Challenging the Peace:

The Counter-Narratives of Northern Irish Women Playwrights, 1980-2012

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Abstract

When addressing the contributions of Northern Irish women playwrights, Irish scholarship tends to cite Christina Reid, Anne Devlin, and Marie Jones, along with a cursory nod to the Charabanc Theatre Company, as the primary and only examples of women's writing from the North. While the plays of these early pioneers are important, they are far from being the only or most significant examples of women's theatrical contributions. Current scholarship erroneously gives the impression that the North has not produced a significant female playwright since the early 1980s. It also creates a false perception that the North experienced a brief and isolated renaissance of women playwrights only to have their contributions overshadowed by male playwrights like Brian Friel, Stewart Parker, Gary Mitchell, and others. These men have received enormous critical and scholarly attention while women playwrights have been essentially written out of history and the theatrical canon. In fact, during the 1980s and 1990s, the theatre companies of Charabanc, DubbelJoint, and JustUs dramatized the development of the sectarian conflict in Northern Ireland in an attempt to show how historical and political conditions perpetuated violence and divisions. The companies provided new jobs and training for women in the theatre, created a new audience-base, and established a model of bringing artistic work into rural and working-class areas.

The tendency of scholars and critics to overlook women's contributions continues in the present. There has been little examination of the female playwrights who are now emerging to lead the North in a cultural revival. A new

generation of playwrights such as Abbie Spallen, Stacey Gregg, Rosemary Jenkinson, Patricia Downey, and Shannon Yee is exploring how the peace process is shaping women's subjectivity and their relationship to the newly forming state. In order to combat persistent notions that Jones, Reid, and Devlin are the primary female contributors from the North, this study repositions the Charabanc, DubbelJoint, and JustUs theatre companies as central to the development of Northern drama. In addition, recent contributions by a new generation of playwrights shows a continued legacy of women writers addressing gender politics and giving voice to marginalized groups. While the government continues to promote images of a new and improved Northern Ireland, contemporary women playwrights are challenging these constructed images of the North and suggesting that the Troubles continues to radically shape women's sexuality, subjectivity, and professional and personal opportunities.

In charting the development of women playwrights in Northern Ireland, this dissertation (1) broadens the dialogue about female playwrights from the North, rewriting women into history; (2) analyzes how the transition from violence to peace over the past thirty years has affected women's writing and professional opportunities in the theatre; and (3) provides an overview of what contemporary women playwrights are writing about today and their current positioning within Irish theatre.

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Introduction

On June 27, 2012, the Lyric theatre, Northern Ireland's oldest professional producing house, was at the center of a groundbreaking political event. While the occasion had high-profile actors, an eager audience, and was carefully choreographed and staged, it was not a play. Instead, this event had higher stakes and more real-life significance than anything that had been staged at the Lyric before. The Queen of England, the most potent symbol of continued British rule over Northern Ireland, and Martin McGuiness, Northern Ireland's Deputy First Minister and former leader of Sinn Féin,[1] shook hands. This historic and highly symbolic act marked a major step in the process towards a lasting peace in Northern Ireland. The fact that it took place in a theatre emphasizes the highly theatrical and symbolic nature of politics, violence, and the peace process in the North.

The year 2012 was extremely important for the North in general. Along with the Queen's visit to celebrate her diamond jubilee (sixty years on the throne), the year was also marked by the centenary of the *Titanic*, which was designed and built in Belfast. The Northern government used the occasion to launch a new marketing campaign meant to combat images of the North as violent, economically unstable, and culturally impoverished. Instead, the campaign reintroduced the "new" North as a site of positive historical significance and of renewed diverse culture. The official 2012 slogan promoted by the government and by the Northern Tourism Board was *Your Time, Our Place*, suggesting that

[1] A nationalist political party that is widely viewed as the Irish Republican Army's political wing.

2012 was a positive new beginning. The balance between *your* and *our* also reflected a dual goal by the government to have its citizens take personal responsibility for building a positive future while also tempering individual aspirations with collective, cross-community achievement. Furthermore, *Your Time* suggested that 2012 was the start of a new historical period of confident and optimistic ownership for the North's citizens, while *Our Place* also reflected a fresh push towards seeing the land and space of the North as belonging to everyone rather than as marked by sectarian division.

Today, this "new Northern Ireland" has begun a process of not only envisioning a better and brighter future but also of redefining and re-presenting its past. With the *Titanic* centenary, Belfast opened a multimillion-dollar *Titanic* museum as well as re-designated and renamed buildings and various areas in the city to reflect the history of the *Titanic* rather than that of the Troubles.[2] Titanic Boulevard, the Titanic Belfast Museum, Titanic Slipways, Titanic Studios (a film production studio), and the Titanic Memorial Garden now comprise a new waterfront section of the city, which is called the Titanic Quarter. This massive waterfront regeneration project includes luxury apartments, an entertainment complex (which houses a cinema, recreation center, and live performance venue), as well as shops, hotels, and restaurants. Instead of Troubles tourism with visits to political murals, the peace walls, and the sites of the most violent clashes, cultural and tourist activities associated with the *Titanic* now dominate the city.

While the government has worked hard to promote economic and political reforms in the North, significantly, it has also focused on developing and

[2] A period of violent sectarian conflict in the North from roughly 1969-1998.

promoting arts and culture as a symbol of the North's social renewal. This push to redefine Northern Ireland as a peaceful and civilized state has been marked by several important cultural events throughout 2012, including an international music concert entitled *Peace One Day Concert* in Derry/Londonderry in June, large-scale art installation projects in the countryside, and several public arts festivals and theatrical events throughout the year. The city of Derry/Londonderry has also been selected as the British City of Culture for 2013, again bringing focus to the North as a desirable destination for culture and tourism. 2013 also marks the four-hundredth anniversary of the founding of Belfast City, and a series of cultural events are planned throughout the year to celebrate the occasion. All these developments signal a distinct desire by the government to promote the North as a newly peaceful, stable, and progressive state that welcomes new industry, tourism, and economic development. Most importantly, it also marks the very beginning of a Northern revival, which is using art and culture as the means through which to reposition the country's past and define its future.

The use of art and culture to redefine a population coming out of a period of great trauma can be seen throughout history. African Americans during the Harlem Renaissance and Indian artists post-Independence used art and culture as a means through which to express their humanity and intelligence after centuries of dehumanization. The island of Ireland itself experienced the Irish Literary Revival during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, reaching back to a Celtic and folk mythology to establish themselves as a "civilized" culture against British imperialist notions of the Irish as drunk, violent, and subhuman.

After thirty years of heightened violence and centuries of sectarian conflict, the North is likewise engaged in a cultural and artistic renaissance designed to reposition the North as a peaceful and progressive society.

In the theatre sector, this revitalization has begun in earnest with the emergence of new theatre festivals, the rise of independent theatres companies, and a new generation of playwrights who are writing about the North's transition to peace. Women theatre practitioners and playwrights have arguably been at the forefront of these efforts. Women currently hold a significant portion of theatre management and artistic positions in the North, and women playwrights have distinguished themselves through a courageous willingness to critique controversial notions of the North's "Troubled" past while also advocating for positive change. The Troubles, which describes three decades of violent sectarian conflict in the North, has been the most significant and defining episode in contemporary Northern history, shaping culture, politics, and government in profound ways. Although the North is currently enjoying a period of peace, women playwrights are questioning whether the violence and trauma of the Troubles are truly over and if the North can move beyond its traumatic history.

The Troubles

Northern Ireland was partitioned from the rest of Ireland on May 3, 1921, under the Government of Ireland Act of 1920. While the rest of the island became the Irish Free State on December 6, 1922, six counties in the North (Antrim, Armagh, Down, Fermanagh, Tyrone, Derry/Londonderry) remained under British

control, forming the new Northern Irish state. When partition occurred, the majority of people in the North were Protestants whose families had come over from Scotland and England during the plantation period in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. At the time of partition, Protestants had primary control over land, industry, and government in the North. As a result, the Catholic minority was systemically denied housing and voting rights, creating a two-tiered and unequal system which favored Protestants. Catholics were placed in slum housing, given the least paying and most dangerous jobs, and denied voting rights and representation in the Northern Irish Parliament. After decades of increasing conflict between Catholics and Protestants during the twentieth century, the struggle erupted in violence in the late 1960s.

The "Troubles" in Northern Ireland is a euphemistic expression which refers to the period from roughly 1968/69 to 1997/98 which was characterized by violent sectarian conflict between Irish Catholic nationalists and British/Anglo-Irish Protestant unionists. During the conflict, more than 3,600 people were killed,[3] and over 40,000 were seriously injured. [4] By the time the Belfast Agreement was signed in 1998, signaling a new peace, "about one in seven of the adult population, disproportionately Catholic, had been a victim of a violent incident."[5] It is important to note that although the conflict typically divides along religious lines, it is not a fight over religious theology. Rather, the conflict is a

[3] Michael McKeown, "Spreadsheet of Deaths Associated with Violence in Northern Ireland, 1969-2001," (Version 1.1; dated 4 Feb 2013), accessed through the CAIN Website, http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/victims/mckeown/index.html.
[4] Bill McDonnell, *Theatres of the Troubles* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2009), 21.
[5] Marc Mulholland, *Northern Ireland- a very short introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 76-7.

complex struggle over culture, ethnic identity, territory, civil rights, and British rule over the North. The Troubles has primarily consisted of clashes between the British military and Catholic civilians as well as between paramilitary groups such as the Irish Republican Army (IRA) on the Catholic side and the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) and Ulster Defense Association (UDA) on the Protestant side. Nationalism refers to those who want the Republic and the North to be unified into one country, independent of British rule and tends to be made up of Catholics, although not exclusively. Unionism refers to those who want the North to remain under British rule and is primarily made up of Protestants, although not exclusively. Republicanism encompasses those who are willing to use violent means to achieve a united Ireland while Loyalism comprises those who are willing to use violent means to maintain the union with the British crown. Republicanism and loyalism indicate some affiliation with or sympathy towards the paramilitary groups that were active in the North during the Troubles.[6]

The Peace Process

Today, the Troubles has transitioned into the peace process, brought about by the 1994/1997 ceasefires[7] and the 1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement.[8] Up

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[6] Reduced forms of these paramilitary groups are still present in the North. They occasionally still commit violent acts, although their numbers and influence have diminshed significantly since the Troubles.

