From Troubles To Post-Conflict Theatre in Northern Ireland


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The central danger of all writing about the Troubles is the danger of cliche.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 marred 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

In This Place

1969-1998: Sure Every Week Is Historic

Conflict Drama

The 1998 Good Friday Agreement, which I am proposing, is essentially a post-conflict drama. This can be compared to the veritable explosion of work produced in the era following the peace accords and the signs of what is often called 'Post-Celtic Tiger'.

Today, the form and the structure of the form remain unchanged. The Troubles play, or the 'Troubles drama', is still the dominant meta-narrative, and its echoes linger on. The form has been revised, updated, and modernized, but the basic structure remains intact.

Devil in the Detail Day

With the current political situation in Northern Ireland, it is crucial to understand the complex dynamics at play. The Troubles play is not just a reflection of the conflict, but it is also a means of processing it. The form offers a way of engaging with the past and creating a narrative that can be used to construct a meaningful future.

Consider for instance, Owen McCafferty's 'Truce'. This play addresses the issue of the divided island, and it is a testament to the power of drama to bring people together.

From Troubles to Post-Conflict Theatre

The deep cultural and historical roots of the Troubles remain a significant aspect of Northern Irish identity. The artistic response to this situation has been varied, but it is clear that the Troubles are still a part of the cultural landscape.

The future of post-conflict Northern Ireland will depend on how we engage with the past and how we construct a narrative that is not only about the Troubles, but also about the future.
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'. 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*'. 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. 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. 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

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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.
The play, therefore, is a commentary on the political and historical context of the time. It explores the complexities of power, loyalty, and the consequences of action. McCafferty's Antigone is a modern-day retelling of the classical tragedy, emphasizing the relevance of ancient themes to contemporary issues. The play's setting in Northern Ireland, during a time of political conflict, highlights the struggle between tradition and modernity, between the ideal and the practical. The protagonist, Antigone, is a symbol of resistance against oppression, embodying the spirit of her name 'Antigone', meaning 'against all'. The play is a call to action, urging the audience to confront the moral challenges of their time.

Throughout the play, McCafferty weaves together historical and fictional elements, creating a tapestry that reflects the nuances of the conflict in Northern Ireland. The play's structure, with its interplay of dialogue and monologue, mirrors the complexity of the situation, presenting a multifaceted view of the conflict's impact on the characters and on the community. The characters, both those on stage and those off, are portrayed as individuals caught in the web of history, struggling to find their way through the labyrinth of politics and power.

In conclusion, McCafferty's Antigone is a powerful theatrical piece that resonates with the needs of the present. It invites the audience to reflect on the implications of their actions, to consider the impact of their choices, and to envision a future that is free from the shackles of the past. The play is a testament to the power of art to transcend time and place, to speak to the human condition, and to offer hope in the darkest of moments.
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 frights the play with a class politics that contests the paternostic 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

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\(^{13}\) 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.
FROM TROUBLES TO POST-CONFLICT THEATRE

Stock's appeal for fleets of free bicycles to be supplied for the city offers a precedent for

WOMEN'S TROUBLES

Monica McWilliams, Struggling for Peace and Justice: Reflections on Women's Activism in Northern Ireland.

Charabanc Theatre Company was very much a theatrical manifestation of this movement:

Monica McWilliams, 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 early Sixties, to the community centres and women's clubs of 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 organise and campaign around issues of concern. The Charabanc Theatre Company was founded by a number of actors (Marie Jones, Maureen McAuley, Eleanor Methven, Carol Scanlon) frustrated with the lack of work for women in a male-dominated dramatic scene. Its subject of its inaugural production, Lay Up Your Ends (1983), was the 1911 strike by millgirls protesting against their horrific working conditions. Developed through an innovative process of collaborative research, the play was an extraordinary success, praised for its commitment to collaborative writing, developed through an improvisatory process that sought to capture the oral traditions and working-class culture of the women involved. The play was praised for its authentic portrayal of the women's struggle and their resilience in the face of poverty and political oppression. The Charabanc Theatre Company was very much a theatrical manifestation of this movement:

WOMEN'S TROUBLES


Charlotte Methven, Struggling for Peace and Justice: Reflections on Women's Activism in Northern Ireland.
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 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 Theatre of Pluck, 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...
The policies of reconciliation and reparation underpin the progress of the peace process, and to engage with the legacies of the past and present, it is important to understand the political and cultural context in which they were enacted. This involves recognizing the historical and social dimensions of the conflict, as well as the ongoing impact of the past on present-day politics.

In his play "The Cure at Troy," Mitchell explores the themes of memory, responsibility, and accountability in the context of the Northern Ireland conflict. The play challenges traditional narratives of reconciliation and offers a more nuanced perspective on the complexities of political violence and its aftermath.

The political landscape in Northern Ireland is characterized by a history of conflict, division, and trauma. Mitchell's work seeks to disrupt these narratives by presenting a vision of collective healing and rebuilding. Through his characters and their experiences, Mitchell offers a critical reflection on the role of power, memory, and justice in reconciliation processes.

