**QUEEN'S
UNIVERSITY
BELFAST**

From Troubles To Post-Conflict Theatre in Northern Ireland

Phelan, M. (2016). From Troubles To Post-Conflict Theatre in Northern Ireland. In N. Grene, & C. Morash (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish Theatre* (pp. 372-388). (Oxford Handbooks of Literature). Oxford University Press.

Published in:
The Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish Theatre

Queen's University Belfast - Research Portal:
[Link to publication record in Queen's University Belfast Research Portal](#)

Publisher rights

© 2016 Oxford University Press.
Reproduced by permission of Oxford University Press.
<https://global.oup.com/academic/product/the-oxford-handbook-of-modern-irish-theatre-9780198706137?prevSortField=1&sortField=1&start=160&resultsPerPage=20&prevNumResPerPage=20&lang=en&cc=nl#>

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Queen's University Belfast Research Portal is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The Research Portal is Queen's institutional repository that provides access to Queen's research output. Every effort has been made to ensure that content in the Research Portal does not infringe any person's rights, or applicable UK laws. If you discover content in the Research Portal that you believe breaches copyright or violates any law, please contact openaccess@qub.ac.uk.

EDITED BY

NICHOLAS
GRENE

CHRIS
MORASH

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Great Clarendon Street, Oxford, OX2 6DP,
United Kingdom

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,
and education by publishing worldwide. Oxford is a registered trade mark of
Oxford University Press in the UK and in certain other countries

© Oxford University Press 2016

The moral rights of the authors have been asserted

Impression: 1

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in
a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the
prior permission in writing of Oxford University Press, or as expressly permitted
by law, by licence or under terms agreed with the appropriate reprographics
rights organization. Enquiries concerning reproduction outside the scope of the
above should be sent to the Rights Department, Oxford University Press, at the
address above

You must not circulate this work in any other form
and you must impose this same condition on any acquirer

Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Data available

Library of Congress Control Number: 2016933499

ISBN 978-0-19-870613-7

Printed in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Links to third party websites are provided by Oxford in good faith and
for information only. Oxford disclaims any responsibility for the materials
contained in any third party website referenced in this work.

CHAPTER 23

FROM TROUBLES TO POST- CONFLICT THEATRE IN NORTHERN IRELAND

MARK PHELAN

The central danger of all writing about the Troubles is the danger of cliché.¹

THERE has long been an expectation that playwrights from the North of Ireland must engage with the Troubles. The best of this work has interrogated the causes and consequences of political violence on culture, society, and imagination in the North; however, the sense of obligation to engage with the conflict has inspired and enervated in equal measure. As early as 1972, Frank Ormsby published his 'Write-an-Ulster-Play Kit' in *The Honest Ulsterman*, signalling just how swiftly drama dealing with the conflict had ossified into stock characters and scenarios.² It was certainly the case that stock characters, dialogue, and drama in the form of fatalistic tragedies, black comedies, thrillers, and sensationalized spectacle abounded in theatre as much as they did in fiction and film. Narratives of tribal revenge and thwarted romance also proliferated, as the dramaturgy of love-across-the-barricades and melodrama conveniently removed complex causes of political violence to present a murderous Manichaean struggle between good and evil; right and wrong; taigs and prods; 'two men fighting over a field'—all of which, it could be argued, absolved the state from its responsibility whilst expropriating audiences of their political agency by presenting the ongoing conflict as inevitable and intractable.

While it is possible to identify the tropes that marbled three decades of drama from Northern Ireland, and this in turn provides a convenient shorthand to sift through what is a large body of work, as a taxonomic system it can be reductive. Such reductionism is compounded further by the fact that theatre in the North is so frequently siloed into single chapters

¹ Rónán McDonald, 'Between Hope and History: The Drama of the Troubles', in Dermot Bolger (ed.), *Druids, Dudes and Beauty Queens: The Changing Face of Irish Theatre* (Dublin: New Island, 2001), 233.

² Frank Ormsby, 'The Write-an-Ulster-Play Kit', *Honest Ulsterman* 36 (1972), 2–3.

appearing as codas in edited collections and books that are much more concerned with Irish theatre on the rest of the island, constructing a canonical and compositional position that reinforces the impression of the North as 'a place apart'. This critical relegation—and the deeper partitionist structural purview it reflects and reproduces—also lends itself to a narrow engagement with Northern dramatists.

Consider, for instance, Owen McCafferty: one of Irish theatre's most prolific and significant playwrights, who is grievously neglected by scholars of Irish theatre.³ The only explanation for this is that the Troubles still remains the dominant meta-narrative mis-shaping discourse about theatre and politics in the North, so that artists like McCafferty, who opt to deal obliquely with the conflict, end up being overlooked and ignored. Tellingly, scholars who have written about Northern theatre tend to concentrate almost exclusively on plays and playwrights that explicitly engage with the Troubles, hence the canonical prominence of writers and companies such as Graham Reid, Martin Lynch, Gary Mitchell, Anne Devlin, Field Day, and Charabanc.

Today, however, the forms and themes that critics like Anthony Roche once claimed distinguish Troubles drama as 'a new genre'⁴ in Irish theatre now appear exhausted, utterly inadequate in capturing the complexities, contradictions, and ambivalences of life in post-conflict Northern Ireland. Indeed, as the North slowly emerges into a putatively post-conflict period, scholars of Irish theatre need to recognize this transformation and to redress its critical neglect by engaging with the rich plenitude and complex flux of new forces, forms, and themes shaping contemporary theatre practice in Northern Ireland. For the purpose of this chapter, it may be best to broadly map some of the forms, tropes, and themes of what is often collectively classified as 'Troubles drama' so that these can be compared to the veritable explosion of work produced in the era following the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, which I am loosely constellating under the prefix 'post-conflict drama'.

1969–1998: SURE EVERY WEEK IS HISTORIC IN THIS PLACE

In some respects, the dramaturgical blueprint for the 'Troubles play' appeared the year before Ormsby's 'Write-an-Ulster-Play Kit', in John Boyd's *Flats* (1971). Along with similar plays like Wilson John Haire's *Within Two Shadows* (1972) and Patrick Galvin's *Nightfall to Belfast* (1973), these Troubles plays of the early 1970s are critiqued by Lionel Pilkington as emblematic of a problematic dramaturgy which presents 'the persistence

³ David Grant's entry in John Bull (ed.), *British and Irish Dramatists since World War II* (Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2005), 151–7, and my own entry in Martin Middleton and Peter Paul Schniere (eds.), *The*

Meihuen Guide to Contemporary Irish Playwrights (London: Methuen Drama, 2010), 194–212, remain the only academic overviews of his work. McCafferty is only name-checked twice in Tom Maguire's landmark study of Northern Irish theatre, *Making Theatre in Northern Ireland: Through and Beyond the Troubles* (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 2006).