[7] In 1994, the IRA and loyalist paramilitary groups declared a ceasefire which allowed peace talks to progress. However, demands that the IRA decommission before being allowed to participate in negoiations towards peace caused the ceasefire to be broken in 1996 when the IRA bombed London's docklands (Canary Wharf). In 1997, the IRA renewed their commitment to the ceasefire before breaking it again in 1998 when a breakaway faction called the Real IRA committed the Omagh Bombing.

[8] The Belfast/Good Friday Agreement established that the union between the UK and the North would remain as long as the majority of people in Northern Ireland were in favor of it. It also

until the recent global recession, unemployment was at a historic low and foreign direct investment in the North was growing at a faster rate than anywhere else in the United Kingdom.[9] In addition, a 2010 historic agreement between Sinn Féin and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP)[10] allowed the slow transfer of regulation over the judicial and law enforcement agencies from the British government to the power-sharing executive of Northern Ireland, strengthening the peace process. Although still present, paramilitary groups are sparse and have limited influence, as evidenced by the devastating Omagh bombing in 1998, which did not derail the peace process or the implementation of the Belfast Agreement.[11]

At the same time, the peace process has been arduous, slow, and rife with difficulties. Despite legal and political changes that have guaranteed more equal rights and representation between Catholics and Protestants, the North still struggles with how to address its violent past and how to overcome the still palpably sectarian prejudices that permeate society. Schools remain highly segregated with less than 7% of children receiving non-denominational integrated

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established a power-sharing executive within the Northern Parliament that gave both Catholics and Protestants power and representation. Another important aspect of the agreement was the release of republican and loyalist prisoners who had been jailed for their part in the sectarian conflict.

[9] George J. Mitchell, "From Troubles to the Celtic Tiger," *Boston Globe,* March 20, 2008, Op-Ed Section, http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/editorial_opinion/oped/articles/2008/03/20/from_troubles_to_the_celtic_tiger/.

[10] The DUP is the larger of the two main unionist political parties in Northern Ireland. It was founded by Ian Paisley and is currently led by Peter Robinson.

[11] The Omagh bombing was carried out in August 1998 by the Real IRA (RIRA), a splinter group of the IRA which was opposed to the Belfast Agreement. The bombing killed 29 people and more than 220 were injured. Despite the violence, the bombing was significant in that it did not derail the peace process or the enactment of the agreement in December 1998.

education.[12] Only about 10% of marriages in the North are between a Catholic and a Protestant.[13] The vast majority of neighborhoods, especially in Belfast, are still segregated with Catholics and Protestants patronizing different grocery stores, pubs, and community centers. Suicide rates remain high, poverty and unemployment are increasing, and the divide between urban and rural communities remains stratified. At the center of these difficult political and economic issues are several questions that the country is struggling to come to terms with: Is the past holding Northern Ireland back and preventing the country from healing? Can a community move beyond its own history? Can the perpetrators forgive themselves, pay their debt to society, and move on? Can the victims allow themselves to heal? Can reconciliation happen on a national level or must it be worked out between individuals? What will the future of the country look like? Will the North ever sever ties with Britain? Will the North ever become part of the Republic? These complex questions and the North's ever-shifting relationship with its difficult past are being explored not only through economic and political negotiations but also through the country's cultural and artistic output, most significantly with Northern drama.

Language and the Troubles

Language is a highly political and often contested issue in the North. Names and labels carry huge political implications and thus language tends to be

[12] "Integrating Northern Ireland's Education: models for change," Agenda Northern Ireland Magazine, November 2, 2010, http://www.agendani.com/integrating-education.
[13] Niall Glynn, "More Mixed Couples Tying the Knot," *BBC News*, November 6, 2009, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/northern_ireland/8344480.stm.

coded, creating a nuanced form of communication that is often beyond the reach of outsiders. Extremely subtle variances in language can reflect enormous differences in ideology and political affiliation. For example, if an individual uses “the North of Ireland” instead of “Northern Ireland,” this may imply a nationalist sympathy. The word “Ulster” can refer either to the six counties that make up Northern Ireland or it can refer to the original eight counties that encompassed Ulster before partition. To use the latter definition and include the counties of Donegal and Cavan again betrays a nationalist sympathy. The city of Derry/Londonderry is yet another highly contested name, with nationalists referring to the city as Derry and unionists referring to it as Londonderry. In addition to the highly sectarian and politicized language of the North, politically correct expressions have also developed as a way of neutralizing potentially inflammatory speech. For example, nationalism and unionism are often obliquely referred to as the *two traditions* while *cross-community* is the polite way to reference an event that involves both Protestants and Catholics. Thus, in a place where sectarian affiliation has been the most important marker of identity, a highly coded language has developed to subtly indicate membership within either group.

Another important example of coded language is reflected in the use of geography. Most of the women interviewed for this research did not directly state their religion but instead identified where they were born as a way of subtly identifying their background. For example, to be from west Belfast usually indicates a nationalist and sometimes republican ideology whereas being from

east Belfast is associated with a unionist and sometimes loyalist background. This emphasis on location and place as primary markers of identity stresses how territory, space, and land are central to the conflict.

A further complex aspect of language in the North is the code of silence which became a survival mechanism during the Troubles. The infamous Northern expression, “Whatever you say, say nothing,” became ubiquitous throughout the conflict. This culture of silence was used both as a weapon and as a safeguard in Northern culture for decades. Paramilitaries policed their own communities, ensuring that no one reported them to the authorities by killing those who spoke out against them. Catholics also used silence as a means of protest when they refused to cooperate with the British military, which was seen as complicit with the Protestant-controlled government and police force. Finally, silence was also an important way of protecting individuals. Revealing one’s name, address, or which school one attended could alert the “enemy” to one’s ethnic and religious status, leading to potential violence. This culture of silence has persisted into the peace process, perpetuating a culture of secrets, shame, and fear.

The code of silence was apparent with many of the older women I interviewed for this research. When I met several of them in public locations, most talked in code about their religious and ethnic upbringing. Some literally whispered stories of the conflict, physically and symbolically enacting the code of silence that has persisted. Pressure to remain silent has arguably affected women more acutely than men as women’s voices have also been excluded from much of the political dialogue during the Troubles and the ongoing peace process. Thus, it

is especially interesting and poignant that these same women, who whispered in public, forcefully proclaim their status, opinions, and visions for the North on the theatrical stage.

Northern Irish Theatre

Northern Irish drama has several qualities that distinguish it from theatre of the Republic. Anthony Roche argues that Northern drama tends to be anti-hierarchical, privileging ensemble stories where multiple voices are heard.[14] Likewise, it "moves in opposition to the well-made play, emphasizing instead discontinuity, fragmentation and juxtaposition." [15] Given the North's complex linguistic history, its drama is also distinguished by unreliable language: words are constantly undermined, questioned, and revealed to be false. Northern theatre also tends to use a full range of theatrical devices including "gesture, mime, dance, song, music, symbolism, and stage imagery"[16] as opposed to the more literary tradition from the Republic, which has historically privileged text and dialogue before visual components of theatre.

In addition to Roche's characteristics, Northern drama tends to be political, both on the civic and individual levels. Northern practitioners, Carol Moore and Eleanor Methven, define Northern drama as that which "addresses issues that are particular to the Six Counties- political issues,"[17] with a "rugged,

[14] Anthony Roche, *Contemporary Irish Drama* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 159.
[15] Roche, *Contemporary Irish Drama*, 159.
[16] Roche, *Contemporary Irish Drama*, 159.
[17] Helen Lojek, "Eleanor Methven and Carol Moore (Scanlan) in Conversation with Helen Lojek," in *Theatre Talk*, eds. Lilian Chambers, Ger FitzGibbon and Eamon Jordan (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2001), 345.

robust, and unsentimental view of the world…"[18] It is not surprising then that the primary archive for theatre research in the North is housed within the Linen Hall Library's political collection which centers around the history of the sectarian conflict. Because most Northern art is assumed to be politically motivated, it can be difficult for artists to produce works that are not interpreted through a sectarian lens. Another distinguishing characteristic is that Northern drama tends to explore the effects of violence (physical, psychological, and emotional) on individuals and the community at large. This is balanced by an extremely dark humor, which serves as an uncomfortable yet cathartic relief from that intense and pervasive violence.

Women and Theatre

Northern Irish theatre historically has been marginalized within the Irish dramatic canon. Without a legacy of internationally recognized playwrights such as Beckett and Synge and without a strong cultural institution like the Abbey Theatre to help define its history and culture, Northerners generally do not feel the same historical and cultural connection to the theatre that those from the Republic enjoy. While a few male playwrights from the North have achieved significant recognition in Ireland and occasionally abroad (Brian Friel, Stewart Parker, Gary Mitchell, Owen McCafferty), female playwrights from the North have historically been even more marginalized than their male peers. Few have found success inside the island and even fewer on an international level. However, in the 1980s, Northern Irish drama seemed poised to make a significant impact on theatre both

[18] Helen Lojek, *Theatre Talk*, 344.

at home and abroad with women in the lead. The country experienced a small theatre renaissance, led in part by the Charabanc Theatre Company, Anne Devlin, Christina Reid, and Marie Jones who helped establish the North internationally as a site of high-quality, innovative theatre.

The Charabanc Theatre Company (1983-1995) was devoted to exploring Northern Irish history, politics, and sectarianism specifically from women's perspectives. Comprised of members from both Protestant and Catholic backgrounds, Charabanc was revolutionary in that it broke the gender barrier as well as sectarian lines to explore issues relevant to all women of the North. While it was a professional theatre company, it was community-based in the truest sense of the word as members of the company interviewed women from all around the North and used their stories to devise plays that directly reflected women's lives.

In addition to Charabanc's important contributions, several other female playwrights were changing the landscape of Northern drama during the 1980s. Christina Reid's *Tea in a China Cup*, which premiered at the Lyric Theatre in 1983, refocused the classic Troubles play from a traditionally masculine perspective to a treatment of the conflict as seen through the eyes of a Protestant mother and daughter. In addition, Marie Jones, Anne Devlin, and Jennifer Johnston[19] were committed to giving women a new public voice and to addressing previously taboo subjects such as sexual politics, domestic violence, and gender roles. These women elevated the prestige of Northern Irish theatre and also

[19] Jennifer Johnston (1930-) was born in Dublin but wrote extensively about the North through plays, novels, and short stories. Her plays were produced by the Lyric during the 1980s and early 1990s.

created a small canon of internationally recognized work that promoted women's rights and exposed how confining and restrictive gender roles were in the North.