In conclusion, the policies of reconciliation and reparation are essential for the ongoing process of healing and transformation in Northern Ireland. Mitchell's work serves as a powerful reminder of the need for sustained engagement with the past and a commitment to creating a more just and equitable future for all.

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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.' 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.’

Re-inhabiting the Past

‘Plays and ghosts have a lot in common,’ Stewart Parker once wrote. 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

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

*** Parker, Plays 2, xiii.
Carville's jaunty joke is itself an embryonic example of a kind of Ulster nostalgie, 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 Reasons to Believe (2009) and, arguably, Martin Lynch's hugely successful History of the Troubles (Accordin' to My Da) (2002) and Chronicles of Long Kesh (2009), which repackage the Troubles as a long series of comic set pieces. Lynch's West Belfast war zone is inhabited entirely by lovable rogues, chancers, characters, where affable paramilitaries and unflappable communities endure and even enjoy everything the Troubles can throw at them. Some commentators regard Lynch's plays as comic relief, because they ignore the underlying politics, which are evident in the political violence that led to the Troubles in the first place. However, what emerges is a kind of Ulster satire, in which the Troubles are parodied and mocked, rather than celebrated. 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, the prison site is being toured by the family of a former prisoner, as well as by a visitor guide who describes the facility's history. The play opens up complex issues about how to handle this politically charged space, which has become a metaphor for the North's failure to grapple with the past. While the Troubles are acknowledged, there is no attempt to grapple with the politics, ethics, and aftermath of political violence.

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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 the 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, Abbi 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 holdout of fuel smugglers that have left Pumpgirl’s petrol station ‘on it last legs’ on the wrong side of a fluctuating exchange rate. 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. And yet, 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. In 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 motorcars ‘up b the new hotel that got bombed in ’94’, whilst the secluded scenic spot where Pumpgirl meets him for their trysts is where ‘two Prods were took and killed about fifteen years ago’. The elliptical presence of the past has an unsettling effect, instilling a haunting sense of how history, landscape, language, and memory have been misshapen by acts of political violence that have reinscribed the border areas with an altogether new form of diminuendo.

**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
The all-female cast of *I Once Knew a Girl* included, among others, a serving PSNI officer, a former IRA quartermaster, and Kathleen Gillespie, the widow of Patsy Gillespie, who had been vapourized in the first IRA proxy bomb along with five soldiers. This extract from Mary K. Meyer's 'Gender Politics in the Northern Ireland Peace Process', in Mary Ann Tétreault and Robin L. Teske (eds.), *Partial Truths and the Politics of Community* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), 203.

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 distilled from a series of interviews, workshops, and performances that give the cast fresh, direct and powerful access to their experiences. The performances resemble a form of verbatim or documentary theatre, but one in which the performers are ensemble of the performers who have lived the events that are expressed in the play.

The issue that Northern Irish theatre has begun to bring into the light, notably the way in which
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.’ 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’.

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 ‘generated’ an extensive archive of reflective responses from many of those who saw it. 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’. 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

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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.]
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In Quietly, McCafferty reminds us of the radical possibilities of truth, and that

whereas, in McEvenue's example, the victim is the only one whose killed at the end, in McCafferty's, the victim is the perpetrator. The perpetrator, having killed, must now face the consequences of his actions. McCafferty's Quietly (2012) is a play about the aftermath of a bombing, set in a pub where the bomb was detonated.

In Quietly, McCafferty's play opens with a bombing, followed by a meeting between the expected victim and the perpetrator. The victim, Jimmy, is the son of one of those killed in the bombing, which was carried out by a paramilitary group.

McCafferty's play is a reflection on the process of truth and reconciliation. It explores the idea that truth and reconciliation can only be achieved if the perpetrator is willing to face the consequences of his actions. In the play, Jimmy is asked to confront the perpetrator, and he does so, demanding an explanation for what happened.

The play is set in a pub, and the set is designed to look like a typical Irish pub. This is a place where people come to socialize and share stories, and the play uses this setting to explore the idea of collective memory. The pub is a place where people can come together to share their stories, and it is a place where the play's characters can come together to confront the past.

McCafferty's play is a powerful exploration of the concept of truth and reconciliation. It is a play that challenges us to think about the importance of confronting the past, and it is a play that reminds us of the radical possibilities of truth.
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.\(^\text{40}\)

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.' 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.'\(^\text{41}\) 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'.\(^\text{42}\) 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 a 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.  
\(^{42}\) Ibid.  
\(^{43}\) Owen McCafferty in conversation with the author, 8 May 2014.
You 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 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, impermeable, fourth wall. It was a stunningly simple yet complex staging, leaving Quigley to negotiate his role: 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 a heteronormative society which reacts to and rejects her appearance and identity, and 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: shopping at Tesco's with her father upsets her, and in an emotional outburst, performs 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 [...]. My name is Pauline. [...] It's all quite normal.

In post conflict Northern Ireland, far too much emphasis remains on the politics of orange and green, rather than the grey areas in between 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 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.

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