⁴ Anthony Roche, *Contemporary Irish Drama*, 2nd edn. (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2009), 159.

and unassimilability of sectarian division'. By doing so, Pilkington argues, they absolve 'the theatre spectator of all responsibility [as] this portrayal of the conflict in terms of an irresolvable social pathology tends to foreclose the possibility of its political solution'.⁵ In many plays written by Northern authors, political violence dwells darkly in the wings, malevolently encircling the stage world, sometimes entering and interrupting, but mostly affecting action from offstage. Stewart Parker's *Pentecost* (1987), set in the haunted sanctuary of a Belfast house during the civil unrest of the Ulster Workers' Council strike of 1974, exemplifies this tradition. Indeed, the play might even stand as an appropriate metaphor for Belfast's theatres, and notably the Lyric, which remained open during the darkest days of the Troubles in spite of the ongoing state of chaos that surrounded it. Given the brutal nature of the Troubles, it is unsurprising that theatre audiences sought some sort of release or relief from the conflict outside; however, it was precisely such middle-class escapism that is attacked in Bill Morrison's *Flying Blind* (1977), which satirized those who wilfully sought to ignore the conflict. Set in a single suburban living room, its central character listens to Charlie Parker records on stereo headphones, avoiding what the play calls 'the old, mindless, useless, sectarian conflict' that is unseen off-stage.

Christopher Murray also identifies another common motif in Troubles drama: the 'Romeo & Juliet *typos*'.⁶ This recurrent narrative of the national romance is a wearily familiar form that functions, as Joe Cleary observes, as an emotional, albeit enfeebled, allegorical appeal for political reconciliation.⁸ There are legions of examples of this sentimental tradition, from Wilson John Haire's *Bloom of the Diamond Stone* (1973), Christina Reid's *Did You Hear the One about the Irishman?* (1987), and Graham Reid's *Remembrance* (1984). Thomas Kilroy even goes so far as to suggest that one of the classic plays of the Irish dramatic canon, Brian Friel's *Translations* (1980), follows this narrative arc, pointing out that the characters Yolland and Maire resemble a Romeo-and-Juliet couple.⁹ Although this form has since faded into a clichéd convention, it is one that some playwrights in more recent work have sought to rehabilitate by reconfiguring the transgressive nature of a cross-community relationship so that it instead violates geographical, generational, and sexual boundaries as well as sectarian ones.

Indeed, there was an ambitious attempt to redeem this trope through a logistically complex, site-specific staging of a literal cross-community wedding. *The Wedding Community Play* (1999) was performed across one of Belfast's oxymoronically named 'peace walls', with audiences transported to terraced homes in both the nationalist enclave of Short Strand and its surrounding Protestant heartland of East Belfast; small audiences were then triaged into even smaller groups to experience an immersive performance in which they eavesdropped on the domestic tensions and sectarian suspicions that suffused the wedding preparations, before being bussed once more to a local church and nightclub for the wedding service and reception. Although community theatre in the North has been criticized

⁵ Pilkington, *Theatre and State*, 209.

⁶ Bill Morrison, *Flying Blind* (London: Faber & Faber, 1978), 34.

⁷ Christopher Murray, *Twentieth Century Irish Drama: Mirror up to Nation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 192.

⁸ See Joe Cleary, 'Domestic Troubles: Tragedy and the Northern Ireland Conflict', *South Atlantic Quarterly* 98, no. 3 (1999), 526–7.

⁹ Thomas Kilroy in *The Story of Field Day*, BBC NI documentary, 2006, dir. Johnny Muir.

for further reinforcing single-identity communities, *The Wedding Community* play represented 'the first truly cross-community drama venture'.¹⁰ At the same time, however, the caustic fallout afterwards from those in the Protestant community who felt their contributions had been misrepresented provides a cautionary warning against assuming that this extraordinarily ambitious and effective piece of theatre, which thrilled metro-politan festival audiences, had a transformative impact at a grass-roots level on its host communities.

Perhaps the most pervasive—and pernicious—of the modalities of representing the North portrays the Troubles as modern-day tragedy, a problem compounded by the fact that this appellation is as ubiquitous in drama as it is in the discourse of historians, political commentators, and the media. Irish playwrights have rich form in translating Greek tragedies into local vernacular, and several of these engage with the Troubles, including Tom Paulin's *The Riot Act* (1984) and Seamus Heaney's *The Cure at Troy* (1990). The attraction of such appropriation is obvious, given that tragedy is predicated on irreconcilable conflict. However, what is unsettling, especially in light of trenchant twentieth-century critiques of tragedy as a reactionary form by practitioners like Brecht and Boal, is the ease with which many theatre scholars uncritically engage with (and endorse) this approach. As Pilkington and Shaun Richards astutely observe, tragedy, though based on an 'insoluble conflict' which Murray and others have argued is emblematic of the North, can be profoundly problematic given that it forecloses possibilities and depoliticizes conflict by naturalizing the conditions which precipitate it. Moreover, tragedy removes the political agency of audiences by reproducing an enveloping, enervating fatalism which precludes meaningful political engagement or action, both on- and off-stage, as we are encouraged to 'accept what we are witnessing in the North is "the working out of tragic destiny"',¹¹ We can register the change that has taken place in Ulster dramaturgy since 1998 in Owen McCafferty's version of *Antigone* (2008), which self-consciously shifts the emphasis away from its eponymous heroine to focus on the flawed figure of Creon, to the extent that McCafferty even contemplated retitling the play *Creon*. Set in the aftermath of a civil war, the political connotations of Sophocles' tragedy for post-conflict Northern Ireland were obvious, but McCafferty studiously avoided labouring any such allegorical connection. Not only is Creon cast as a much more complicated (and sympathetic) figure, a man whose martial mindset is poorly suited to the requirements of peacetime governance, but the play's chorus is reduced to a single 'Old Man' who appears from the outset, exhausted, stacking twenty-six body bags that belong to both sides of the fratricidal war. Throughout the play his wry, weary observations undercut the rhetorical hubris of the play's high-born protagonists. He later reveals that as he spends every day sewing and stacking body bags, he is simultaneously searching for his own son, who was slaughtered in the same battle as

¹⁰ David Grant, 'Orality and the Ethics of Ownership in Community-Based Drama', in S.C. Haddicke et al. (eds.), *Political Performances: Theory and Practice* (Amsterdam, 2009), 55–70.
¹¹ Indeed, for Christopher Murray the situation in the North 'appeared to be insoluble conflict, which is the essence of tragedy'; *Twentieth-Century Irish Drama*, 187.
¹² Shaun Richards, 'In the Border Country: Greek Tragedy and Contemporary Irish Drama', in C.C. Barfoot and Rias van den Doel (eds.), *Ritual Remembrance: History, Myth and Politics in Anglo-Irish Drama* (Amsterdam, 1995), 192; Lionel Pilkington, 'Language and Politics in Brian Friel's *Translations*', *Irish University Review* 20, no. 2 (1999), 291–4.