While the contributions of these early pioneers are important, they are far from being the only or most significant examples of women's theatrical contributions. However, Irish theatrical scholarship tends to cite Jones, Reid, and Devlin along with a cursory nod to Charabanc as the only and primary examples of women playwrights from the North. Anthony Roche's *Contemporary Irish Drama* (1995) uses Christina Reid's *Tea in a China Cup* and Anne Devlin's *Ourselves Alone* as his primary examples of women's playwriting in the North. He does give a superficial overview of the contributions of Charabanc but then moves on to a more in-depth examination of the male-led Field Day Theater Company. Like Roche, Christopher Murray's *Twentieth Century Irish Drama* (1997) again positions Reid and Devlin's works as the main contributions by women in the North. While he too has a short paragraph about Charabanc, it focuses primarily on Martin Lynch's contributions to the group, emphasizing *male* influence on the company. Imelda Foley's *Girls in the Big Picture* (2003) remains the most comprehensive work-to-date on women playwrights in the North. However, her analysis is also limited to examining Reid, Devlin, and Jones. While she does devote part of a chapter to Charabanc and DubbelJoint, the companies are analyzed only in relation to how they supported the career of Jones, and Foley fails to look at the companies' contributions within the broader context of Irish theatre history.

This scholarship erroneously gives the impression that the North has not produced a significant female playwright since the early 1980s. It also creates a false perception that the North experienced a brief and isolated renaissance of women playwrights only to have their contributions overshadowed by Friel, Parker, Mitchell, and others. These men have received enormous critical and scholarly attention while women playwrights have been essentially written out of history and the theatrical canon. This has only recently begun to be corrected. Tom Maguire's *Making Theatre in Northern Ireland* (2006) and Bill McDonnell's *Theatres of the Troubles* (2008) include good analysis of the women-led JustUs Theatre Company but ultimately fail to situate the group within the development of women's contributions to Northern drama. Melissa Sihra's *Women in Irish Drama* (2007) improves greatly upon previous scholarship with several chapters devoted to Northern women playwrights. The book also takes care to situate Northern women's contributions within a broader historical context as well as within the development of women's theatre on the island as a whole. Despite these advances, the perception still remains that Devlin, Reid, and Jones have been the only significant female playwrights the North has produced, and women's recent contributions to Northern drama have been entirely overlooked by scholars.

In fact, there were other significant female-led theatre groups during the 1980s and 1990s that deserve greater attention. DubbelJoint Theatre Company was a direct descendent of the Charabanc Theatre Company. Led by writer Marie Jones and director Pam Brighton, it produced many important productions which

addressed the challenges women faced during the Troubles. In addition, the JustUs Community Theatre Company, led by working-class women from west Belfast, was devoted to telling the story of the Troubles from a nationalist perspective. These two companies along with Charabanc not only provided significant creative and political platforms for women's voices during the Troubles but they also served as important models for the development of women theatre practitioners in the North today.

The tendency of scholars and critics to overlook women's contributions continues in the present. There has been little examination of the female playwrights who are now emerging to lead the North in a cultural revival. A new generation of playwrights such as Abbie Spallen, Stacey Gregg, Rosemary Jenkinson, Jaki McCarrick, and Lucy Caldwell is exploring how the peace process is shaping women's subjectivity and their relationship to the newly forming state. This dissertation intends to (1) broaden the dialogue about female playwrights from the North, rewriting women into history; (2) analyze how the transition from violence to peace over the past thirty years has affected women's writing and professional opportunities in the theatre; and (3) provide an overview of what contemporary women playwrights are writing about today and their current positioning within Irish theatre.

Argument and Summary of Chapters

During the 1980s and 1990s, Charabanc, DubbelJoint, and JustUs dramatized the development of the sectarian conflict in an attempt to show how

historical and political conditions perpetuated violence and divisions. In their plays, women's strength and bonding were positioned as antidotes to the militarized masculinity of the conflict, and their plays argued that Northerners were capable of achieving both the political and personal changes necessary to break the cycle of violence. The companies provided new jobs and training for women in the theatre, created a new audience-base, and established a model of bringing artistic work into rural and working-class areas. In doing so, they, along with playwrights like Devlin and Reid, secured a new respect for women on the Irish stage.

Despite these important advances, professional opportunities for women theatre practitioners today have arguably regressed, and the optimism which characterized previous years has dissipated. Women's plays continue to be underfunded and under-produced compared to their male counterparts, and there is less recognition (within the theatre sector as well as within scholarship) for women's dramatic contributions. In addition, women's outlook on the North has changed significantly. Instead of championing images of the "new" Northern Ireland, their plays express frustration over the slow pace of change (especially for women) and cynicism that the country and Northern culture can actually transform for the better. In addition, as the North adapts economically, socially, and ethnically, these plays identify new problems such as growing class divisions, increases in drug and alcohol abuse, racism, poverty, lack of jobs and education, and the subtle pressure for women to resume traditional gender norms. In addition, a central tension permeates the core of these recent plays: whether the

North must leave its violent history behind in the name of progress or whether past trauma must be acknowledged and justice performed before the country can truly heal.

Whereas women playwrights in the 1980s and 1990s argued that the North is capable of moving beyond its own history and is not trapped in an endless cycle of violence, today's playwrights question whether the conflict has become ingrained in the Northern psyche, becoming a reflexive part of people's lives. Furthermore, in contrast to the tempered optimism that characterized previous women's writings, a deep cynicism about the peace process pervades playwriting today, questioning whether the Troubles is truly over and whether the North will find a lasting peace.

Chapter One looks at the intersections between gender and the sectarian conflict. This section examines how the Catholic and Protestant churches as well as how the sustained violence of the conflict has historically reinforced proscribed gender roles in the North. It also explores the complex reasons why feminism and a unified women's movement have historically been inhibited in the North. Chapter Two provides a brief overview of the historical development of theatre in the North along with an in-depth look at the legacy and contributions of the Charabanc Theatre Company which have been previously overlooked by scholars. Chapter Three shows how Charabanc inspired the formation of the DubbelJoint and JustUs theatre companies which continued Charabanc's model of cross-border and cross-community touring throughout the 1990s. This chapter also

includes close analysis of several unpublished plays, which inspired great controversy over the role of art within the sectarian conflict.

Chapter Four transitions from theatre being produced during the Troubles to the post-conflict, peace process theatre of women playwrights today. This section charts the professional challenges and lack of support that women are currently experiencing through an examination of Abbie Spallen's developing career. Spallen's plays *Pumpgirl* and *Strandline* are also analyzed with an emphasis on several common themes found in women's writing today: children in peril, bad mothers, proscribed gender roles, sex linked to violence, and the lingering effects of Troubles violence on Northern society. Chapter Five explores the work of Stacey Gregg who, like Spallen, has had difficulty getting her work produced in the North. This chapter analyses two plays, *Perve* and *Lagan*, both of which focus on a generation of lost young people who have come of age during peacetime. *Lagan* captures another important theme in women's writing today: whether the North should disregard its violent history in order to move the country forward or whether the past must be confronted in order for the country to heal. Chapter Six focuses on the work of Rosemary Jenkinson who departs from her female contemporaries to write primarily about young, working-class, Protestant male characters. Despite the lack of focus on women's issues, many of the themes in Jenkinson's plays are similar to her female contemporaries. She repeatedly explores the breakdown of the family unit, the disturbing link between sex and violence, and a pervasive pessimism associated with the peace process. Finally, Chapter Seven further shows the range of women's writing in the North by

examining the works of Patricia Downey and Shannon Yee. Downey's women-led theatre company, Spanner in the Works, is committed to social change and women's empowerment, making it arguably the most direct legacy of Charabanc. Finally, Shannon Yee, an American ex-pat who now resides in Belfast, addresses queer issues in her multidisciplinary performance work, pushing boundaries and bringing a new level of diversity to Northern theatre.

Research parameters:

Theatre in the North is heavily centered in Belfast. Whereas Dublin remains the largest producer of theatre in the Republic, other major centers around the country have strong artistic centers such as Galway and Cork. The North, however, is significantly smaller than the Republic, and Belfast remains its primary city with Derry/Londonderry and Lisburn coming in distant seconds. As a result, Belfast is the primary center for professional theatre whereas the rest of the country tends to have a strong amateur and community theatre tradition. Outside of Belfast, Big Telly in Portstewart is the only other professional fulltime theatre company currently in practice. Consequently, much of the research in this study is centered on Belfast and Belfast-based companies, writers, and theatre practitioners.

Defining Irishness has long been a preoccupation of the entire island, North and south, and this debate has arguably been most intense when it has come to defining who is an Irish writer. Oscar Wilde, George Bernard Shaw, and more recently, Martin McDonagh have all had their national and cultural identities

debated. Defining who is a Northern Irish writer can be an equally contentious and difficult matter. There are those writers who were born in the North but have spent their lives elsewhere and who no longer self-identify as Northern Irish. There are those who have lived outside of the country for the majority of their lives but still consider themselves Northern. There are those who have lived in the borderlands, stuck between the North and south, feeling slightly out of place in each. And there are, for the first time, newly-arrived immigrants who have made the North their permanent home. For the purposes of this study, I am using the definition that the Tinderbox Theatre Company typically uses in defining Northern Irish playwrights: those who were either born in the North or those who currently live and work in the North. This definition expands my parameters of Northern Irish playwrights to include a newly-arrived immigrant, a woman who grew up in the Republic on the border of the North, and a playwright who was born in the North, writes about the North, and yet no longer self-identifies as Northern, having spent decades out of the country. This research treads carefully around these writers and tries to be as sensitive to their complex and overlapping national, cultural, and sexual identities as possible.

