**QUEEN'S
UNIVERSITY
BELFAST**

Collapsing time: LGBTQ+ rights in Northern Ireland, A Queer Céilí at the Marty Forsythe

Durrer, V., & Grant, D. (2020). Collapsing time: LGBTQ+ rights in Northern Ireland, A Queer Céilí at the Marty Forsythe. *Scene*, 8(1-2), 105-120. https://doi.org/10.1386/scene_00026_1

Published in:
Scene

Document Version:
Peer reviewed version

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

Publisher rights
Copyright 2020 Intellect.
This work is made available online in accordance with the publisher's policies. Please refer to any applicable terms of use of the publisher.

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.

COLLAPSING TIME: LGBTQ+ Rights in Northern Ireland, A Queer Céilí at the Marty Forsythe

Victoria Durrer, University College Dublin, ORCID [0000-0002-0330-2720](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0330-2720)
David Grant, Queen's University Belfast

Abstract

This paper examines Kabosh Theatre Company's production of Dominic Montague's *A Queer Céilí at the Marty Forsythe*, in Belfast, Northern Ireland, during its first run in March 2019. Based on archival research and personal accounts of a weekend surrounding the October 1983 National Union of Students Lesbian and Gay Conference in Belfast, the play depicts a moment of Lesbian and Gay activism largely neglected in critical and popular historical accounts of the period known as the 'Troubles' (1968 – 1998). Through observation of rehearsals and performances as well as in depth interviews with audiences and artists, we argue that the play's situation in the venue, where many of the events portrayed originally took place, and the use of archival and found photographic imagery as key scenic elements create a sense of 'collapsed time' that brings the past into dialogue with the present and future, particularly regarding the relationship of LGBTQ+ rights to societal reconciliation.

Key Words:

LGBTQ+
Site-Specific
Site-Emphatic
Northern Ireland
Reconciliation
Kabosh Theatre Company
Brexit

Introduction

This paper examines *A Queer Céilí at the Marty Forsythe*, written by Dominic Montague between 2018 – 2019 and directed by Kabosh Theatre Company's Artistic Director, Paula McFetridge, with rehearsals and performances in March and August 2019. Based on archival research and personal accounts of the time, the play depicts a weekend surrounding the first National Union of Students Lesbian and Gay Conference held in Northern Ireland (NI) in October 1983. Through observation of rehearsals and Belfast-based performances as well as in-depth interviews with audiences and the artistic team involved in the 27– 30 March 2019 run of the play, our study focuses on the scenic elements of the play, specifically the use of the projection of photography from the time period and the play's siting within the pub (Trinity Lodge, formerly known as the Marty Forsythe) in which a key moment in the story portrayed took place—the *céilí*.

We conclude that these scenic elements facilitate a collapsing of time, bringing the past into dialogue with the present, what Louise Lowe has called a 'NOW-THEN-NOW' experience

(Singleton 2016: 97). While intended by the writer and director to promote thinking about future social and political change, particularly regarding the relationship of LGBTQ+¹ rights to societal reconciliation, dominant religious and ethno-political frames persist in ways that may limit the future that can be (re)imagined by means of the reflective space theatre creates (Dolan 2001). Focused specifically on the impressions of scenic elements in *A Queer Céilí*, the paper thus contributes to studies on the role of theatre in both bringing traditionally disregarded histories of LGBTQ+ people in NI to light (Lehner 2017) and in promoting attitudinal change and thus political and social action challenging LGBTQ+ oppression and discrimination (Iverson and Seher 2014; Vogel and Jackson 2016).

Before framing and discussing our analysis, it is necessary to give a sense of the play's storyline. Fulfilling a 'longstanding promise from the student body' (*A Queer Céilí*, Scene 1) to host the next National Union of Students (NUS) Lesbian and Gay Conference in Belfast after the decriminalisation of homosexuality in NI, less than the expected conference delegates arrived at Queen's University Belfast (QUB) in 1983 due to a hike in registration fees, which many suspected were aimed at discouraging attendance. Those student delegates from Great Britain and NI who did attend were met with hostility from 'Save Ulster from Sodomy' protestors at QUB. This external attempt to infringe on rights, was compounded by the determination internally on the part of NUS to enforce a 'no politics' rule on discussions by delegates, under threat of expulsion. Amidst these tensions over the weekend, an invitation came for the student delegates from the largely nationalist and Catholic community in West Belfast to attend a céilí, an Irish social gathering and popular form of folk dance, at the Martin (Marty) Forsythe Social Club in Turf Lodge (now Trinity Lodge where the March 2019 performances took place) for Saturday night, 22nd October 1983.

A group of black taxis arrived at QUB to bring some local and some visiting students to the Lodge where they mingled and danced with one another and the local community. As explained, and to some extent depicted in the play, some delegates were also housed locally for the night. Jeff Evans, an Englishman who had taken part in the events in Belfast himself, invited Montague and McFetridge to write and premier the completed play, *A Queer Céilí*, during the March 2019 OUTing the Past – LGBT+ History Month. Performed by four actors, it centres on the experiences of four homosexual students in their mid to late twenties, who took part in the conference: three males with two from Belfast and one visiting from Manchester, England for the conference and one female, from Belfast.