Antigone's brothers. The Old Man's rough vernacular speech signifies his social position as altogether lower than the aristocratic class and caste of Creon and Antigone, and this freights the play with a class politics that contests the paternalistic precepts of Aristotle's *Poetics*, whereby only the high-born qualify as tragic. This crucial element leads to an extraordinary confrontation towards the end of the play when the ordinarily servile Old Man suddenly challenges Antigone, as she wallows in her grief, with the no less keenly felt loss of his beloved son, bellowing in her face: 'Yours is not the only grief!'¹³

This is not to say, however, that playwrights prior to 1998 did not challenge the politics of cliché or the traps of convention in their work. Stewart Parker's *Northern Star* (1984), set in a crumbling cottage on the slopes of Cave Hill in the aftermath of the 1798 Rising, is an Irish history play like no other in that it both contains and critiques the Irish theatrical canon. Stylistically, it ventriloquizes the speech, setting, and style of several Irish playwrights from Sheridan to Beckett, whilst structurally the play is shaped according to the 'Seven Ages of Man', from Shakespeare's *As You Like It*. The play opens with the first age: that of Innocence (Sheridan), then proceeds to the second age, Idealism (Boucicault), followed by Cleverness (Wilde), Dialectics (Shaw), heroism (Synge), compromise (O'Casey), and knowledge (Behan and Beckett), each written in the distinctive style of the respective playwrights. This metatheatrical structure is integral to the meaning of the play. For example, the opening stage of Innocence aptly labels the naivety of Belfast's urbane intellectual classes who believed that the lofty French ideals of *liberté, égalité, fraternité* could be transplanted to Ireland where they could transcend territorial and tribal divisions. 'We were city boys. What did we know about two men fighting over a field?' says the play's protagonist, Henry Joy McCracken, at one point.¹⁴ By the Age of Knowledge, however, those sublime principles have been drowned in sectarian slaughter and military massacre. Thus, context and content are thematically connected. The Age of Knowledge plays out in prison and is written in the style of Behan, with explicit references to *The Quare Fellow's* setting and dialogue. Political history, theatrical tradition, personal biography, and the canon of Irish drama are thus compressed in *Northern Star's* cat's cradle of politics, historiography, and art.

However, Parker was less interested in the metanarrative of Irish history than in its marginalia. So, in *Northern Star*, the 1798 Rising is the frame, not the focus, of the play. Likewise, in his 1975 play *Spokesong*, the Home Rule crises, the First World War, and the Troubles are but backgrounds to what the play claims as the most important date in Irish history—1887—when Belfast-born John Dunlop invented the pneumatic tyre. Likewise, the Ulster Workers' Council strike of 1974 is the offstage context for *Pentecost* (1987), and the sinking of the *Titanic* is reduced to a subterranean SFX in his radio play *The Iceberg* (1975), which focuses instead on the purgatorial plight of two shipyard workers, Danny and Hugh, a Catholic and a Protestant, killed in the construction of Belfast's 'proudest offering to the Empire—and to the world!', whose ghosts wander *Titanic's* decks on her maiden voyage.¹⁵

In what is surely the most evocative stage direction in all of Irish drama, *Northern Star* is set in 'Ireland, the continuous past':¹⁶ *Northern Star* and *Pentecost* are history plays about the future. By the same token, *Spokesong's* environmental politics, and the character of Frank

¹³ Owen McCafferty, *Antigone* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2008), 32.

¹⁴ Stewart Parker, *Plays: 2* (London: Methuen Drama, 2000), 59.

¹⁵ Stewart Parker, *The Iceberg, Honest Ulsterman* 50 (1975), 33.

¹⁶ Parker, *Plays: 2*, 3.

Stock's appeal for fleets of free bicycles to be supplied for the city, offers a prescient civic vision that has since materialized in many metropolitan capitals throughout Europe. Moreover, *Northern Star's* appeal for a shared and civic politics, *Iceberg's* history from below, and *Pentecost's* expressionistic imagining of the possibility of political compromise and accommodation all collectively reveal Parker to be a visionary artist, capable of opening out new theatrical forms and ideas in a situation that impelled so many of his peers in the opposite direction.

WOMEN'S TROUBLES

Monica McWilliams, the founder of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition, draws attention to the vital contribution of women to the public sphere in Northern Ireland:

From the civil rights campaigns of the sixties, to the community projects and women's centres in the mid 1970s and 1980s, women in Northern Ireland have played a central role in the development of alternative political structures. Women have created safe, yet, subversive spaces where they can organize together around issues of concern which cross the sectarian divide all the while 'agreeing to disagree' on the more divisive ones.¹⁷

Charabanc Theatre Company was very much a theatrical manifestation of this movement: a collective company founded by a number of actors (Marie Jones, Maureen McAuley, Eleanor Methven, Carol Scanlon [now Moore], and Brenda Winter) frustrated with the lack of work for women in a male-dominated dramatic scene. The subject of its inaugural production, *Lay Up Your Ends* (1983), was the hitherto largely forgotten 1911 strike by mill girls protesting against their horrific working conditions. Developed through an innovative process of collaborative research, the play was an extraordinary success, praised for 'convincingly portray[ing] the contradictions, difficulties and resilience of working class women dogged by grinding poverty'.¹⁸ One reviewer praised the play's adroit handling of a myriad of political issues such as 'trade unionism, class issues, poverty and sectarian animosity',¹⁹ and yet neglected to mention its overt feminist politics. This was to miss the way in which the bawdy badinage of the millworkers in the play explicitly connects the sexual and industrial economies as the women mock the way in which sexual reproduction and child-rearing are conducted on the same principles of mass production that operate in the mills:

FLORENCE. Accordin' to Mary Galway, the mill trade's been fallin' off. They say there's too much pilin' up in the warehouse and they have to cut back on production.
BELLE. (*Entering, having heard what the others were saying*) That's what you should tell your Albe, Ethna, next time he's lakin' his way w'ye—'hey Albe, the house's full, I'm cuttin' production!²⁰

¹⁷ Monica McWilliams, 'Struggling for Peace and Justice: Reflections on Women's Activism in Northern Ireland', *Journal of Women's History* 6, no. 4/7, no. 1 (1995), 32.
¹⁸ Lyn Gardner, 'Lay Up Your Ends', *City Limits*, cited in Ophelia Byrne, *State of Play: The Theatre and Cultural Identity in Twentieth Century Ulster* (Belfast: Linen Hall Library, 2002), 71.
¹⁹ Jane Bell, 'Dramatic View of Life in a Mill', *Belfast Telegraph*, 16 May 1983.
²⁰ Martin Lynch and Charabanc Theatre Company, *Lay Up Your Ends* (1983), typescript in Linen Hall Library, Belfast, 15.

Charabanc's work is not only significant for its feminist politics, connecting the personal with the political, and for its collective creation, but also for its decision to perform in community halls and centres across the sectarian divide, in rural and urban venues, North and South, and in working-class areas where live theatre had never been brought before. In pioneering this form of portable theatre, Charabanc set the scene for the later proliferation of community theatre groups.

The work of Charabanc is also significant for its trenchant engagement with class, and in the years since *Lay Up Your Ends* Northern Ireland's thriving community theatre sector has consistently engaged with class issues. The same has been true of some established playwrights like Graham Reid, Martin Lynch, and Robin Glendenning, who have all explored how both class and educational systems reproduce sectarian identities, while Marie Jones, Christina Reid, and Anne Devlin have interrogated the complex nexus of class and sectarian politics as it shapes gender roles and relations. Devlin's *Ourselves Alone* (1985) invokes the republican movement to accuse it of relegating and restricting women's agency in real social terms, while simultaneously elevating women as iconic symbols of struggle as Kathleen Ni Houlihan, Mother Ireland, or the grotesquely mutilated character of Aunt Cora, who has been blinded and maimed by a cause for which she's ceremonially, if cynically, wheeled out every Easter. Devlin dramatizes how these gender roles and relations are regulated by domestic violence—a taboo subject also broached by Graham Reid's poignant *Remembrance* (1984) and which has belatedly become a critical issue in the politics and theatre of post-conflict Northern Ireland. Indeed, it is possible now to look back to Northern theatre before 1998, and see in some work the prescient traces of concerns that will emerge more forcefully after the Good Friday Agreement, whether racism in Christina Reid's *The Belle of Belfast City* (1989), or sexual orientation in plays such as Frank McGuinness's *Carthaginians* (1988). This work has collectively helped contribute to a new form of civic politics and performance that has been built on in the later work of Colin Bell, Tim Loane, and TheatreofplucK, the North's only queer theatre company.

PERFORMING THE PEACE

One of the most distinctive, if debilitating, features of the otherwise successful peace process in the North is the fact that there is no state mechanism or apparatus in place to undertake any form of truth recovery, with the resulting vacuum unsatisfactorily filled by a welter of charitable, statutory, and community organizations. This political failure to deal with the past means that artists—particularly theatre artists—have had an enormously important role to play in the ongoing processes of conflict transformation. Even the most cursory inventory reveals a vast repertoire of work produced over the past decade or more. Some have been produced by local theatre companies in Belfast and Derry; some are authored by ex-combatants (Laurence McKeown, Robert Niblock, Brian Campbell, Sam Miller, Danny Morrison, Brenda Murphy), others by professional playwrights (Owen McCafferty, Martin Lynch, Gary Mitchell, Abbie Spallen, Damian Gorman, Tim Loane, Stacey Gregg, Rosemary Jenkinson, Dave Duggan, David Ireland, Marie Jones, Jimmy McAleavey). Yet more work has been commissioned by organizations actively involved in ongoing processes of conflict transformation and transitional justice (e.g. Healing Through Remembering, WAVE, Consultative

Group on the Past, Victims' Commission). All of it draws on theatre and performance to assimilate traumatic history into public memory, and to engage with legacies of the past and the politics of reconciliation.

'The utopian possibilities of reconciliation and redemption, the 'miracles/And cures' of Heaney's *The Cure at Troy*, however, are once more suppurating wounds in the work of younger Northern playwrights like Tim Loane and Gary Mitchell, who deal with the political fallout from what often seems to be a faltering peace process. Mitchell's loyalist thriller-tragedies, set against the backdrop of a political process perceived by many of his protagonists as a 'sell-out', have attracted international critical acclaim. His work is a vital counterweight to official narratives of the peace process, dramatizing the dystopian urban underside to Heaney's promissory desire for hope and history to rhyme on the far side of revenge. Mitchell's importance is that he also places centre stage a constituency and community of working-class loyalists wholly unused to seeing themselves before the footlights, and certainly not in a sympathetic, if utterly un sentimental, light. Tellingly, in a significant body of drama, there are no Catholic characters in any of Mitchell's plays (bar one Catholic murdered at the start of *Tearing the Loom*, 1998). Mitchell instead focuses on a supposedly single-identity community to reveal, not one that is united and uniform, but a violently fissiparous fraternity that, after being united in a war against republicans, has now lost this sustaining opposition and is disintegrating dangerously, just at the moment that many republicans are progressively migrating into constitutional politics. Mitchell's work provides a vital insight into how so many within working-class loyalist communities have increasingly felt alienated, disillusioned, and disenfranchised by the 'new dispensation' of the Good Friday Agreement to offer a 'profoundly pessimistic reading of post-Agreement Northern Irish society'.²¹

His plays are also startling for their fierce critique of the hypermasculine codes of paramilitary culture, and for female characters who frequently contest the 'armed patriarchy' around them with a political agency that rejects the passive roles of mothers, wives, and daughters. Mitchell's work led to his own family being attacked in his native Rathcoole, from which he had to flee under paramilitary threat in an incident that led to an enforced hiatus in his career. That almost all of his stage plays have been set within the militarist milieu of the loyalist Ulster Defence Association (UDA) seemed to signify a worrying lack of development in his work, but his recent *Re-Energise* (2013) and *Demented* (2014), both still set in the loyalist Rathcoole, are positive signs of his evolution as a writer as well as the possible emergence of post-conflict drama, for neither feature any paramilitary involvement.