Another complex issue with self-identity surfaced when several playwrights interviewed for this research were reluctant to have their work filtered through the lens of gender. Several women were hesitant to embrace the label "woman playwright" as they felt it ghettoized and marginalized their work. Many stated that they did not identify primarily in terms of gender; rather, they viewed their identity as a writer (not a *woman* writer) and wanted to be analyzed

and judged against all their peers regardless of gender. In addition, many of these same women did not want to be labeled as feminists or be defined as promoting "women's issues," although their work often spoke to the contrary. As Chapter One explores, feminism and gender issues have a complex and highly politicized history in the North. This research purposefully does not impose theoretical and highly academic notions about gender and gender identity within analysis of the plays. The playwrights included in this study did not feel that feminist theory, which they denied any association with, would accurately reflect their artistic intentions nor the reception of their work by Northern audiences. However, consciously or unconsciously, directly or indirectly, the women included in this study are highly engaged in gender politics and gender positioning within the North. This is demonstrated by the themes of their plays as well as through their personal experiences forging a career in what has traditionally been a male-dominated field in Ireland.

Instead of further marginalizing women's writing, this research attempts to celebrate women's diverse and varied contributions to Northern drama by exposing the common themes and structures in their work and by charting the shared challenges they face in forging careers in theatre. In order to combat persistent notions that Jones, Reid, and Devlin are the primary female contributors from the North, this study repositions the Charabanc, DubbelJoint, and JustUs theatre companies as central to the development of Northern drama. In addition, recent contributions by a new generation of playwrights shows a continued legacy of women writers addressing gender politics and giving voice to marginalized

groups. While the government continues to promote images of a new and improved Northern Ireland, contemporary women playwrights are challenging these constructed images of the North and suggesting that the Troubles continues to radically shape women's sexuality, subjectivity, and professional and personal opportunities.

Chapter One: Gender and the Troubles

> *I think that one day this country's going to wake up and realize that the rest of the world has moved into the 21st century. It's going to be a big shock, in terms of sexism, in terms of equal rights, in terms of the things you can say and the things that are acceptable with people from different races, different sexualities or who in any way just happen to be different from a certain type, y'know?*[20]
>
> Abbie Spallen, 2010

For centuries, gender has played a prominent role within Irish politics, culture, and in Ireland's status as a British colony. In Irish colonial discourse, the island was (and continues to be) positioned as the pure, innocent, and feminized state while the British Empire was characterized as the violent masculine interloper. Gender has continued to play a prominent role throughout the island, both North and south, during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries with gender roles being directly linked to national and religious identity. There have been two significant and primary determiners of gender norms in Ireland. The first influence has been the dominance of the Catholic Church within Irish society, and the second has been the violent and protracted fight over British rule in Ireland.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the fight for an independent Ireland imposed strictly enforced gender roles on the Irish Catholic population. Masculinity was directly linked to what Mary Condren terms "masculine political sacrifice."[21] Irish republican[22] men had to prove their masculinity through dramatic acts of violence against the colonizing British, showing that they were

[20] Kiran Acharya, "Abbie Spallen," *Culture Northern Ireland*, September 12, 2010, http://www.culturenorthernireland.org/article/1488/abbie-spallen.

[21] Mary Condren, "Sacrifice and Political Legitimization: The Production of a Gendered Social Order," *Journal of Women's History* 6/7, (Winter/Spring 1995).

[22] At the turn of the twentieth century, *republican* was a term associated with those who wished to create a free and independent Republic of Ireland. This is not to be confused with the contemporary definition which usually refers to those who wish to see a united Ireland (North and south) independent from Britain.

willing to die for an independent Ireland. Women were expected to subvert their needs to those of the nation, willingly sacrificing their husbands, sons, and brothers for the cause. Women were responsible for birthing and raising young men for the fight and also for creating and securing the legacies of those who had died. The intense nationalist fervor in the early part of the twentieth century demanded that all Irish republicans conform to these proscribed gender roles, subverting their individual needs for the greater national good.

Historically, there have been two dominant images of women and femininity in Ireland within nationalism and the Irish Catholic tradition. The first is "Nation as Mother": the fertile and feminine Mother Ireland, raped and colonized by the masculine British. The second is the Virgin Mary: the suffering and impossibly chaste and virginal mother-figure. As nationalism became the defining cause of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the role of the mother arguably became the most important responsibility/function of womanhood.[23] Fidelma Ashe states that the "valorization of women's morality and role as mother in the family [has been]…a central aspect of nationalist discourse."[24] In the theatre, these gender norms have been expressed by male playwrights through a confinement of women to the domestic sphere and by limiting the roles of female characters to either the dutiful waiting wife or the

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[23] The Irish Constitution, written in 1937, infamously refers to women as *mothers* throughout its text and primarily defines a woman's responsibility to the state as raising children and providing a secure domestic space. Only in the past few years has there been serious debates about how to update the constitution's language; however, no changes have been made as of February 2013.

[24] Fidelma Ashe, "The Virgin Mary Connection: Reflecting on Feminism and Northern Irish Politics," *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy,* vol. 9, no. 4 (Dec. 2006): 575.

protective mother. Female characters who played an active role in the violence were often presented as aged, de-sexed, and unfeminine on the theatrical stage.

However, with Independence in 1921 and the nationalist cause no longer the defining struggle of the country, the Republic of Ireland was slowly able to move away from such strictly proscribed views of gender. As the Republic grew stronger, redefining itself as a new and free nation, women were able to make their own needs a priority, embracing the women's liberation movements, enacting antidiscrimination laws, and furthering opportunities for women in education and employment.

In contrast to the Republic, Northern Ireland has remained in conflict for over ninety years. Nationalist discourse in the North has continued to demand a strict adherence to proscribed gender roles, with masculinity being directly linked to militarism, political self-sacrifice, and defense of the nation. Fidelma Ashe writes:

> Nationalist discourses in Northern Ireland, like nationalist discourses more generally, tend to constitute specific models of gendered identities which 'service' the respective nationalist struggles of unionism and Irish nationalism. Both nationalisms constitute men's role as revolving around the defense of the nation and valorize masculine values such as strength, courage and physical self-sacrifice. Men who refuse to defend the nation are constituted as weak and feminized, willing to be dominated and subjugated by the enemy...[25]

For the Protestant and Catholic communities in the North, the strong historical link between nationalism and gender has reinforced and further solidified gender norms, especially for women. Mary Condren states, "Both nationalist discourses

[25] Ashe, "The Virgin Mary Connection," 575.

in Northern Ireland[26] have associated women with the cultural stability and morality of the ethnic group. The behaviour of women in both communities has been closely linked to the integrity and morality of the nation as a whole..."[27] This has led to the perception that because men must break basic codes of morality (such as killing) in order to engage in sectarian warfare, women must uphold the integrity of society. Therefore, while men of the North are fighting and breaking down the moral and social order, women uphold ethical codes in order to combat a total destruction of civilized society.

In direct opposition to a proscribed militant masculinity, feminine identity in the North has been positioned as naturally non-violent and innately peaceful. Ashe states, "There has been a strong tendency in Northern Ireland to view women as having weaker ethnic identifications than men and therefore as less sectarian and bigoted... As a consequence, the notion that women rather than men are more inclined to seek peace and reconciliation has been popular in Northern Ireland."[28] Like Ashe, Tom Maguire warns against such limited and essentialized notions of womanhood, arguing that these traditional representations strip women "of any political insight or analysis in order to serve as the vehicle for the assertion of liberal humanist values against the doctrines which are presented as the source of divisions within the society."[29] In other words, women are harmed

[26] Condren refers here to the nationalist movement at the turn of the twentieth century in Ireland as well as on the ongoing nationalist movement in the North today.
[27] Ashe, "The Virgin Mary Connection," 575.
[28] Ashe, "The Virgin Mary Connection," 576.
[29] Tom Maguire, *Making Theatre in Northern Ireland: Through And Beyond the Troubles* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2006), 104.

by having their roles limited to that of peaceful moral guide charged with preventing the complete destruction of Northern society.

Correspondingly, women's sexuality has historically been the ultimate symbol of the community's integrity. In her article, "Gendering Ethno-Nationalist Conflict in Northern Ireland," Fidelma Ashe builds upon these ideas:

> The body politics of Irish nationalism also operates on the terrain of women's sexual and erotic autonomy. Like other nationalisms, Irish nationalism has traditionally identified women with the integrity and purity of the collective culture... As woman becomes the allegory of the nation, in this case Mother Ireland, real women's so-called 'sexual integrity' symbolizes the nation's integrity. As Nagel…observes, in nationalist societies women's 'purity must be impeccable... nationalists often have a special interest in the sexuality and sexual behaviour of their women'... This is reflected, for example, in the policing of women's sexuality in Irish nationalist cultures...[30]

Because women's bodies have been symbolically linked to the sectarian conflict, the feminine body has been obsessively and repressively policed for decades in the North. Thus, women in both the Catholic and Protestant traditions have had the added pressure that their individual gendered identities directly influence their community's political and territorial claims on the North.

The historical connection between nation and gender continues today. Ashe reflects on the contemporary role of women in the North:

> Women…are valorized for their roles as wives and mothers by both unionism and Irish nationalism... Women are therefore constituted as best suited to the private sphere of the home where they can perform specific functions for the nationalist cause. This includes supporting men who are active in nationalist struggle and socializing children into the ideology of the nationalist group... In nationalist ideology women are constituted as

[30] Fidelma Ashe, "Gendering Ethno-Nationalist Conflict in Northern Ireland: a comparative analysis of nationalist women's political protests," *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 30, no. 5 (Sept. 2007): 770.

> passive subjects in need of male protection... Men are therefore positioned as the active agents of nationalism... [31]

As Ashe shows, these strict gender roles, originally present at the birth of the Republic, still exist in the North and have been exacerbated as the protracted sectarian battle has waged on intensified by the Troubles. Indeed, Mary Condren emphasizes the ability of war to shape gender roles in particular arguing,

> …just as Christian sacrifice has historically been a performative act of gendering legitimization, so too contemporary warfare- conventional, nuclear, and terrorist- is the major performative and legitimization rite of Western hegemonic masculinity, culturally elaborated through various religious mechanisms to form the dominant Western social mythologies.[32]

Because the North was engaged in a recent thirty-plus year war and centuries of conflict, hegemonic masculinity has been repeatedly performed and legitimated through warfare, effectively marginalizing femininity into a strictly proscribed and restrictive space.