The play's agit-prop style presents tragi-comic monologues and dialogue detailing the everyday and individual experiences and multiple political and social positionings of these four student characters against the backdrop of the social, political and cultural circumstances of Belfast, NI during the period of religious and ethno-political violence known as the 'Troubles', which lasted 30 years and claimed over 3700 lives. The politics of the moment is made apparent through the debates on morality and its association with LGBTQ+ identities made evident in the script through the reiteration of political speeches at the time (*A Queer Céilí*, Scene 3; see also Duggan 2012: 53). Also evident in the script is disagreement regarding a hierarchy of rights in NI's conflict, with lesbianism and feminism as particularly unrecognised identities and experiences (Duggan 2012). As official, critical and popular historical accounts of the Troubles have long been dominated by heteronormative, male as

well as religious and ethnopolitical narratives (Duggan 2012), *A Queer Céilí* joins a growing repertoire of NI theatre that challenges heteronormative narratives of the conflict (Lehner 2017).

Written and designed to transfer to other venues and allow for the performance of excerpts at academic conferences, the play is what McFetridge calls 'site-empathetic'. As will be explored below, the site-specific premier of *A Queer Céilí* in March 2019 in Trinity Lodge included a scenic element key to the fluid temporality *A Queer Céilí* evokes. The nature of site-specific performance has excited much academic interest, and Pearson and Shanks' (2001: 23) definition (that 'site-specific performances are conceived for, mounted within and conditioned by the particulars of found spaces, existing social situations or locations, both used and disused') continues to be the benchmark understanding of the term. Wilkie (2002), however, acknowledges the wide variation of opinion on whether the status of a performance conceived in one space but recreated elsewhere can still be described as site-specific. To clarify this ambiguity, he cites Wright and Sites' (2000) taxonomical table, which traces the continuum as consisting of work in a conventional theatre-building, to work staged outside, to site-sympathetic, site-generic and site-specific in that order. Montague refers to *A Queer Céilí* as site-specific and McFetridge refers to the play as site responsive or site-empathetic. While the latter terms do not preclude Pearson and Shanks' (2001: 23) insistence that, 'simply setting 'site' and 'performance' side by side is insufficient because a foundational intersection of the components is required wherein both 'performance' and 'site' inform each other', they do serve to throw emphasis on the performance rather than the site, which makes a study of site as scenic element useful for understanding theatrical intention and encounter.

The opportunity to rehearse and premier the play in March 2019 in Trinity Lodge and the integration of photographic projections—of people and events involved in that October weekend and the evolving campaign for LGBTQ+ rights across the island of Ireland—facilitated an opportunity for artists and audiences to imagine themselves in both a politically charged past and present. Having changed little since the time in which the story is set, the décor of the building highlighted the strong connection between the production's setting and the content. Situated in West Belfast, a city space associated as a republican stronghold and a key site of violence in the conflict, the area has strong associations to individual and collective historical trauma (Dawson 2016). The photographs established a clear Brechtian aesthetic in keeping with the play's agitprop style and emphasised the historical nature of this moment of Lesbian and Gay activism as a part of a longer continuum of activism and rights-based campaigning that is all-island in nature, even if the story of *A Queer Céilí* is NI specific.

These scenic elements will be argued to (re)present LGBTQ+ histories as a (re)presentation of LGBTQ+ lives within this past. In doing so, it will be further argued that these scenic elements also facilitate a dialogue with present and future experiences of life in NI. This is a present and future context in which Northern Ireland faces several social and political challenges. These challenges include the absence of a sitting government in NI from January 2017 – January 2020. Additionally, there have been heightened concerns regarding the impact that Brexit, the United Kingdom's (UK) negotiations to leave the European Union

(EU), would have in relation to human rights and economic, social, cultural, and political relationships on the island. Furthermore, there had been continued debates over the lack of parity in marriage equality for NI within the UK in the context of a recent change in legislation by Referendum in the Republic of Ireland in 2015. In doing so, both the chosen site and photographic imagery used for the March 2019 production present experiences and memories that provide 'an alternative, transformative realm, in which' artists and audiences may 'rethink the conditions of the present' (Lehner 2017: 104; Lev-Aladgem 2006; Zatzman 2005), the potential of which are in turn influenced, and possibly limited, by the personal, interpersonal and political contexts of post-conflict NI.

Context and Methods of Study

Study of the March 2019 rehearsals and premier of *A Queer Céilí* has involved thematic and performance analysis of multiple forms of data collection.² Forms include field notes on observation of six rehearsals and three performances and transcripts of eight audio-recorded 'reflective' conversations among the actors, director and stage manager after rehearsals. In-depth interviews were carried out with thirteen audience members, two of whom were also practicing theatre makers and two of whom were Kabosh board members. These individuals were between the approximate ages of 34 and 70 years old. While none were asked about their identities, one individual self-identified as homosexual, and at least three self-identified as Protestant. No one specifically self-identified as heterosexual nor as Catholic. Two out of thirteen were not born and did not grow up in NI. Three had previously lived abroad.

