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 cliché.

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. 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 mar 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.

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IN THIS PLACE

1969-1998: SURE EVERY WEEK IS HISTORIC

Conflict drama: the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, which I call post-conflict drama, produced a veritable explosion of work produced in the era following the peace process. The terms and lexicon of what is often coherently classified as "Troubles drama" have the potential to elide the specific forms, themes, and tropes of the era's plays that were central to the problem. The post-conflict plays of the 1990s are distinguished by their shared focus on the Northern Ireland peace process and the attempts to establish a new order. However, the term "Troubles" drama as a new genre in Irish theatre now appears to have outlived its usefulness in capturing the complexities, contradictions, and ambivalences of this period. Tellingly, "Troubles" drama is no longer identifiable as such by the critics who engage with Northern theatre, and the term is seen as unhelpful in understanding the productions that emerged in the post-conflict era.

Consider for instance Owen McCafferty's "One of Irish Theatre's Most Prolific and Significant Playwrights," which appeared in edited collections and books that are much more concerned with the deep structural and political issues that were central to the Troubles. According to McCafferty, the only academic interest in his work is in the "Troubles" and its theatrical representation, which is "only academic interest in the work." This critical repositioning—perhaps forced by the "Troubles" drama's association with violence and conflict—has led to a narrow engagement with Northern theatre.
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 Irish University Review no. 2 (1999), 21+.


Sharon Clift, in the article "Whose Contested Countryside? Ritual, Myths and Politicisation in a Ritual-Focalised Irish Drama," suggests that the article focuses on the ritualised nature of political conflict in the North of Ireland, an area which has been described as a "post-conflict" region.

The article explores the idea that the contemporary essence of tragedy, as understood in the context of Irish drama, has shifted from the traditional focus on individual heroism to a more communal and ritualised approach. The article argues that the contemporary forms of tragedy, which are characterised by ritualised conflict and communal sacrifice, are a reflection of the political and social conditions of the North of Ireland.

The article also discusses the role of the Irish theatre in representing these conditions, and the ways in which the theatre has responded to the political and social context. The article concludes that the theatre has had a significant role in representing the contemporary essence of tragedy, and that it has been able to provide a platform for the expression of community and collective identity.
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 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!'

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. 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.

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

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 vision.

WOMEN'S TROUBLES

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.

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.

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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 Glendening, 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 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
The cyphism and dhikarany that underpinned the North's peace process, as well as the new body still set in the English Balrook, are positive signs of the transition as a vehicle as well as the possible emergence of post-conflict drama. For others, reading post-conflict drama

Mitchell's work when it describes a political process that engages the passive roles of women within this context, the author of his plays has seen a dramatic shift in the way stages are read. His plays are also striking for their fierce critique of the hypermasculine codes of post-conflict politics and the role of women in that process. The Good Friday Agreement, to offer a profoundly pessimistic reading of post-agreement, provides a vital insight into how many within working-class communities have been disillusioned and disheartened. The new distribution of power within the Northern Irish political landscape, in which Sinn Fein and the Ulster Unionist Party seem to have emerged as the dominant players, has now led to a situation where it is difficult to envision a united Ireland for the near future.

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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.'\(^6\) 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'.\(^7\)

**RE-INHABITING THE PAST**

'Plays and ghosts have a lot in common,' Stewart Parker once wrote.\(^8\) 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 aural 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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\(^7\) Stewart Parker, *Dramatis Personae* (Belfast: John Malone Memorial Committee, 1986), 18.
\(^8\) Parker, *Plays*: 2, xiii.
Publicity...just like the old days...put us back on the map. Make Belfast—a boom town again.

Carville's jaunty joke is itself an embryonic example of a kind of Ulster osthall—tobor rowaterm 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 

Peter to the Troubles in Convictions (Belfast: Tinderbox, 2000), 56-7.

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 Theatrical Company. Now derelict and empty in many ways, the prison site is being toured by the mother and sister of a former prisoner, together with the prison governor. The play opens up complex issues as to how to handle this politically charged space, which has been a metaphor for Northern Ireland, but should it be demilitarised in the same way as a play about the Robert MacNamara's visit to Northern Ireland. The play is set in the prison and the narrative includes the story of his decision to live in the prison and to be released from it. However, the play also deals with the political implications of the Troubles and their aftermath.

From Troubles to Post-Conflict Theatre
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 fit, 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 to 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 fieldland 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. An 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 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 misshaped by acts of political violence that have reinscribed the border areas with an altogether new form of dimneachas.