Delay of Feminism

It is well documented that sectarian divisions in Northern Ireland have killed thousands, created persistent poverty, and delayed economic development. But the conflict has also had insidious but less obviously visible effects on social, cultural and political developments, most notably feminism. Adrian Little views the North as frozen in the past and entrenched in outdated ideologies, which are essentially delaying women's (as well as other minority group's) full liberation. In her article, "Feminism and the Politics of Difference in Northern Ireland" (2002),

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[31] Ashe, "The Virgin Mary Connection," 575.
[32] Mary Condren, "Gender, Religion, and War," in *Religion and the Politics of Peace and Conflict,* eds. Linda Hogan and Dylan Lee Lehrke (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2009), 127.

Little argues that Northern feminism seems to be stuck in an archaic stage of development: "…while feminists in Northern Ireland are becoming more attuned to 'the politics of difference,' the dominant feature of feminism in the North to date is a strategic essentialism that resonates more with first-wave feminism than contemporary feminist debates."[33]

When second-wave feminism was welcomed in the Republic in the 1970s, the North was at the pinnacle of intense Troubles fighting. During this time, there was little room or energy in the national consciousness to address women's rights. Women were expected to privilege the priorities of the nationalist/unionist fights before those of feminism. While there were attempts to unite Protestant and Catholic women together through groups like The Northern Ireland Women's Rights Movement (founded in 1975), these organizations inevitably failed owing to the divided issue of nationalism as well as a failure to acknowledge important differences between the Protestant and Catholic experiences. Feminist organizations have also met with strong resistance from the patriarchal powers that controlled women's everyday lives, including the government, church, and paramilitary groups. Imelda Foley explains, "Women's attempts to lobby on issues that affect their everyday lives have been branded by their respective paramilitaries as 'Republican challenges to the state' (loyalist) or as 'collusion with opposing forces' (republican). The very act of cross-community single-gender initiatives threatens the patriarchal stronghold."[34]

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[33] Adrien Little, "Feminism and the Politics of Difference in Northern Ireland," *Journal of Political Ideologies*, vol. 7, no. 2 (June 2002), 164.
[34] Imelda Foley, *The Girls in the Big Picture* (Belfast, NI: Blackstaff Press, 2003), 26.

Essentialist identity politics have been the norm in the North for some time. Since partition in 1922, if not before, the binary identity of British-Protestant/Irish-Catholic has been the dominating and fundamental core of self-identity. Religious and national identification as the predominant markers for selfhood has created a system in which identity in the North tends to be essentialist and dividing. This has created the (false) perception that all members of the North conform to two dominant groups: Irish Catholic nationalists and Anglo-Irish/British Protestant unionists. An emphasis on essentialist forms of identity has required that individuals subvert all other parts of their selfhood (such as gender, class, or profession) to the dominate identifying markers of the larger group. This has had two important results. First, it has required minority groups such as the disabled, elderly, or queer to integrate themselves into one of the larger identity groups or risk marginalization. Second, it has dictated a subjectivity defined by a single (binary) identity rather than a pluralistic one. For women in the North, this means that they have had to subvert their needs as females to those of their ethno-nationalist group in order to avoid marginalization. S. Sales observes, "Sectarian divisions are built into the structures and identity of Northern Ireland. Politics has remained polarized around community loyalties, placing severe limitations on the development of class-based or gender-based loyalties."[35] In this way, essentialist identity politics have historically prevented minority groups from making advancements, most notably with women and feminist politics.

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[35] Rosemary Sales, *Women Divided: gender, religion, politics in Northern Ireland* (London: Routledge: 1997), 202.

In addition, violence associated with the Troubles, a staunchly masculine political atmosphere, and strong community affiliation with the Catholic and Protestant churches have also greatly hindered the development of feminism in the North in complicated ways. Addressing this complexity, Adrian Little identifies four additional impediments to the development of feminism in the North. First, restrictive views of gender within the Catholic and Protestant traditions have prevented women from actively participating in formal politics or nation-building. Both churches have promoted politics as a purely masculine space in which the "good" mother and wife does not engage. Little states, "It is clear that the centrality of religion as a major source of identity has constrained the opportunities for women to make a major impact in the public sphere (especially as the churches play a prominent role in the secular life of the province)."[36]

Little identifies the second obstacle as "the closure of spaces for political debates and the prevalence of a narrow definition of what is political."[37] Here, Little essentially argues that politics have become directly associated with masculine national and ethno-religious identity, creating a limiting and narrow definition of political engagement. In other words, politics in the North center around issues of the sectarian conflict rather than encompassing wider social issues such as poverty or education that might engage a broader group of people. A third barrier to the development of feminism is an overarching focus in Northern Irish politics on the practical, material, and economic conditions within

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[36] Little, "Feminism and the Politics of Difference in Northern Ireland," 164.
[37] Little, "Feminism and the Politics of Difference in Northern Ireland," 164.

the North paired with a tendency to dismiss more theoretical, moral, or ethical debates on how to create an inclusive society for all members. This focus on the material conditions, Little argues, provides little space to speak about larger social issues (such as the subjugation of women) that cannot be as easily solved by material solutions.

Finally, Little identifies the fourth obstacle as the association of feminism within the ideological framework of nationalism in particular. Because feminism has historically been linked to nationalism,[38] many unionists perceive the women's movement with distrust and do not feel that it can encompass their own concerns (which are often seen as fundamentally different from nationalist women's). This has created an unequal voice for women in the North with nationalist and Catholic women arguably having a louder and more active political voice than their unionist and Protestant counterparts. This was especially true during the 1970s and 1980s when thousands of Catholic men were interned and imprisoned, necessitating that Catholic women take up political leadership within their communities. This perception that nationalism and feminism are linked is so profound that second-wave feminism did not develop within the loyalist community altogether until the early 1990s.[39]

Even within the more developed feminist movement of the nationalist communities in the 1970s and 1980s, women's involvement in politics was still extremely limited and difficult to enact. A major obstacle for nationalist feminists

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[38] The reasons for this are too complex to explicate here. They are linked to the development of the civil rights movement within the nationalist community in the 1960s as well as to restrictions within the unionist communities and the Protestant church.

[39] Elish Rooney, "Women's Equality in Northern Ireland's Transition: Intersectionality in theory and place," *Feminist Legal Studies*, vol. 14 (Spring 2006), 42.

was being unable to campaign for certain rights which were seen as supporting British authority. Elish Rooney uses the fight for abortion as an example of this difficulty:

> The campaign to extend abortion legalization to Northern Ireland was a case in point. At the time,[40] some Republican feminists felt unable to support a campaign that called for the extension of British legislation in the North. To do so was tantamount to support for the British presence in Ireland.[41]

Thus, while abortion rights were extremely important to nationalist feminists, the perception of supporting additional British legislation and intervention in Catholic lives overrode their ability to support women's rights over their own bodies. Although abortion was legalized throughout the United Kingdom in 1967, due to the Catholic Church's influence, these privileges do not extend to Northern Ireland and abortion remains illegal today. The few cross-community women's groups that have developed in the North such as the Northern Ireland Women's Rights Movement have often found themselves unable to take positions on certain political subjects such as abortion in an effort not to alienate members from both nationalist and unionist sides.[42] With a limited women's movement, intense sectarian divisions, and strong church influence, it has been difficult for women in the North to advocate successfully or publically for the rights which are extended to those throughout the rest of the United Kingdom.

In addition, because many women in the North believe that feminist issues cannot be divorced from nationalist politics, many feminist organizations have

[40] The Abortion Act of 1967 legalized abortion in the United Kingdom; however, it did not extend to Northern Ireland. Today, women still have to travel to Britain or Scotland for the procedure.
[41] Rooney, "Women's Equality in Northern Ireland's Transition," 43.
[42] Ashe, "The Virgin Mary Connection," 577.

had sectarian ideology attached to them, creating fragmentation rather than unification within the women's movement. Furthermore, the notion that nationalist and unionist women's issues are fundamentally different along with the two communities' inability to work together to advance women's rights as a whole have arguably been some of the most difficult barriers to the firm establishment of feminism in the North. Even within the more developed republican feminist movement, many men argued that feminist politics were inherently at odds with Irish nationalism and used this as excuse to dismiss women's involvement in politics or public life; this had a profound impact on nationalist women's influence on politics on a national scale. While women were allowed to speak out on behalf of family issues, prison conditions, children, and non-violence, they typically were excluded from participating in high-level talks that would affect broader political and socio-economic conditions for the entire country.

While essentialist divisions between Protestant and Catholic women have, in part, prevented feminism from developing fully in the North, important differences in culture, religion, experience, and identity between Protestant and Catholic women have also contributed to this failure.[43] As Little points out, while all women in the North experience subjugation to male patriarchy, the *ways* in which they experience it differ greatly. Women are oppressed in the North as women but also specifically as Catholic women and as Protestant women, as Irish women and as British/Anglo-Irish women. For example, nationalist feminists' tendency to tie their oppression as women to British colonialism excludes unionist

[43] Little, "Feminism and the Politics of Difference in Northern Ireland," 165-166.

feminists from identifying with that cause. Thus, Northern Ireland's status as a not-quite or almost post-colonial nation has added another layer of complexity to the creation of women's subjectivities and thus to their unification. This is connected to the idea of woman's "double colonization" from Gayatri Spivak's essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" which argues that women in colonized or previously colonized nations are subject to two forms of oppression: that from men as well as that from the colonizing force. This is an idea that Irish feminists have repeatedly addressed, arguing that women in colonial nations have a double bind from which to extract themselves.

Violence and the Female Body

Violence has also played a large role in the physical subjugation of women in the North. According to Monica McWilliams, not only do gender roles tend to be strictly enforced during intense periods of strife and nationalist fervor (such as the fight for Irish Independence), but long-term sectarian conflict also can lead to significant increases in violence against women. This violence, in turn, perpetuates the cycle of keeping women in positions of submission within society. McWilliams states:

> …'violences' against women are used to keep women in their place; to limit their opportunities to live, learn, work, and care as full human being; to hamper their abilities to organize and claim their rights. It is a major obstacle to women's empowerment, and their full participation in shaping the economic, social, and political life of their countries.[44]

[44] Monica McWilliams, "Violence Against Women and Political Conflict: The Northern Ireland Experience," *Critical Criminology,* vol. 8, no. 8 (March 1997): 89.