In-depth interviews were also held with the writer, director, the stage manager, and costume designer, as well as the four actors, all referred to as 'artists' in the paper. The actors and stage manager who participated in the research were all Northern Irish and aged in their twenties and younger than the rest of the artistic team. Some had lived, studied and/or worked in theatre outside of NI. Audience members participating could be categorised as keen theatre-goers, attending theatre multiple times per year and sometimes per month. The types of theatre they most often attended included large-scale and commercial musical productions, to NI-specific plays by smaller theatre companies, international-based plays in NI as well as in venues abroad, and those produced by NI's only full-time producing theatre, the Lyric in Belfast. Most audiences and all artists had previous knowledge of Kabosh's work as socio-political and often performed in non-traditional theatre spaces.

Following practices of reflexivity in qualitative research and thematic analysis (Clarke et al. 2015) and in response to Sedgman's (2019) call for greater reflexivity in theatre reception studies, we acknowledge the frames that have shaped not only our engagement with research participants but also our analysis of *A Queer Céilí*. The opportunity to study the play emerged because of our involvement in an Arts and Humanities Research Council (UK) funded project entitled 'The Art of Reconciliation: Do reconciliation-funded arts projects transform conflict?', involving arts, humanities and social science researchers at QUB, University of Liverpool, and Ulster University. In addition to exploring the question of impact itself, the research explores what, how, and why impact of the arts on peacebuilding and reconciliation in NI is captured, since the Good Friday Agreement (Jankowitz, et al. forthcoming 2020).

Due to this context, particular attention has been paid to the relationship of *A Queer Céilí* to research participants' perceived notions of societal reconciliation in NI (Bloomfield 2006). While reconciliation is understood as 'the process of addressing conflictual and fractured relationships' (Hamber and Kelly 2004: 7), societal reconciliation, refers to

a process of gradually (re)building social relationships between communities alienated by sustained and widespread violence, so that over time they can negotiate the realities and compromises of a new, shared socio-political reality (Bloomfield 2006: 12).

As explained by Jankowitz (2018: 41) societal reconciliation

is concerned with relationships between social groups and the identities associated with collective experiences and group membership...[It] functions to help groups learn to 'share a formerly contested space' and hinges on the creation and resilience of transformed relationships (Clegg 2008, 83). At this level, reconciliation requires the participation and initiative of wider society in order to alter the collective identities and antagonisms that have sustained violent conflict.

In doing so, societal reconciliation is dependent upon reconciliation processes between individuals, social groups, and at the political level, involving law making, governance, and justice practices.

Such processes are tied to multiple, complex, and contested perceptions and attitudes of the prolonged period of conflict in NI (Hayes and McAlister 2013; Tonge 2002) that may become legitimised or, conversely, invalidated over time. In fact, reconciliation is deeply temporal. It is future-oriented, but requires addressing 'the culture of suspicion, fear, mistrust, and violence' passed on from past conflict (Hamber and Kelly 2005: 38). Such action involves addressing those voices and experiences neglected from the cultural and political history of the conflict, which have been traditionally and systemically 'ethno and heteronormative', privileging heterosexual, male, and sectarian identities (Conrad 2013). While the peace process in NI has allowed for greater account and promotion of LGBTQ+ lives and rights in NI (Duggan 2012), the 'needs and experiences of people with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities' have largely been absent from peace and reconciliation policy and practice more broadly (Daigle and Myrtilinen 2018: 103). Articulations of the conflict and senses of the achievement of reconciliation are dominated by the religious and ethno-political binary of Protestant/Unionist - Catholic/Nationalist.

Beyond the scope of our discussion here, strong arguments exist regarding the role theatre may play in promoting forms of reconciliation (Jankowitz, et al. forthcoming 2020). As Kabosh's work is internationally recognised for addressing political and social circumstances and change in NI as a post-conflict society (Fitzpatrick 2017)³, the company's production of *A Queer Céilí* presented an opportunity to address emerging findings from the first stage of this research project. These findings highlight the limitations of emphasising the binary of religious and ethno-political division or inter-mixing as an approach to understanding the achievement (or not) of societal reconciliation in Northern Ireland, over more nuanced

experiences. As such, reconciliation and a sense of its meaning and achievement (or not) was a key question asked of each research participant.