Tim Loane's political comedies of the peace process, *Caught Red Handed* (2002) and *To Be Sure* (2007), are acerbic 'parodies of esteem', as both attack Sinn Féin and the Democratic Unionist Party, recalling the earlier political double act of Joseph Cilly's *Second Hand Thunder* (1998) and *McQuillan's Hill* (2000). Loane's comedies offer a damning critique of the cynicism and chicanery that underpinned the North's peace process, as well as the new

²¹ Seamus Heaney, *The Cure at Troy* (London: Faber & Faber, 1991), 77.

²² Wesley Hutchinson, 'Engendering Change in the UDA: Gary Mitchell's *Loyal Women*', *Estudios Irlandeses* (2005), 67.

²³ Linda Eageron, cited in Margaret Gonzalez-Perez (ed.), *Women and Terrorism: Female Activity in Domestic and International Terror Groups* (London: Routledge, 2008), 120.

orthodoxies it has generated; along with Mitchell, Loane was one of the first playwrights to do so. Their intervention was all the more important given what many see as the mainstream media's unwillingness, in the interests of maintaining the equilibrium of the peace process, to investigate the causes and consequences of the past four decades of political violence. Indeed, Gary Mitchell claims: 'BBC Northern Ireland told me I wouldn't be working with them any more unless I wrote about the peace process and it would have to be positive.'²⁴ It is in this context that Mitchell and Loane's plays are so important. Not only do they set out to 'rock the boat' by asking awkward questions, but they also offer difficult, dissident answers – something which imbues their work with an ethical aesthetic integrity. After all, as Stewart Parker, observes, 'the easy answer constitutes an artistic abdication'.²⁵

RE-INHABITING THE PAST

'Plays and ghosts have a lot in common,' Stewart Parker once wrote.²⁶ As if in confirmation, several site specific productions have directly engaged with Belfast's troubled past, if only to imagine its future, so that the narrative of the play is shared by the place of performance. One stunning example of this was Tinderbox and Field Day's co-production of Parker's *Northern Star* in Rosemary Street Presbyterian Church on the 1998 bicentenary of the United Irishmen's Rising. The Church itself was where Henry Joy McCracken worshipped, as did the Presbyterian founder of the United Irishmen, William Drennan, so the story of *Northern Star* was ghosted with its history and meaning. When the performance reached the final line of McCracken's unfinished speech beginning 'Citizens of Belfast ...', time and space collapsed as an audience was collectively hailed to remember the past and to continue its story.

Likewise, Tinderbox's *Convictions* (2000) ghosted the site specific setting of the dilapidated Crumlin Road Courthouse, the impact of which derived largely from the auratic experience of the place. Featuring seven short playlets, each named for an area in the building, written by different authors and performed in different spaces, *Convictions* transported small audiences to view these scenes in different sequences. For instance, Owen McCafferty's *Courtroom No. 1* hauntingly used the court as a purgatorial setting for a dialogue between a nameless victim of the Troubles and the disembodied voice of his unseen interrogator. The victim seeks answers in the vain hope of finding some form of closure or resolution to his plight; however, his hope for release or redemption is continually denied. Similarly, Daragh Carville's contribution was set in the *Male Toilets* of its title, where a jaded photographer and PR man meet whilst above them the former courthouse is being launched as a tourist information centre and heritage site. Lamenting the days when Northern Ireland 'had an identity ... a brand', the photographer goes on to wonder:

PHOTOGRAPHER. What if there were a way we could keep Northern Ireland in the public mind. Internationally, I mean? [...] Just the odd wee bomb ... Think of the

²⁴ Cited by Henry McDonald, 'Playwright Hits Back Against Intimidation', *Observer*, 29 Jan. 2006.

²⁵ Stewart Parker, *Dramatis Personae* (Belfast: John Malone Memorial Committee, 1986), 18.

²⁶ Parker, *Plays*: 2, xiii.

publicity ... just like the old days ... Put us back on the map. Make Belfast—a boom town again.²⁷

Carville's jaunty joke is itself an embryonic example of a kind of Ulster nostalgia, to borrow a term that emerged in the former East Germany: a sentimental belief in the 'good old bad old days' that has informed and inflected later work, such as Beano Niblock's *Reason to Believe* (2009) and, arguably, Martin Lynch's hugely successful *History of the Troubles* (2009) and *Chronicles of Long Kesh* (2009), which repackaged the Troubles as a long series of comic set pieces. Lynch's West Belfast war zone is inhabited entirely by lovable rogues, characters, where affable paramilitaries and unflappable communities endure and even enjoy everything the Troubles can throw at them. Some commentators regard such comic, carnivalesque treatments as testifying to Belfast's infamous gallows humour, whilst others spuriously suggest this is a therapeutic response to collective trauma. However, at no stage in either play are the politics, ethics, and aftermath of political violence considered.

Former Loyalist UVF (Ulster Volunteer Force) prisoner Beano Niblock has expressly acknowledged the influence of Martin Lynch, whose work he seeks to emulate; unsurprisingly, his debut play, *A Reason to Believe*, was a harmless comedy about two loyalist paramilitaries who resolve to spice up their empty lives by attempting one last bank job, which farcically plays out to comic effect. Like Lynch's plays, there is a complete avoidance of any political discussion or reflection on why they were sent to prison in the first place, which in many ways mirrored Niblock's own position, as he persistently refused in a newspaper interview to confirm that he had been imprisoned for a particularly grisly murder.

By contrast, another former prisoner of Maze/Long Kesh, the hunger striker Laurence McKeown, adopts a different approach in *The Official Version* (2006), which is set in the prison and was staged by Dubbeljoint Theatre Company. Now derelict and empty, in McKeown's play the prison site is being toured by the mother and sister of a former prisoner, as well as by a history student who is being personally guided round the facilities by a former prison governor. The play opens up complex issues as to how to handle this politically charged space, which itself becomes a metaphor for how the North's politicians have failed to deal with the past, whereby they do nothing since they cannot agree. Should the prison be preserved and protected or demolished and forgotten? The family of the republican inmate hold it to be 'a sacred place';²⁸ its former governor maintains it 'should be demolished in its entirety' [...] It should be bulldozed into history.²⁹ When the play opened in West Belfast at the republican Roddy McCorley Social Club, surrounded by prison memorabilia, with a minute's silence reverentially observed in memory of dead republican hunger strikers from the 1980s, it was possible to wonder which version was now 'the' official version, as the conditions of the play's production made it clear that the counter-narrative had a new form of official endorsement. To make matters even more complex, the actor playing the part of the prison governor, Gerry Doherty, was a former IRA prisoner of Maze/Long Kesh, who had been imprisoned for attempting to blow up Derry's Guildhall—Dubbeljoint's next venue for the play.