Troubles violence had a direct effect on the subjugation of women first through its demand of loyalty to nation before individual and also through its normalizing and legitimatizing of violence towards women and others. McWilliams argues that areas which have experienced intense and prolonged conflict, like Northern Ireland, tend to devalue domestic violence over sectarian violence. For example, during the Troubles, attacks on women because of religion or sectarian loyalties were viewed as much more heinous than violence within the domestic sphere. Sectarian attacks on women were seen as breaking the rules of warfare and attacking those who were considered outside the sphere of acceptable victims. Domestic violence, in contrast, was often viewed as a private matter, and one that did not affect the community or nation at large. McWilliams writes:

> …when a woman is the target of a sectarian murder in Northern Ireland, invariably there is a great sense of outrage. This outrage exposes the gendered nature of public morality in its opposition to the murder of women in political conflict. However, when a woman has been murdered in a 'domestic' assault in the 'sanctuary' of her own home, there is less of a sense of violation. In Northern Ireland, as elsewhere, there is a kind of continuum that ranges from the least to the most acceptable type of murders that is perhaps best symbolized in the way in which murders not related to the political situation have been euphemistically referred to by police officers as 'ordinary decent murders.'[45]

Thus, during periods of sectarian strife, domestic violence, which is associated with the private sphere, is more socially acceptable and is dismissed as less important compared to the violence happening in the public sphere.

In addition, within regions engaged in conflict, domestic violence often becomes even harder for women to report. During the Troubles, the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), the Northern Irish police force, was connected to the British

[45] McWilliams, "Violence Against Women and Political Conflict," 80-81.

government and army. For a Catholic nationalist woman, calling the police would be tantamount to calling the enemy. Even in situations in which a Catholic woman felt comfortable calling the police, the physical feat of bringing the RUC into a republican neighborhood during the Troubles could involve tanks and a small army of soldiers parading through the streets, making the event public to everyone around it. McWilliams explains:

> In Northern Ireland, telling women in nationalist communities to call the police has even less meaning when the police will not respond to calls because of the perceived risk to their security…When the police do respond, they have to be escorted into these communities by the British Army. The arrangement usually entails a convoy of six to eight heavily armoured vehicles full of soldiers and police, all wearing flak jackets and carrying submachine guns.[46]

Ultimately, McWilliams shows that the history of violence in Northern Ireland has made women more susceptible to violence within the public and private spheres and also without many resources to prevent or report the violence. Instead, the strong link between militarism and masculinity has prolonged a violent atmosphere in the North, subjugating women through sustained and normalized violence upon their bodies.

Political Women

Despite all the obstacles outlined above, it is important to recognize that Northern women were able to accomplish some significant political advances during the Troubles. Because of the North's inclusion within the United Kingdom, the women's liberation movement in Britain brought several important antidiscrimination laws to the North. Britain's Equal Pay Act and the Sex

[46] McWilliams, "Violence Against Women and Political Conflict," 85.

Discrimination Act were both legalized in the North in 1970 and 1976 respectively. The Equal Opportunities Commission was also created in 1976 and a series of women's health and rape crisis centers were founded in subsequent years. The early 1980s also saw the founding of prominent neighborhood women's centers that gave support and community to local women. Advocacy groups that lobbied for women's rights were also established in the 1980s and 1990s. The nationalist group, *Clar na mBan* (Women's Agenda for Peace), was founded in 1994 because women's voices were not being included in the peace talks. The group presented a series of important reforms to the government-sponsored Forum for Peace and Reconciliation, highlighting demilitarization, economic equality and protective rights for children, the disabled, and lesbians. Women have also been the leaders of grass-roots activism and community politics for decades, having significant influence over local legislation and domestic affairs. This was especially true of Catholic women who became politicized in the late 1960s fighting for civil rights and then again in the 1970s and 1980s during internment and the hunger strikes.

Despite these important advances, however, from 1921 until 1998, only three women were elected as Members of Parliament. While there were certainly a few women who held political office during the Troubles, they tended to be isolated examples and failed to have a significant impact on long-term issues of peace. For example, while she is rightfully lauded as playing a central role in the advancement of the Northern civil rights movement, Bernadette Devlin is also,

sadly, a strong example of how women's voices failed to have a lasting political impact in the North.

Devlin was an exceptionally high-profile political activist during the Troubles. She was the youngest MP to be elected to Parliament and, for many years, was an internationally recognized and respected figure who advocated for civil rights for the working classes. However, after the events of Bloody Sunday[47] (which ushered in a new period of IRA recruitment and paramilitary domination of the North) and the devastating effects of two (arguably failed) hunger strikes in 1980 and 1981, Devlin's power waned as political groups like Sinn Féin and hyper-masculine paramilitary violence hijacked the political dialogue. The primary goal of the nationalist community in the late 1960s was achieving civil rights and better living/working conditions for Catholics and the working classes. Devlin had hoped to achieve a socialist state that would take care of both the Protestant and Catholic working-class communities. However, as violence erupted, these goals were overtaken by a new priority led by Sinn Féin and the IRA: unification with the Republic. Thus, the Troubles, which began primarily as a fight for basic civil rights, soon became a larger ideological battle over British rule. Devlin's socialist politics and previously significant power in the North was completely overrun by a new decade that was marked by a strident and militant masculine violence. Her dismissal by the dominant masculine discourse was

[47] Bloody Sunday occurred on January 30, 1972 in Derry/Londonderry when the British military opened fire on hundreds of unarmed civil rights marchers. Twenty-six were shot and thirteen died with the entire event captured by news cameras and reporters. The role of the British military was covered up until the Saville Inquiry in 2010 finally acknowledged British responsibility.

further shown when Devlin was completely ignored by organizers of the peace talks in the 1990s.

Similarly, the Peace People, created and run by Betty Williams and Mairead Maguire, was a strong cross-community grassroots political movement in the late 1970s which advocated for peace through education. Williams and Maguire organized many large-scale peace marches that brought together both the Protestant and Catholic communities united in a common cause, and they were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1976. However, as the Troubles became dominated by sectarian violence, several of their marches were attacked and disrupted by paramilitary groups. The organization, which had been lauded by the international community, withered away by 1980 under similar pressures of an increasingly intolerant, violent, and militant political atmosphere. More recently, Monica McWilliams and Pearl Sager created the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition (NIWC) in 1996 in protest against the fact that no women were being included in the peace talks that would eventually lead to the Belfast Agreement in 1998. The NIWC made important strides when it had several women elected to the Northern Ireland Forum and the Northern Ireland Assembly in 1996, 1998, and 2001. The organization was a significant step in the progress towards women's rights in the North as it "managed to do something that had eluded the women's movement in Northern Ireland for many years: unite and organize

around an identity as women."[48] However, by 2005, all the representatives lost their seats and the party officially disbanded in 2006.

Therefore, while there have certainly been strong, visible, and influential women involved in the political processes in the North, ultimately they have been isolated instances that have rarely had a long-lasting effect. Instead, their influence has often been undermined by a militant masculine atmosphere and a lingering prejudice that women should not be involved high-level politics. Thus, Bernadette Devlin, the charismatic grassroots political leader who wished to join the Protestant and Catholic working classes together, had her voice and influence stripped as the political climate grew increasingly militant and chauvinistic. In contrast, Gerry Adams (a former IRA leader who has been involved in murders and bombings) has steadily grown in power, buoyed by sectarian violence and the increasing control that Sinn Féin has had over politics and society in the Catholic communities in the North.

Politics, Power, and Playwriting Today

Just as women's participation in political dialogue was not considered useful or integral during the Troubles, women are again being sidelined from direct and essential political engagement in the transition to peace. Linda Connolly, in *Feminist Politics and the Peace Process* (1999), argues that women and feminist politics are not considered an integral part of the ongoing peace process:

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[48] Fearon and McWilliams, "Swimming Against the Mainstream: the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition," in *Gender, Democracy and Inclusion in Northern Ireland,* eds. Roulston and Davies (London: Palgrave, 2000), 132.

> …feminism, as both a set of political ideologies and mobilising social movement, is generally not considered as an integral element in resolving or upholding the conflict, in the dominant political discourse. In particular, prominent academic representations of the Peace Process tend to depict feminism as something consensual which (some) women 'do' in isolation from the pivotal political processes at work—not as a transformational consciousness and heterogeneous movement which diffuses and mobilises across society, to some effect. 'Doctrinal' interpretations of the Peace Process simplify feminist politics and occlude diversity and conflict both within and between different groups of women.[49]

Connolly argues that feminism is typically not viewed in the North as a transformative ideology that can help improve relations across sectarian divisions for both men and women. Instead, it is viewed as a movement that only addresses individualized "women's issues."[50] Scholar Sharoni agrees saying, "the narrow definition of 'women's issues' has been used to justify women's exclusion from domains that men have sought to maintain as their own primary positions of social and political power."[51] Arguing against this limiting viewpoint, Ashe shows that gender issues permeate every aspect of society including "national boundaries, political violence, programmes for peace, culture and history"[52] and thus these same issues can be directly useful in engendering productive dialogue within the peace process. However the cultural attitude that "violence and politics are…unnatural activities for women"[53] has largely prevented women from aiding

[49] Linda Connolly, "Feminist Politics and the Peace Process," *Capital & Class*, vol. 69 (1999): 146.

[50] While one might think that a move from sectarian violence to peace would create more opportunity to express a pluralistic identity, some in the unionist and loyalist populations have become increasingly separatist, believing that an integration of Catholic values and politics into mainstream society will erase their core beliefs, structures, culture, and identity. This has resulted in an arguably more entrenched and separatist ideology, leading many in the unionist community to fear they will eventually become a minority population within Catholic Ireland.

[51] Simona Sheroni as quoted in Fidelma Ashe, "Gender and Ethno-Nationalist Politics," in *Northern Ireland After the Troubles: a Society in Transition,* eds. Colin Coulter and Michael Murray (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008), 157.

[52] Ashe, "Gender and Ethno-Nationalist Politics," 157.