While we do not focus extensively on their responses to those specific questions within this paper, they certainly shaped our researcher-research participant discussions and our analysis. As Jankowitz (2018: 38) explains, ‘lingering feelings of victimhood, guilt, distrust, and fear reinforce conflict divisions and constitute perceptual and relational barriers to [reconciliation] and peace’. Further, life experiences and memories of the conflict are interconnected with spaces and sites, with sectarian divisions still playing out spatially and territorially in Belfast (Dawson 2016). All research participants acknowledged that quality of life had improved in NI since the Troubles, yet how this related to issues of human rights as well as what social causes and whose voices (eg. LGBTQ+, women, migrants) needed to be heard in progressing a sense of societal reconciliation varied. So, while all shared awareness and discontent regarding the discrimination and oppression experienced by people identifying as LGBTQ+, what priority this took over addressing other concerns regarding ‘the legacy of the past’, did vary amongst research participants. Such perceptions may be generationally informed (McAlister, et al., 2014).

The actors indicated that, having grown up in a period of relative peace and stability, their understandings and experiences of the past have been passed down to them by family, educational and political establishments, and / or other community members in so far as it has facilitated awareness of religious and ethno-political divisions and past trauma, which they indicated still remained for some older generations. Despite a feeling that much has moved on, they expressed frustration with, how the legacy of the conflict continues to impact on NI’s political structure, what narratives dominate in theatre, civil rights, and social relations (see Leonard 2017). Typically, though not wholly, older research participants, audiences, who indicated that the legacy of religious and ethno-political divisions were still strongly felt—even if they disagreed with it being so, had different views. Our exploration of site and photographic projections as scenic elements in *A Queer Céilí* indicates that such life experiences, viewpoints, and prior knowledge are important to understanding how artists and audiences perceive and receive the intention of the work.

Analysis

As a result of this context, our analysis centres on the ‘relationship between [the] production and reception’ of *A Queer Céilí*’s scenic elements, to the ‘cultural values’ associated with LGBTQ+ rights and societal reconciliation in NI (Bennett 1997: 86). These connections were part of the motivation for Montague to write and McFetridge to direct *A Queer Céilí*, having previously worked together as writer and director respectively on *Quartered* (2018), an hour-long promenade piece exploring the ways in which Belfast’s LGBTQ community reacts to and interacts with its surroundings in Belfast’s ‘Queer Quarter’ and elsewhere. Montague consciously chose to write a play that he felt ‘could speak to [...] and have relevance to today’, specifically marriage equality, but particularly the ‘inequality of rights across the UK and Ireland...and with Brexit’ (RI1). For McFetridge, with its performance surrounding and on 29 March 2019—the day the UK was originally slated to leave the EU—the first run of the play was ‘for 2019 [...] for the weekend of Brexit’. Even with Brexit postponed days before the premier performance, its eventuality raises concerns

regarding equality protection. Despite its devolution to NI, EU frameworks have provided a 'floor of minimum standards' regarding equality law and human rights that are at risk in the context of Brexit (Danisi et al. 2019: 253). This is especially pertinent to LGBTQ+ rights, for which there have been disparities between NI and the rest of the UK until recently, particularly in relation to same-sex marriage.

A relevant example of how past merges with the present and the possibilities of the Brexit future is closely linked to *A Queer Céilí* in both script and scene design. It is a case brought by the Northern Ireland Gay Rights Association (NIGRA) to the European Commission of Human Rights in 1975 and decided in 1978 on behalf of Jeffrey Dudgeon, gay rights activist, politician and subsequent member of the Ulster Unionist party (pro-union and often associated with Protestantism), and then NIGRA secretary. The Commission's decision that decriminalisation be applied to homosexual acts between consenting adults in private in NI was subsequently upheld by the European Court of Human Rights in 1981 in a decision by 15 votes to 4 (Duggan 2012: 55). It is this decision, referenced in the script of *A Queer Céilí*, which would come into effect in 1982 and led to the National Union of Students (NUS) Lesbian and Gay conference being held in NI in 1983.

Not only is the case foundationally significant to the 'past' moment on which the play focuses, but it is also significant to the current context of the campaign for LGBTQ+ rights on the island of Ireland and how this may or may not progress after Brexit. The decision helped pave the way for a similar case involving the Republic of Ireland, *Norris v. Ireland*, brought to the European Court in 1988. This NI 'first' contrasts with the Republic's 2015 referendum vote by an over 60% majority to permit the contraction of marriage by two persons without distinction as to their sex. While not having achieved similar status at the time of the production under study here⁴, campaigners for the same rights in NI have been strongly connected to, and affected by, the campaign and vote in the Republic (Corrigan 2015).

These connections were visualised through a slide-show projection of archival and found photographic images (curated by Conleth White) of the campaigns in both NI and the Republic of Ireland in the final scene of *A Queer Céilí*. As the set goes dark, the song 'Glad to be Gay' by the Tom Robinson Band plays as images of 'gay and lesbian protests from 1983 ... right through to modern day' are shown chronologically (*A Queer Céilí*, Scene 6). The four 'characters' remain centre stage. They turn their back to the audience, joining them in viewing this slide show. Audiences see the actors, representative of historical personas, blacked out against images of LGBTQ+ rights' campaigns in NI and in the Republic of Ireland—scenes with significant figures of the movement that would largely be of a time located in these characters' future. These include Senator David Norris (of *Norris v. Ireland*) and Dublin-based, County Mayo-born, drag queen Panti Bliss, recognised for raising awareness of homophobia and thus driving public support for the Republic's marriage equality campaign (O'Neill 2014; O'Connor 2017) along with 'Rock The Sham', the campaign pursued for over ten years by a small group of Irish lesbians and gay men and their American supporters, to take a place in the world's largest St. Patrick's Day celebration in New York City. Their backs to the audience, the audience does not get to bear full witness to the characters' sense of witnessing, yet a mapping of past onto present is clearly visible. History is cited and both time and place meld together through the juxtaposition of music,

imagery, and even space: New York, and areas in NI and the Republic. Its relevance to the current context of Brexit, implied.