**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 traumati...
issue that Northern Ireland theatre has begun to bring into the light, notably the way in which 


# Figure 2.3.

Still from The Far Side of Revenge (2012), film maker Maria Harkin’s documentary.
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

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.]
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 *AH69o5* (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 *AColdHouse* (2003), whose title is a reference to Unionist leader David Trimble’s Nobel speech in which he conceded unionism had since partition created a ‘coldhouse for Catholics’, stages the almost insuperable difficulties of any such process, whereby truth leads only to recrimination as the coldhouse 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 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 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 forth 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 Cummins’ meticulously realistic set was modelled on the original design and decor of the Rose & Crown pub where, according to local legend, the bomber’s father, a Republican activist of the 1970s, was murdered by both Loyalist and Republican paramilitaries. McCafferty’s fiction of revenge as the liberal alternative to reconciliation is explored in McCafferty’s *Quietly*, where a former RUC officer meets his former republican interlocutor in a pub, where they re-encounter each other and exchange a incredible story of justice.

In *Quietly*, McCafferty reminds us of the therapeutic possibilities of truth, and that where he has argued against the moral equivalence of victims and perpetrators, we should not confuse the personal quest for justice with the public business of peace. McCafferty’s *Quietly*, like so many Irish plays, is set in a dreamscape, where the memory of the atrocity is enacted as a play within a play. In *Quietly*, McCafferty asks us whether truth and reconciliation are the same thing, and whether there can be justice without truth, or truth without justice. In *Quietly*, McCafferty reminds us of the therapeutic possibilities of truth, and that where he has argued against the moral equivalence of victims and perpetrators, we should not confuse the personal quest for justice with the public business of peace.
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—

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.' 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.'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'.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 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.
42 Owen McCafferty in conversation with the author, 8 May 2014.
Looking after an elderly father who refuses to accept or to acknowledge his child’s
play takes the form of a monologue about a middle-aged transvestite woman in a pub
in the heart of the city. All the more reason then, that the middle-class play
proposed here, at the Catalonian (Quarter), the MAC, with a full house in 2012,
seems to mark a significant moment in Northern drama.

After this exchange, the Troubles are not mentioned again. In this understated way
this

STEVE: The Troubles. I’m so sick of talking about it and hearing about it.

MARTHA: Why is that?

STEVE: I just so fucking bored.

MARTHA: Why are you so fucking bored? And how could you have

seen so much terror and tragedy when you’ve never known it? And how could you have

lived with such fear in your own city for so long and why do you only now

begin to live with all the violence in your city after you’ve been a member of the RUC

for years. I think it’s only fair that you know how it feels to be guaranteed how

you’re going to die every day. And you and your family and all the other people I meet

suddenly stopped: I just want to know you and I mean I know we’ve only just met

STEVE: The Troubles. How we let that happen. Like why it went on. And why it

MARTHA: I don’t understand it. I don’t understand how it could have happened.

Troubles with a combination of ignorance, horror, and curiosity:

Troubles is adapted from a novel, but aware that the novel was produced with him
been killed in a murder-mash on the road when his mother was pregnant with him.

Learn a little more from each other with Martha discovering Steve’s political leanings
while her curiosity is palpably raised by his combinations of ignorance, perfect
Martha (she is a Glasgow Presbyterian)

exploration of this political line by being inspired by the Catholic church in the

heavens, the church of Steve is the corner of some building that looks like a

theological college with an alterwise perfect Martha (she is a Glasgow Presbyterian)

extension of his physical space which is expressed in the extended ends in an even more

socially

and

the

MARTHA: This is not a novel take on the bog-across-the-bar.

Two shows running simultaneously at the recently regionalized MAC Theatre in

readers’ notes on the back. It is equally true that the North is changing and there-

politics remain as entrenched as ever.

With no one would dispute that many of the features of Northern Ireland’s, confessional

published, can TROUBLES do better? Can TROUBLES do better? Can TROUBLES do better? Can
transformation, pointedly using her birthname, 'Paul', whilst scorning her appearance and identity. *Tuesdays* was performed in the MAC's ground floor exhibition space, its 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, if impermeable, fourth wall. It was a stunningly simple yet complex staging, leaving Quigley to negotiate his character's 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, 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, 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 'normalisation' 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, 'normalisation', as Theatre of Pluck remind us, is a heteronormative process that is an inadequate metric of political progress. If *Can't 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.