[53] Ashe, "Gendering ethno-nationalist conflict in Northern Ireland", 779-780.

in the process toward peace. This has led critic Sara McDowell to ask:

> So what roles can women play in the present if they have been written out of the past? Onyejekwe…warns that cultural systems that do not allow women to play major roles during conflict represent a major handicap in that they also exclude women from the conflict resolution process. This is an argument supported by Ward…who believes that the continuing absence of gender parity in peacetime is a major contributing factor in hindering the development of a peaceful and shared future. Recent progress in the Northern Ireland peace process will hopefully re-open the issue of gender equality but whether or not women will (be allowed to) make any significant impact on this vastly changing political landscape remains to be seen.[54]

As McDowell asserts, this historical domination of the cultural and political landscape by men throughout the Troubles and now into the peace process has marginalized women and hindered the success of reconciliation.

In the 1980s, women playwrights in the North came to prominence by questioning these very issues of women's limited social positioning and restricted political voice in the North. Groups such as Charabanc, JustUs, and DubbelJoint, and playwrights such as Christina Reid, Marie Jones, and Anne Devlin produced highly political pieces of theatre that, for the first time, told the story of the Troubles from a female perspective. In plays like *Tea in a China Cup* (Reid, 1983), *Ourselves Alone* (Devlin, 1986), and *Somewhere Over the Balcony* (Charabanc, 1987), these women highlighted how issues such as poverty, lack of jobs and education, and violence were affecting women from both the Protestant and Catholic communities. Shattering the classic Troubles play (which focused on male involvement in the conflict), these plays put women at the very center of the story to express a specifically female experience of the Troubles. Presenting

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[54] Sara McDowell, "Commemorating Dead 'Men': gendering the past and present in post-conflict Northern Ireland," *Gender, Place, and Culture*, vol. 15, no. 4 (August 2008): 350.

female characters as funny, sexual, powerful and sometimes violent, these plays shattered the trope of the devoted wife and the peace-loving mother. In doing so, these playwrights created nuanced and realistic portraits of womanhood, imbued women with a powerful political voice on a very public stage, and allowed audiences to see honest and realistic depictions of women and their lives. While female political activists struggled in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s to have a direct and lasting influence on Northern politics, women playwrights during this same period defied expectations by breaking sectarian and gender barriers and allowing women to enter into the political dialogue in a new way: through the medium of theatre.

Chapter Two: Charabanc Theatre Company- Foundation and Legacy

Foundations for a Women's Renaissance

During the 1980s and 1990s, a diverse group of Northern women established themselves as leaders of Irish theatre and helped to solidify the North's reputation as a site of cultural and artistic significance. Marie Jones, Maureen Macauley, Eleanor Methven, Carol Moore, and Brenda Winter of Charabanc Theatre Company; Zoe Seaton of Big Telly; Lynn Parker of Rough Magic; and playwrights Jennifer Johnston, Anne Devlin, and Christina Reid were among a wave of women theatre practitioners who created a small but significant theatrical renaissance of high quality, innovative drama coming out of the North. In order to understand the significance and impact of this phenomenon, it is necessary first to look briefly at the development of Northern Irish theatre and its complex relationship to the state.

Northern drama has always had a fundamentally different relationship to its people and government than theatre within the Republic. Starting at the turn of the twentieth century, drama from the Republic was an important part of Irish culture and identity. It became indelibly linked to the fight for Irish Independence when W.B. Yeats, J.M. Synge, and Lady Augusta Gregory used drama as a powerful political tool to fight for Irish nationalism. The historical importance of the Abbey Theatre and the elite standing of Ireland's top playwrights such as Sean O'Casey and Samuel Beckett have earned the Republic an international reputation as a literary and artistic epicenter. Although the majority of the country may not

regularly attend the theatre, drama is a prestigious part of Irish society, and it is generally recognized among the Irish to have played an important role in nationalism and in establishing Ireland's international reputation as a highly respected center for literary and artistic output.

The North, however, does not have this same deep historical relationship to theatre. Instead, the North is typically known for its history as an industrial center of the linen and shipbuilding industries and, of course, for its history of sectarian conflict. Theatre has not played a prominent role culturally or socially for complex social (Protestant shunning of anything popish: i.e. theatrical) as well as practical reasons (the danger in venturing out at night at the height of Troubles violence). In a 1994 interview with scholar Helen Lojek, Northern actress Eleanor Methven explained,

> In the Republic, writers were in the vanguard of a social and political movement, Yeats and O'Casey, so interest in theatre is a hangover from when writers were recognized as national heroes rather than just people living at the edges of socialism or whatever. It's a very different state here. How could you possibly have here a playwright who was a hero? Whose hero? Belfast has an industrial base, and it's been a Protestant base, and it's therefore been the state base. If you own the state, the last thing you want is theatre, which has been (and should be) both a tool of challenge and subversion. It's only very recently that there's been a kind of indigenous theatre…It's a very, very different atmosphere here.[55]

This fundamentally different relationship that Northerners have with its theatre, especially viewing drama as a site of potential political and state subversion, can be best understood by looking at how theatre developed in the North.

After partition in 1921, a primary goal of the Northern government was strengthening and legitimizing the North as a separate country and as part of the

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[55] Helen Lojek, "Seeding New Writing, Seeking More Analysis: Belfast's Charabanc Theatre Company," *Irish Studies Review,* no. 8 (Autumn 1994): 34.

United Kingdom. Starting in the 1940s, theatre in the North was regulated by the Protestant-run government, which only supported and promoted art that reflected this pro-unionist and pro-English ideology. In aid of this goal, the late 1940s and early 1950s saw the start of a national theatre initiative coinciding with Ulster Regionalism, a Protestant-led cultural movement which promoted and reinforced Protestant control in the North. This was, in essence, a state-sponsored arts movement meant to legitimize partition and advocate a unionist, government ideology. In *Theatre and the State in Twentieth Century Ireland*, Lionel Pilkington explains:

> Stormont's unprecedented enthusiasm for developing a state or regional theatre in Northern Ireland may also be explained in terms of the unionist government's incorporation of elements of the post-war cultural ideology of the British state. Middle-class culture, and especially the theatre, was regarded as an important means by which a regional identity might be fostered with the minimum of political dissent…The attractiveness of a state theatre and of a canon of "Ulster" drama for a regionalist cultural policy was that it manifested Northern Ireland's political normality.[56]

Because theatre was state-led and its primary goal was, as Pilkington asserts, to normalize and legitimize Protestant rule over the newly partitioned state, drama in the North for many years did not address the sectarian conflict which had been brewing for centuries between Catholics and Protestants nor did it represent Northern Irish life on stage. Instead, it primarily produced British classics as a way to reinforce the link between Britain and the North and to assert unionist authority.

State control over the arts only increased as the nationalist community protested over civil rights violations during the 1950s and 1960s. An example of

[56]Lionel Pilkington, *Theatre and the State in Twentieth-Century Ireland: Cultivating the People* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 169.

this was the government's mandate that the British national anthem, *God Save the Queen,* be played before the start of any performance. The indignity of having to sit through the anthem combined with the British subject matter of the plays alienated most Catholic audiences. Any art that did engage with sectarian politics or question the authority of the government was condemned and often censored. While British and American theatre in the 1960s and 1970s was saturated with feminist, socialist, alternative, and experimental theatre, the North had a staunchly conservative and inward-turning culture that only produced a very limited range of Anglo-Irish and British dramas.

As a result, Belfast theatre in the 1960s and 1970s was primarily British imports. Touring productions from London were seen in Belfast, and English actors were shipped over to perform British classics, whose plots and characters reflected neither the class issues nor sectarian problems that the city was experiencing on a daily basis. Growing up, Marie Jones recounted, "…what little theatre there was in Belfast was all classics, drawing-room comedies and Yeats. People like me just didn't exist in plays."[57]

During this same period, as part of a larger attempt to repress the proliferation of public unrest in the North, the government repressed media coverage of civil rights protests and sectarian violence as well as the art that engaged with these issues. Pilkington observes,

> …whereas by 1967, the modernization of Ireland in the late 1950s and 1960s had culminated in an unprecedented liberalization of Ireland's literary and film censorship laws, the early 1970s [in the North] witnessed

[57] E. Jane Dickson, "Women on the Verge of Falling in Love," *Belfast Telegraph,* March 8, 1997.

> the reintroduction of an array of draconian censorship legislation to deal with the effects of the conflict in Northern Ireland.[58]

In the decades leading up to this reinforcement of censorship, a few significant theatre practitioners had made early attempts to free Northern theatre from state regulation. The foundations for Belfast's largest professional producing house, the Lyric Theatre, were started in 1951 when Mary[59] and Pearce O'Malley founded the amateur Lyric Players Group. The O'Malleys were greatly influenced by the socialist and nationalist New Theatre Group in Dublin and aimed to create an independent theatre in the North that might offer unbiased and apolitical drama, free from government or sectarian agendas. The Lyric Players refused to present overtly political, propagandistic, or agitprop theatre and generally tried to remain politically neutral. Pilkington describes the Lyric Players' mission as seeking "a pluralist, nondiscriminatory state in which nationalist self-expression could freely exist."[60] This neutrality allowed the theatre to operate for years without much government intervention. In 1960, the Lyric Players became professional, marking its later rise as the most important, full-time, professional producing house in the North.

Along with the development of a theatre group devoted to non-sectarian and non-government controlled images of the North, several plays began to address the sectarian conflict head-on. In 1960, the Ulster Group Theatre's board of directors refused to produce Sam Thompson's *Over the Bridge* because it

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[58] Pilkington, *Theatre and the State,* 192.
[59] In terms of women's influence on Northern theatre, it is significant to note that the Lyric was founded and primarily run by a woman, Mary O'Malley, who also opened an early drama school in Belfast in 1952.
[60] Pilkington, *Theatre and the State,* 187-188.

showed how class divisions and sectarian prejudices played out in the shipyards, often with violent consequences. Artistic director James Ellis resigned from the theatre and successfully mounted a production independently which was seen by more than 46,000 audience members in its first six weeks.[61] The next important play to address the sectarian conflict was in 1971 with John Boyd's *The Flats,* which is considered to be the first play to engage directly with the Troubles. The play follows a single day in the life of the Catholic working-class Donnellan family as they attempt to live and survive amid the sectarian conflict. The play charts the increasing violence between the loyalist Shankill Defense Association and the nationalist Citizen's Defense Committee. It is also notable for charting the invasion of the domestic space by violence and politics as the conflict begins to dominate the Donnellan's family life.[62]

Scholars consider *The Flats* to be the start of the classic Troubles play which is characterized by its use of reductive plots that ultimately fail to address the larger socio-political issues surrounding the conflict. A typical (now rehashed) storyline would involve a Protestant boy who falls in love with a Catholic girl and violence ensues. Christopher Morash describes Troubles drama as typically being set in an interior, domestic space (often a kitchen) and revolving around the tragedy suffered by a family as the result of sectarian violence. Typically, an off-stage riot takes the life of an innocent family member, often a young woman.