While the projected slide show was either not discussed in interviews or at least not in any great detail by actors nor audiences, the photographic images did appear to facilitate a sense of time travel. Two audience members interviewed (Aud 9; Aud 6) made explicit remarks about the imagery and particularly with regard to how they helped set the play's time and location in Belfast:

it looked very much of its time [in the 1980's] without bashing you over the head with it [...]. I thought the visuals were quite appropriate and slightly punky (Aud 9).

This same audience member reflected on how the slide show in particular was an effort s/he perceived on the part of Kabosh to deliver the play as a 'big information bullet...partly documentary, partly storytelling' (Aud 9). This alignment of reality with fiction was quite significant for this individual. When asked what impact the presentation of visuals had, s/he replied:

Seeing the real reportage side of it, alongside the fictional side of it, it makes you realise how far we've come. But how angry you feel that not that long ago people were allowed to behave like this (Aud 9).

A strong example of fictionalised reportage is the use of a mixture of archival and recreated photographic imagery that marks the infringement on the rights of the students at that event, as well as what many view as 'a major catalyst for the politicisation of sexuality in NI': the 'Save Ulster from Sodomy' campaign (Duggan 2012: 58). The students who attended the NUS conference at QUB were met by placard-waving 'Save Ulster from Sodomy' protestors, an archival, news media photograph (Figure 1) of which was presented in a projection on the back wall of the play's setting, including signs that state 'Save Ulster from Sodomy' and 'This is Belfast, not Sodom', referred to by 'MICHAEL' in the play (*A Queer Céilí*, Scene 1).

[INSERT FIGURE 1: '*A Queer Céilí at the Marty Forsythe*' by Dominic Montague, directed by Paula McFetridge, Scene 1, produced by Kabosh Theatre Company March 2019, Actors L to R: Christopher Grant, Simon Sweeney, Paula Carson-Lewis, Brendan Quinn, © Kabosh Theatre Company, photographer Loretta Hurson]

While it sought to do otherwise at the time, this 'Sodomy' campaign actually progressed the 'visibility of the gay rights movement' (Duggan 2012: 58). This element is explicitly referred to in both script and scene design. Individuals who were interviewed as part of the script development process explained that some student delegates responded with T-shirts and badges emblazoned with the slogan 'Save Sodomy From Ulster', an archival, news media photograph (Figure 2) to which the actors also refer (*A Queer Céilí*, Scene 1):

MICHAEL: Where the fuck did Tarlach get that t-shirt?

BRENDI: We all should have got them.

[INSERT FIGURE 2: 'A *Queer Céilí at the Marty Forsythe*' by Dominic Montague, directed by Paula McFetridge, Scene 1 produced by Kabosh Theatre Company March 2019, Actors L to R: Simon Sweeney, Christopher Grant, Paula Carson-Lewis, Brendan Quinn, © Kabosh Theatre Company, photographer Loretta Hurson]

In this scenic (re)presentation of the past, *A Queer Céilí*, reimagines the narrative of the LGBTQ+ movement not only in the history of NI's conflict, but also in the present, and potentially the future. Despite many feeling largely aware of the history of the Troubles, artists and audiences alike reflected on a lack of awareness of the event depicted in the play. The play thus 'queers' common understandings of the Troubles through its personalised portrayal of an historical moment evidenced as 'fact' through photographic imagery, exposing 'silenced and neglected [LGBTQ+] voices and experiences of the past' (Lehner 2017: 104; Lev-Aladgem 2006; Zatzman 2005). This consciousness of (re)presenting the past and collapsing it into the present is related to the site in which *A Queer Céilí* was performed in March 2019.

As an artistic practice the Trinity Lodge as a performance 'site', having retained much of its 1980s décor, placed those who were aware of the building's relevance firmly 'in the middle of history' (Aud 9)⁶. Upon entering the building and collecting tickets, audience members turned left to enter one of the Lodge's pub rooms. This is the room where the céilí occurred. Audience members typically ordered drinks at the bar before taking their cabaret-style seats. While there were raised platforms utilised at different moments, the audience witnessed, but was equally a part of the story. In addition to the four main characters, the play involves a number of minor characters, nine in total, ranging from young people to a taxi driver. These characters are all portrayed by the play's four main actors who multirole, moving in and out of different roles and scenes. Character changes are marked by a shift in stage positioning, a change in accent, or by the photographic projections on the set's back wall.