²⁷ Daragh Carville, *Male Toilets*, in *Convictions* (Belfast: Tinderverbox, 2000), 36–7.
²⁸ Laurence McKeown, *The Official Version*, unpublished script in possession of the author, 7.
²⁹ Ibid., 40.

Whilst all the above plays represent very different responses to the legacy of the Troubles most of them do not have the potential to play far beyond the North given the specificity of their humour, topicality, and subject matter. This is certainly not the case for the work of Owen McCafferty. McCafferty's importance as a post-conflict playwright lies in the fact that he writes about those who played no part in the conflict, the ordinary people living in extraordinary circumstances. This approach is what distinguishes *Scenes from the Big Picture* (2003) as one of the finest plays written by an Irish playwright in the past twenty years. Joycean in its ambition and vision, *Scenes* presents a prismatic perspective of an entire city in a single day as a collage of short scenes flit, flux, and fade to produce the eponymous 'big picture' of contemporary life in a modern city. Although setting the play in Belfast, McCafferty deliberately decontextualizes the city, decoupling it from those overdetermined images of conflict that have served only to caricature the place. Certain incidents do elliptically invoke the recent past: an inherited allotment yields a secret cache of buried weapons and a drug dealer is kneecapped, but this is the historical backwash of the Troubles; it does not shape the narrative, for McCafferty seeks to stage a much more complex picture of a city emerging out of conflict.

Set in a rural border backwater and comprising monologues by three characters, Abbie Spallen's *Pumpgirl* (2006) seems to have little in common with *Scenes*, but its portrait offers a fascinating counterpart to the other's big picture. The play is set in the hinterland of rumour and ragwort of south Armagh, on the Northern side of the border and in the midst of republican fieldwork of fuel smugglers that have left Pumpgirl's petrol station 'on its last legs' 'on the wrong side of a fluctuating exchange rate'.⁸⁹ This is a landscape change utterly by demilitarization as road blocks, border bases, and military watchtowers have been removed in what were the most striking materializations of the peace process. Anyway, even though the topography of South Armagh is so deeply inscribed by the politics of conflict, *Pumpgirl* never directly references the Troubles, because the Troubles are over. The era no longer governs everyone's lives, even though its legacy inscribes the very language and landscape of the play. The character of Hammy describes racing his motor cars 'up by the new hotel that got bombed in '94', whilst the secluded scenic spot where Pumpgirl meet him for their trysts is where 'two Prods were took and killed about fifteen years ago'.⁹⁰ This elliptical presence of the past has an unsettling effect, instilling a haunting sense of how history, landscape, language, and memory have been misshaped by acts of political violence that have reinscribed the border areas with an altogether new form of *dinnseanchas*.

BEARING WITNESS

It has been observed that 'the end of conflict is not the end of violence for women'. Pumpgirl's story is beguilingly told in the voice of a young tomboy, whose decency and innocence makes her brutal gang rape all the more horrific. It also opens up a traumatic

⁸⁹ Abbie Spallen, *Pumpgirl* (London: Faber & Faber, 2006), 7.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 16, 20.

⁹¹ Fionnuala Ní Aoláin, Dina Francesca Haynes, and Naomi Cahn, *On the Frontlines: Gender, War and the Post-Conflict Process* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 71.

FIG. 23.1 Still from *The Far Side of Revenge* (2012), film-maker Margo Harkin's documentary tracing Teya Sepinuck's *Theatre of Witness* project (2012–14).

Courtesy of Margo Harkin and Besom Productions.

issue that Northern Irish theatre has begun to bring into the light, notably the way in which the sexual and physical abuse of women was completely silenced throughout the Troubles. In this, the North is not unique. Many countries emerging out of conflict are confronted with the reality of epidemic levels of violence against women, masked by more public forms of violence. As Mary K. Meyer notes, 'during the 1996–7 IRA ceasefire, reported incidents of domestic violence increased owing to the fact that victims were more likely to report such crimes to police than during periods of armed conflict.'³³

The renewed ability to see sexual violence in a post-conflict society is developed powerfully in the *Theatre of Witness* project, *I Once Knew a Girl* (2010). Based in Derry, Theatre of Witness is run by Teya Sepinuck, who, through a series of workshops with non-actors, composes scripts based on their life experiences that are derived from a series of interviews, workshops, and rehearsals that the 'cast' revise, edit, approve and perform. These performances resemble a form of verbatim or documentary theatre, but one in which the performed stories are not derived from reportage, legal tribunals, or documentary evidence, but from the lived experience as expressed by the same individuals who perform the collaborative script themselves.

The all-female case of *I Once Knew a Girl* included, amongst others, a serving PSNI officer, a former IRA quartermaster, and Kathleen Gillespie, the widow of Patsy Gillespie, who had been vaporized in the first IRA proxy bomb along with five soldiers. This extraordinary production showed theatre's capacity to participate in the wider political process

³³ Mary K. Meyer, 'Gender Politics in the Northern Ireland Peace Process', in Mary Ann Tétrault and Robin L. Teske (eds.), *Partial Truths and the Politics of Community* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), 203.

through its ability to manifest through performance what was hidden, in this case a shared experience of sexual and physical violence that crossed political and sectarian divides. Both the policewoman, Maria, and the IRA volunteer, Anne, had been exploited and abused by male figures of authority; moreover, each equally assumed that their suffering did not matter in the context of the 'real' violent struggle convulsing their respective communities. 'I've been raped more than once,' says Maria. 'I never told anyone 'cause compared to all the violence during the Troubles, I thought it was insignificant. But it wasn't. It's happened to too many of us.'³⁴ And from the opposite side of the conflict, Anne tells a similar story. Collectively, these testimonies also reveal how patriarchal organizations like the police and the IRA, operating in militarized masculinist culture of secrecy, institutionally reproduced sexual violence and colluded in the oppression of women, who now must struggle 'to make public the private violence they experience'.³⁵

Like an earlier Theatre of Witness play, *We Carried Your Secrets* (2009), developed by victims and perpetrators of political violence, *I Once Knew a Girl* was followed by facilitated discussions between performers and audiences, which in itself 'generat[ed] an extensive archive of reflective responses from many of those who saw it'.³⁶ A comparison might be drawn here with the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, of which Catherine Cole claimed that its efficacy as a spectacle came from the fact that 'its public enactment was also about people speaking and being heard'.³⁷ This is where the importance of the Theatre of Witness lies: its post-show discussions, generated by the performance, provided a public forum for civic debate. The 'actors' in these performances—individuals whose politics, memories, and identities were often violently opposed—also participated in the post-show discussions, just as they had shared stage space with one another. As a cast, their camaraderie and deep affection for one another was palpable, even though they remained deeply divided by their political convictions. For many, this in itself seemed indicative of the potential of theatre as a site for peace and reconciliation.