Audiences' senses of clarity of space, location and time, were altered. One audience member remarked that this style in that setting was 'confusing... it took me a while to think, oh yes, they're using that as a different room, or a different set or situations' (Aud 5). Sounds from another bar in an adjacent room mixed with music of the period, with punk giving way to the new romantic, locating the audience simultaneously in parallel time periods. For the artists and those audience members who were aware, the emotional response of people, who had taken part in the events portrayed and were in attendance on the play's opening night, the reality of the past was brought into currently lived experience.

This encounter resonates with Singleton's analysis of Anu Productions' work. Where the research underpinning the production is:

performed not as the expression of an idea of the past, but the communication of a trace, a relic, [...] of the past, generating a feeling or a sense of the past in a live and present encounter [... something Anu Productions call] the 'NOW THEN NOW' [...] Though this might suggest an immersion in another time or place, the experience of it in practice is at times a paradox as the spectator was both highly conscious of

playing a role in public space, while at the same time, engaged in acts that s/he knew were supposed to be in the past.

Still, while Montague and McFetridge note their desire for the play to 'bear witness' to the past and be stylistically sensitive of its 'liveness' in the present, it was also about the future: 'asking people about how much power they feel they have to effect change' (RI1). Told through the perspectives of young characters, Montague wanted to mark an 'upswelling' of what he feels is a past and current moment where 'young people [are] engaged in politics' (RI1). As a result, *A Queer Céilí* is a play intended to dispel 'the myth that a gay story was just about gay rights' (RI1). Instead, it was 'the fact the people at that conference were heavily involved in political and activist struggles across the board' (RI1). The intersectionality of LGBTQ+ identity with religious and ethno-political identity and rights' struggles in 1980s NI is captured through the nature of the activism the play portrays. Monologues toward the end of the play that account for the passing on the final day of the conference of a series of motions for the NUS Lesbian and Gay Committee are an example. These included acknowledgement that the NUS actively discouraged attendance through high registration fees; a condemnation of the censorship of political discussion regarding 'Ireland' and a call for dedicated discussion at the 1984 conference; and condemnation of and active campaigning to halt strip searches of women political prisoners in Armagh Gaol (prison).

Yet, the desire to foster future-oriented, activist thinking may be limited by sociopolitically informed interpretive lenses. Continual script and staging revisions took place throughout rehearsals. What lines and how they were presented as well as the choices made about when, what, and how many images to include as either backdrops to scenes or almost as characters in and of themselves were conscious choices. There was much thought regarding whether or not equal representation of political affiliations should be emphasised. An example is reflected in the decisions to attempt to limit the politically charged nature of the images in the closing slide show. For instance, despite the Republic of Ireland having its first openly gay Taoiseach (Prime Minister), Leo Varadkar, a decision was made to exclude his image along with individual political party campaigns in the NI context: no party images of Sinn Féin, the Alliance Party, or the Worker's Party are presented. McFetridge explains,

the show is, at its very heart, about looking at human rights, collective activism [...] So the only political image in the end, is amnesty (RI2).

This judgement appears to have been an important one, as political affiliations did matter to some audience members, imbued with strong feelings of ethno-political identity and thus exclusion and prejudice for some. In fact, the decision to present the slide show was one on which McFetridge deliberated for some time, demonstrating the high status and affective power this scenic element was perceived to have:

I really worried. I really thought it wasn't going to work. I thought it was going on for too long (3.5 mins), and it was simply heightening the worthiness by being sentimental, so detracting from the emotional connection with the play and its protagonists. I had to trust it. [...] because, actually my colleague [Conleth White] did a superb job with the way it was curated (RI2).

The siting of the play not only in Trinity Lodge, but also in West Belfast facilitates what Schneider (2011) might refer to as a kind of live re-enactment of sorts that was a powerful artistic revisioning for some, but one that surfaced vulnerabilities for others. West Belfast is a neighbourhood historically understood and still perceived to be religiously and ethnopolitically homogenous as republican and Catholic. For the actors who reflected on the play's location in West Belfast, there was a common interpretation that travelling across different areas of Belfast was more 'freeing' (A2) now, indicating a lessening of territorialism and division. At the same time, actors were sensitive to the fact that this would not be the case for everyone coming to see the play. While none of the audience members felt they had been in direct receipt of violence as a result of the 'Troubles', some acknowledged an awareness of its trauma as impacting how they felt personally apprehensive about traveling to certain parts of Belfast city (Dawson 2016), which provided a veneer of discomfort upon initially entering the venue, even if they willingly did so. Some who were artists themselves or who were from West Belfast did not have any concerns with the play's location there. The latter shared a view that the play was a more positive representation of West Belfast than might be typical.

Even if lacking apprehension themselves, all audiences expressed awareness that others not from the area might have trepidation. One audience member who was not from the area but had been there previously on work-related business, explained that the location almost prevented his/her attendance, due to his/her identity as a Protestant (Aud 1). This individual spoke of anxiety in attending the play in West Belfast, but still did so due to the nature of its story. Another commented that s/he was equally hesitant in attending but did because s/he knew others going. S/he explained, 'there are [sic] power in numbers' (Aud 8). In recognition of these barriers, Kabosh Theatre Company provided free transport to Trinity Lodge from QUB for each night of the March 2019 run, for those who wished to avail of it, which revisioned the black taxis from QUB in 1983, but equally underlined the apprehensions that remain.

Conclusion: Progress and Stasis

A Queer Céilí joins a growing repertoire in Northern Irish theatre and scholarship (Duggan 2012; Conrad 2013; Lehner 2017) that challenges the privileging of heterosexual experiences. The paper has explored how the play's scenic elements facilitate realms of interpretation. The location of the play and the use of projected imagery have encouraged theatrical time-travelling. Set in the venue and neighbourhood where the actual céilí took place and provided with archival images, the audience is invited to draw meaning from the associations the performance has with the place and time in which it is performed. Further, the location of the play in West Belfast physically moved people to a familiar or unfamiliar cultural and political territory about which they were either indifferent, anxious, or secure. As such, site and imagery call upon artists and audiences to confer between multiple realities that are both past and present and made up of identities that are political, multifarious, negotiated, and ever-evolving.

Depictions and debates about the past, our memories and the revisioning of those memories are culturally specific, current and ongoing, but they are also personal. The history the play (re)presents appears to relate to the perceptions of distance travelled in terms of societal reconciliation. The intention of the play to encourage thinking 'about how

much power [people] feel they have to effect change' (RI1) may be limited by one's personal perception of 'how far we've come' (Aud 9) or conversely that 'views [...] from [the past] haven't changed for some people' (Aud 6). It is noteworthy that the ages and life experiences of individuals who participated in the research varied. How life experiences and beliefs relate to the interests, 'hopes, fears, [and] expectations' one brings to *A Queer Céilí* warrants much deeper consideration (Barker 2006: 131; Sedgman 2019: 473). This includes consideration of one's prior experience and interests in theatre, as well as LGBTQ+ issues and notions of reconciliation in a NI context. Nevertheless, through considering some key scenic elements, *A Queer Céilí* indicates that societal reconciliation is indeed incremental, processual and interdependent with personal, interpersonal, and wider political frames (Jankowitz 2018).

Acknowledgements

This research was made possible through the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AH/P014178/1). We thank the team involved with *A Queer Céilí* 2019 for allowing us to share in their world and Sarah Jankowitz for her role in the initial data collection. We also recognise conference delegate Tarlach Mac Niallais who sadly passed away from complications of the coronavirus in April 2019. The 2019 production was funded by Arts Council of Northern Ireland, Belfast City Council, Community Relations Council NI and the Halifax Foundation.

References

Barker, Martin (2006), 'I have seen the future and it is not here yet...; Or, on being ambitious for audience research', *The Communication Review*, 9:2, pp. 123–41.

Bennett, Susan (1997), *Theatre audiences: A theory of production and reception*, 2nd ed, Abingdon: Routledge.

Bloomfield, David (2003), 'Reconciliation: An Introduction', in D. Bloomfield, T. Barnes, and L. Huyse, (eds.), *Reconciliation After Violent Conflict: A Handbook*, Stockholm: Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, pp. 10 – 18.

Clarke, Victoria, Virginia Braun, and Nikki Hayfield (2015), 'Thematic analysis', in J. Smith, (ed), *Qualitative psychology: A practical guide to research methods*, London: Sage, pp. 222-248.

Conrad, Kathryn (2013), '“You won't re-route this fruit”: Northern Ireland, 'queer', and a geopolitics of affection', in M. O'Rourke, A. Quilty, M. Barron, BeLonG To, K. Conrad, É.Walshe, and M. Sullivan. (eds), Roundtable: Are We Queer Yet?. *Irish University Review*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, pp. 30 – 34.

Corrigan, Patrick (2015), 'Marriage equality: Yes vote will build unstoppable momentum in Northern Ireland, 21 May, Slugger O'Toole,

<https://sluggerotoole.com/2015/05/21/marriage-equality-yes-vote-will-build-unstoppable-momentum-in-northern-ireland/>. Accessed 18 February 2020.

Clegg, Cecelia (2008), 'Embracing a Threatening Other: Identity and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland', in S. Kim, P. Kollontai, and G. Hoyland, (eds.), *Peace and Reconciliation: In Search of Shared Identity*, Hampshire: Ashgate, pp. 81–94.

Daigle, Megan and Myrntinen, Henri (2018), 'Bringing diverse sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) into peacebuilding policy and practice', *Gender & Development*, 26:1, pp. 103-120.

Danisi, Carmelo, Dustin, Moira and Ferreira, Nuno (2019), 'Queering Brexit: What's in Brexit for Sexual and Gender Minorities?', in M. Dustin, N. Ferreira, and S. Millns. (eds) *Gender and queer perspectives on Brexit*, Gender and Politics Series, London: Palgrave, pp. 239 – 272.