PEACE AND RECONCILIATION

If Troubles drama has been largely defined by the expectation that artists deal with the conflict, perhaps post-conflict theatre in the North can be similarly defined by an expectation that it should play some sort of role in the processes of truth and reconciliation. David Ireland's *Everything Between Us* (2010), like David Park's novel *The Truth Commissioner*, envisages how a notional Truth and Reconciliation Commission would pan out, with its

³⁴ Teya Sepinuck, 'I Once Knew a Girl', directed by Teya Sepinuck (Derry: The Playhouse, 2010), unpublished script, 15. [The editors wish to thank Teya Sepinuck for providing us with the unpublished script to this play.]

³⁵ Alice McIntyre, *Women in Belfast: How Violence Shapes Identity* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004), 57.

³⁶ David Grant and Matthew Jennings, 'Processing the Peace: An Interview with Teya Sepinuck', *Contemporary Theatre Review* 23, no. 3 (2013), 315. <http://www.10.1080/10486801.2013.806323>. Accessed 23 Nov. 2014.

³⁷ Catherine Cole, *Performing South Africa's Truth Commission: Stages of Translation* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010), 6.

black South African female Chair assaulted on the first day of hearings in a racist attack by an MLA's sister. Derry playwright, Dave Duggan, opts for an alternative approach in *A H6905* (2005), whose treatment (literally) of the supposed need for a Truth Commission is handled in an allegorical fashion, as the North's body politic is cast in the form of a patient awaiting a medical procedure to have the truth cut out of him. Laurence Mckeown and Brian Campbell's *A Cold House* (2003), whose title is a reference to Unionist leader David Trimble's Nobel speech in which he conceded unionism had since partition created a 'cold house for Catholics',³⁸ stages the almost insuperable difficulties of any such process, whereby truth leads only to recrimination as the cold house of a former RUC officer is repaired by a former republican prisoner, who arrives to fix the boiler.

Mick Duke's *Revenge* (2004) explores, in lieu of justice, how the possibility of reconciliation can be supplanted by the primal compulsion for vengeance. Set on the eve of the wedding of a character who had lost his first fiancée and most of his face when his first wedding was blown up by an anonymous bomber, Duke's play critically examines the urge to seek vengeance. *Revenge* plays with ideas of the cyclical nature of grief, guilt, and history, revealing how those collaterally caught up in the aftermath of atrocity often end up endlessly reliving and replaying their trauma. Mobilizing a large community chorus as a vast host of the dead who appear on-stage as ghostly shades summoned for the pending nuptials, *Revenge* is staged in a strange kind of dreamscape in which the revenants entice the grieving parents with the possibility of revenge as the guilt-ridden bomber appears as an unexpected guest.

Produced in the immediate aftermath of the North's prisoner releases, whereby all paramilitaries had been freed from Maze/Long Kesh under the terms of the Good Friday Agreement, *Revenge* possessed a poignant political valence. However, where *Revenge* staged the encounter between the victim and the perpetrator of violence in a dreamscape, the next play to stage such a confrontation, McCafferty's *Quietly* (2012), did so in a form of heightened realism. *Quietly*, like so many Irish plays, is set in a pub, and Alyson Cummin's meticulously realistic set was modelled on the original design and decor of the Rose & Crown Bar on the Lower Ormeau Road, which once served as the local for McCafferty's father. It was a public house and, like all too many in the city, was reduced to a charnel house when in 1972 the UVF bombed it in a sectarian attack. It is this atrocity, and its imagined aftermath, that is so deftly handled in *Quietly* as the fictional bomber, Ian Gibson, enters the bar he blew up, where he has arranged to meet Jimmy, the son of one those killed in the attack.

In *Quietly*, McCafferty reminds us of the redemptive possibilities of truth, and that the reconciliation it can release need not be state-sanctioned or sponsored, nor can it be imposed or instrumentalized. Jimmy initially embodies the understandable tendency to seek for truth in recrimination rather than reconciliation; this is me playing my part in the truth and reconciliation process,³⁹ he says to Ian at one point. However, as the play progresses, McCafferty reminds us all that meaningful reconciliation means much more than simply telling our stories (as with the Theatre of Witness); it is equally about listening to others, and this an exchange and experience that theatre transacts all the time, and in a public and participatory forum.

³⁸ http://www.davidtrimble.org/speeches_nobelprize.htm. Accessed 16 Nov. 2014.
³⁹ Owen McCafferty, *Quietly* (London: Faber & Faber, 2012), 30.

At the start of the play, Jimmy cannot bring himself to listen to Ian's account of his actions on that fateful day, constantly interrupting and correcting him, seeking to coerce his narrative into one that shores up his own:

JIMMY. just say what happened—simple enough isn't it—the facts are the truth—
isn't that why you're here to tell the truth and be reconciled

IAN. no—and there's more to the truth than facts.⁴⁰

Ian's retort that the facts alone are not sufficient are not the weasel words of someone trying to excuse his actions, nor are they an attempt to evade his responsibility; it is simply the view that truth is perspectival and positional. In the closing scene, Ian offers Jimmy his hand in a gesture which Jimmy eventually accepts, though with the admonition: 'don't ever come back here again.'⁴¹ It is a gesture freighted with symbolism, as formal handshakes between public figures on opposite sides of the conflict have become markers of historical change. In *Quietly*, McCafferty has suggested that 'there is no huge gesture about it, it is a male way [...] of ending something. It's finished.'⁴² It is an uneasy, unsettling act. Both men have reached an understanding, and there is a reconciliation of sorts, but no expectation that they will meet one another again.

After *Quietly* opened in Dublin's Peacock Theatre in 2013, McCafferty recalled being emotionally upset afterwards by its impact, belatedly realizing that, in many ways, he had written *Quietly* about his generation, about 'the Belfast we grew up in and how it affected us'.⁴³ As such, it seems the last in a cycle of plays (*Mojo-Mickybo*, 1998, *Closing Time*, 2002, *Scenes from the Big Picture*) that deal with Troubles and their aftermath; and though there may never be any clean break, this seems a sensibility that is shared in the work of a younger generation of writers like David Ireland, Rosemary Jenkinson, Lisa Magee, and Lucy Caldwell, Stacey Gregg, and Abbie Spallen.

CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

One striking new motif that can be traced through a wealth of new plays over the past decade has been the theme of change, specifically the transformation of Belfast. A slew of plays feature the returned émigré, usually someone who fled Belfast during the Troubles but who has now returned home to find a city they barely recognize. In the Kabosh Theatre Company's site-specific *Two Roads West* (2009), an audience of four share a black taxi tour with a returned local who is re-familiarizing herself with a city in which she feels a stranger. Likewise, in McCafferty's *The Absence of Women* (2010), two down-and-out navvies in a dead-end dosshouse discuss coming home to the city they have heard has been transformed. In Graham Reid's *Love Billy* (2013), the eponymous hero (first made famous by Kenneth Branagh in the *Billy* television plays in 1982–4), is utterly discombobulated as he wanders around his old stomping ground, unable to find anything familiar from the old days.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 35.

⁴¹ Ibid., 51.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴² Owen McCafferty in conversation with the author, 8 May 2014.

While no one would dispute that many of the features of Northern Ireland's confessional politics remain as entrenched as ever, it is equally true that the North is changing, and theatre reflects this perhaps more than any other art form. At the time of writing in June 2014, two shows running simultaneously at the recently rebuilt Lyric and MAC theatres perfectly exemplify this: David Ireland's *Can't Forget About You* (2013) and Theatre of Puck's *Tuesdays at Tesco's* (2014). Ireland's play offers a novel take on the love-across-the-bar-exultation of his bigoted big sister, but on the rebound ends up in an even more socially transgressive relationship with an otherwise 'perfect' Martha (she is a Glasgow Protestant) who is, crucially, considerably older. During pillow talk after some wild lovemaking, both learn a little more about each other, with Martha discovering Stevie's policeman father had been killed in a mortar attack on an RUC station when his mother was pregnant with him; and though Stevie is palpably reticent to discuss the issue, Martha starts talking about the Troubles with a gauche combination of ignorance, horror, and curiosity:

MARTHA. I don't understand it. I don't understand how it could have happened.

STEVIE. What?

MARTHA. The Troubles. How we let that happen. Like why it went on. And why it suddenly stopped. [...] And I listen to you and—I mean I know we've only just met but you seem so normal—and you and your family, and all the other people I meet here, I think how did any of you manage to grow up normal? How did you manage to live with all that violence in your city for so long and why do you, why do you all seem so lovely and friendly when you lived through that? And how could you have done that to each other when you're all so nice?

I don't... I don't get it. I don't understand it. I don't understand how...
(*She shakes her head in bewilderment and looks to him for an answer.*)

STEVIE. Yeah. Can we stop talking about it now?

MARTHA. Why? [...]

STEVIE. It's just so fucking boring!

MARTHA. What is?

STEVIE. The Troubles! [...]. I'm so sick of talking about it and hearing about it!"

After this exchange, the Troubles are not mentioned again. In its understated way, this seems to mark a significant moment in Northern drama.

At the same time as Ireland's play was being performed at the Lyric, the new MAC venue hosted the latest production by the North's only queer theatre company, Theatre of Puck: *Tuesdays at Tesco's*, a version of Emmanuel Darley's French original *Mardi à Monoprix* (2009). An architecturally impressive new theatre and gallery in an area of Belfast city centre being promoted as the 'Cathedral Quarter', the MAC, which opened in 2012, is a vibrant symbol of the post-conflict regeneration of the city. In some respects, this makes the decision to stage *Tuesdays at Tesco's* in the venue all the more resonant. The play takes the form of a monologue about a middle-aged transgendered woman, Pauline, looking after an elderly father who refuses to accept or to acknowledge his child's

transformation, pointedly using her birthname, 'Paul', whilst scorning her appearance and identity. *Tuesdays* was performed in the MAC's ground floor exhibition space, the rear wall of which is wholly made of glass facing onto the busy passageway that leads in to the new piazza style courtyard at the front of the building, surrounded on all sides by fashionable restaurants and bars. Peter Quigley played Pauline from the street outside whilst the small audience watched from within the theatre into which sound was broadcast, so that the solid glass wall constituted a transparent, if impermeable, fourth wall. It was a stunningly simple yet complex staging, leaving Quigley to negotiate his dramatic performance among the 'civilians' passing through, many of whom reacted with amusement, curiosity, or fright. All of this inflected Pauline's narrative of having to endure daily life in a heteronormative society which reacts to and rejects her appearance and identity, a society where her own father maligns her even as she carries out her kindly ministrations. Pauline bears all with good grace, but an encounter while carrying out the most mundane task of shopping at Tesco's with her father upsets her, and in an emotional outburst, performed right up against the glass wall, Pauline poignantly pleads for tolerance. 'I am a woman and I go with my father on Tuesdays to Tesco's [...]. [M]y name is Pauline. [...] It's all quite normal.'³

In post conflict Northern Ireland, far too much emphasis remains on the politics of orange and green, rather than the grey areas in between or the positions of the LGBT community, women, and immigrants, all of whom get short shrift. Since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, the North's peace process has placed enormous political capital on ensuring the 'normalization' of politics, culture, and society, as signalling a successful post conflict evolution from war to peace. A byword for demilitarization, decommissioning, and the stability of democratic structures, alongside the massive inward investment and regeneration of the North's economy, 'normalization', as *Theatre of Pluck* reminds us, is a heteronormative process that is an inadequate metric of political progress. If *Can I Forget About You* suggests we should learn to stop talking about the past, *Theatre of Pluck* suggests some of the things that we should learn to begin discussing.

³ Emmanuel Darcis, *Tuesdays at Tesco's (Mardi à Monoprix)* (trans. Matthew Hurt and Sarah Vermande) (London: Nick Hern Books, 2011), 17.