Dawson, Graham (2016), 'Memoryscapes, Spatial Legacies of Conflict, and the Culture of Historical Reconciliation in 'Post-Conflict Belfast'', in D. Orange (ed.), *Breaking Intergenerational Cycles of Repetition: A Global Dialogue on Historical Trauma and Memory*, Berlin: Verlag Barbara Budrich, pp. 135-159.

Dolan, Jill (2001), 'Performance, Utopia, and the "Utopian Performative".' *Theatre Journal* 53:3, pp. 455-479.

Duggan, Marian (2012), *Queering conflict: Examining lesbian and gay experiences of homophobia in Northern Ireland*, London: Routledge.

Fitzpatrick, Lisa (2017), 'The politics of performance: Theatre in and about Northern Ireland', in E. Jordan and E. Weitz, (eds), *The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Irish Theatre and Performance*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 51 – 68.

Hamber, Brandon, and Gráinne Kelly (2004), *Reconciliation: A Working Definition*. Belfast. <http://www.ark.ac.uk/orb/summaries/Hamber04.doc>.

Hayes, Bernadette C., and Ian McAllister (2013), *Conflict to peace. Politics and society in Northern Ireland over half a century*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Iverson, Susan V., and Christin Seher (2014), 'Using theatre to change attitudes toward lesbian, gay, and bisexual students', *Journal of LGBT Youth*, 11:1, pp. 40-61.

Jankowitz, Sarah (2018), *The Order of Victimhood: Violence, Hierarchy and Building Peace in Northern Ireland*, Cham: Springer.

Jankowitz, Sarah, Durrer, Victoria, Campbell, Peter, Shirlow, Peter (forthcoming 2020), 'A proposed methodology for evaluating arts-based peacebuilding', *Peace Review*, 32:1.

Leonard, Marian (2017), *Teens and territory in 'post-conflict' Belfast: If walls could talk*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.

- Lehner, Stefanie (2017), 'Parallel games' and queer memories: Performing LGBT testimonies in Northern Ireland', *Irish University Review*, 47:1, pp. 103-118.
- Lev-Aladgem, Shulamith (2006), 'Remembering forbidden memories: Community theatre and the politics of memory', *Social Identities*, 12:3, pp. 269-283.
- McAlister, Siobhán, Phil Scraton, and Deena Haydon (2014), 'Childhood in transition: Growing up in 'post-conflict' Northern Ireland', *Children's Geographies* 12:3, pp. 297-311.
- Montague, Dominic (2019), *A Queer Céilí at the Marty Forsythe*, unpublished.
- Pearson, Mike, and Michael Shanks (2001), *Theatre/Archaeology*, London: Routledge.
- Schneider, Rebecca (2011), *Performing remains: Art and war in times of theatrical re-enactment*, London: Routledge.
- Sedgman, Kirsty (2019), 'On rigour in theatre audience research', *Contemporary Theatre Review* 29:4, pp. 462-479.
- Singleton, Brian (2016), *Anu Productions: The Monto Cycle*, London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Tonge, Jonathan (2002,) *Northern Ireland: Conflict and change*, London: Prentice Hall.
- Vogel, Autumn and Jackson, Lydia (2016), 'Activist theatre: The effects of community performance on system justification and willingness to engage in activism', *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology* 26:5, pp. 456-462.
- Wilkie, Fiona (2002), 'Mapping the terrain: a survey of site-specific performance in Britain', *New Theatre Quarterly* 18:2, pp. 140-160.
- Wrights and Sites (eds.) (2000), 'Site-Specific: *The Quay Thing Documented*', *Studies in Theatre and Performance Supplement*, 5, August.
- Zatzman, Belarie (2005), 'Staging history: Aesthetics and the performance of memory', *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 39:4, pp. 95-103.

¹ The acronym 'LGBTQ+' was not employed in the 1980s. We recognise the complexity, relevance and importance of terminology, including 'queer' and SOGI (Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity). We employ 'LGBTQ+' in this paper as it has been more commonly employed at the time the play was performed and more encompassing of how the rights issue is articulated in a NI context (Duggan 2012).

² Research interviews are referenced by Aud for 'audience', 'A' for actor, and RI for research interviews with the writer and / or director. Each are followed by a number that correspond to the interview transcript. Due to anonymity they are not cited in the references.

³ Particular attention in the research project has been given to arts projects funded by bodies aimed at promoting peace and reconciliation. *A Queer Céilí* itself was not funded through such a funding stream, but Kabosh was core funded at the time by the Community Relations Council (CRC), which has contributing to peace and reconciliation as its core mission.

⁴ NI received equality in 2020 when British MPs in Westminster voted in October 2019 that same-sex marriage rights would be extended to NI, unless a sitting government returned by the 21st of that month.

⁶ Trinity Lodge was extensively damaged in a fire on 7 March 2020 with plans for rebuild.