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[61] Pádraic Whyte, "Review of *Over the Bridge,*" *Irish Theatre Magazine,* April 02, 2010, http://www.irishtheatremagazine.ie/Reviews/Current/Over-the-Bridge.

[62] Lionel Pilkington notes that in this play, the living room is emptied of all domestic furniture and personal effects in order to clear space for the command center of the Defense Committee. The women and child who once occupied the domestic space are entirely ejected/displaced by the men's efforts to transform the home into a masculine political sphere. (*Theatre and the State*, 206)

Morash sums up the standard formula of early Troubles plays as 'one family, one day, one death.'[63] The primary conflict in these plays "is between the onstage world of the family, and the unseen offstage world, a realm of mindless violence where death can come from an anonymous mob or a hidden sniper."[64] Morash goes on to argue that the classic Troubles play presented the family as apolitical innocents and portrayed the violence swirling outside as "mindless and unmotivated."[65] Thus, Troubles violence was shown in early plays to be a senseless and incomprehensible phenomenon rather than the product of decades of increasing discrimination against Catholics. By severing the connection between sectarian violence and its historical and economic circumstances, the plays failed to effectively engage the political situation in the North. The Field Day Theater Company was founded in 1980, in part, to correct this disturbing disconnect between the economic and historic realities and their representations on stage. Likewise, Charabanc and DubbelJoint would also spend significant time dramatizing the history of the conflict in order to demonstrate the connection between Troubles violence and real material circumstances.

Slowly, the 1970s brought an increase in plays that began to directly address the sectarian conflict and the developing violence of the Troubles. The Lyric produced multiple Troubles plays during this period including John Haire's *Between the Two Shadows* (1972-3), Patrick Galvin's *Nightfall to Belfast* (1973-

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[63] Christopher Morash, *A History of Irish Theatre, 1601-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 245.
[64] Morash, *A History of Irish Theatre*, 246.
[65] Morash, *A History of Irish Theatre*, 246.

4), and Stewart Parker's *Catchpenny Twist* (1977).[66] Also in 1975, John Arden and Northern Irish actress and playwright Margaretta D'Arcy performed *The Non-Stop Connolly Show.*[67] The play, which dramatized the life of Irish socialist leader John Connolly, took twenty-four hours to perform and a cast of over thirty actors. It is important to note, however, that despite new representations of the Troubles, the conflict, and Catholic life on stage, these plays invariably focused around *male* experiences of the conflict and rarely showed women outside of the supporting roles of wife/mother. As Mary Trotter writes, classic Troubles plays "made the domestic space an apolitical sphere, with women as victims but not participants in the ideological struggle surrounding them."[68]

The 1970s, however, also brought an important new mandate from the Arts Council of Northern Ireland (ACNI), which would play an instrumental role in allowing women to emerge as leaders in Northern theatre during the 1980s. The importance of the independent and community theatre movements in England during the 1960s and 1970s led the ACNI to adopt funding strategies similar to those being enacted in Britain. This led to a new investment in independent and community theatre in the North. Previously, only commercial and established theatres like the Lyric had received significant funding from the government. This new funding scheme, which targeted community groups, allowed playwright Martin Lynch to found the extremely influential Turf Lodge Fellowship

[66] Pilkington, *Theatre and the State,* 209.
[67] This production was sponsored by Sinn Féin, the political wing of the IRA, signaling early republican interest in using arts and culture as a form of propaganda. Sinn Féin would continue to use arts and culture as a tool for political reform and as a way of promoting its ideology with the sponsorship of Féile an Phobail (the West Belfast Festival), the JustUs Theatre Company, and many other artistic and cultural groups.
[68] Mary Trotter*, Modern Irish Theatre* (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 2008), 169.

Community Theatre in Belfast in 1976. Other groups such as the Playzone Community Theatre were also started with this new funding. [69] Playzone, which was committed to social change, brought theatre into deprived areas and performed in schools, retirement centers, and community centers and employed many women actors and writers. Although it was only in existence for two years (1977-1979), it was an important reflection of a radical change in funding structures for the arts and provided new job opportunities for women in the theatre. Both Tuft Lodge and Playzone would ultimately serve as an inspiration for Charabanc[70] and for Marie Jones in particular who was an original member of Playzone.

The impact of the growing community arts sector in the late 1970s encouraged the ACNI to begin funding independent regional companies in the 1980s. These theatres, which were often outgrowths of the amateur and community theatre sector, allowed some professional theater to develop outside of Belfast. One of the most significant examples of this funded growth was the Field Day Theatre Company, created in 1980 by Brian Friel and actor Stephen Rae. Field Day produced several new plays that are now central to the Irish theatrical canon including Friel's *Translations* (1980), Thomas Kilroy's *Double Cross* (1986), and Stewart Parker's *Pentecost* (1987). As other independent companies like Playzone and Stage '80[71] became more established, the Council also created

[69] Playzone was founded in 1977 by Northern theatre director Andy Hinds and Dubliner Frank Brennan.
[70] Brenda Winter, "That's Not Theatre Love!: The *Lay Up Your Ends* Experience," in *Lay Up Your Ends: A 25th Anniversary Edition,* ed. Richard Palmer (Belfast: Lagan Press, 2008), 20.
[71] Stage '80 was founded by Michael Poynor.

training, opportunity, and platforms for new playwriting, opening up opportunities for women writers.

Despite significant advances in the community and independent arts sectors as well as the slow but persistent development of an indigenous drama that reflected the life of real Northern citizens, there remained only three main centers for theatre in Belfast during the 1980s: the Grand Opera House, the Belfast Civic Arts Centre, and the Lyric. All three were controlled by male boards. These theatres still primarily staged British classics and imported productions from London. Things were especially bad for Northern actresses when Leon Rubin took over as artistic director of the Lyric. Under his leadership, the theatre rarely employed Northern actresses; instead, Rubin imported English actresses to say three or four lines in an entire show. This discrimination against Northern actors, particularly women, stemmed from bigotry within British theatre that Northern actors were not as professional or as highly trained as their English counterparts. It also derived from prejudice against having working-class Northern bodies and accents on stage, which were considered too rough to appear in elite British classics.

Limited theatre work, government censorship, narrow representations of women, few depictions of working-class life, and no plays from a women's perspective were the norm within Northern theatre throughout the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. It was into this vacuum that Christina Reid, Anne Devlin, Marie Jones, and Jennifer Johnston defiantly pushed themselves, creating complex and realistic representations of the challenges that women in the North endured on a daily

basis. Refocusing the standard Troubles play told from a masculine perspective, these playwrights reset the conflict as experienced through the eyes of women. Their plays addressed the complex interplay between gender roles, politics, sexuality, domestic violence, marriage/relationships, motherhood, feminism, and sectarian divisions. Christina Reid's *Tea in a China Cup* (1983) followed three generations of Protestant women as they negotiated female identity and domestic space within the violent clashes of the annual July 12th parades.[72] Anne Devlin's *Ourselves Alone* (1985) followed three sisters from a prominent IRA family as they dealt with jailed husbands, political obligations to a patriarch, romance, and dreams for a better life. Jennifer Johnston wrote a series of monologues addressing the Troubles from women's perspectives. *Twinkletoes* (1993) explore the inner life of a top IRA prisoner's wife who is revered by her community but is desperately lonely while *Christine* (1989) is about a wife whose husband is killed by the IRA, leaving behind several children to support. In these new plays, women were no longer positioned in supporting roles. Instead, these "dutiful wives" and "patient, peace-loving mothers" became the protagonists. Moreover, these tired tropes of womanhood were subverted as female characters were portrayed as complex, fully rounded women who felt constant pressure to both fulfill and rebel against gender norms in the North.

Whenever theatrical scholarship addresses women's playwriting in the North, it almost exclusively points to the 1980s as the one period of great theatrical output for women. People inevitably reference Reid, Devlin, and Jones

[72] The controversial July 12th parades honor Protestant King William's victory over Catholic rival King James II in 1690. Protestants march through Catholic enclaves, engendering sectarian violence on a yearly basis.

as examples of this phenomenon. Although scholars such as Claudia Harris, Imelda Foley, Maria R. DiCenzo, and Helen Lojek have done good work on Charabanc, the company's influence on contemporary Northern drama has not been adequately recorded. Even less has been written about DubbelJoint and the JustUs Theatre companies, which deserve to have a greater presence in Northern Irish theatre history. These three companies, although often neglected by scholarship, had a significant impact on the growth and development of women's theatre in the North, breaking gender barriers, providing new theatrical training and jobs for women, and leaving a legacy of engaging the sectarian conflict from a woman's perspective.

Charabanc

The Charabanc[73] Theatre Company was created in direct response to a lack of acting jobs and strong roles for women in Northern drama during the 1970s and 1980s. The company was started in 1983 by five actresses: Marie Jones, Maureen Macauley, Eleanor Methven, Carol (Scanlan) Moore, and Brenda Winter.[74] In addition to the male-led Field Day Theatre Company, Charabanc was arguably the most significant Northern theatre company of the 1980s. It helped to establish an independent theatre sector for the first time in the North, and it

[73] Pronounced *Sharabang*: the name comes from an open-air benched wagon that was used in the early twentieth century for group excursions on weekends or holidays.
[74] Playwright and community activist Martin Lynch is often credited as having initially co-founded Charabanc. The women of Charabanc saw his play *Dockers* which was produced at the Lyric in 1981. They asked Lynch to write them a play, but he encouraged them to write their own. He helped the women shape and edit *Lay Up Your Ends.* While his involvement was important to the formation of Charabanc, scholars tend to overemphasize his contributions to the company and often fail to mention that he actually repudiated the company after they stopped doing devised, community-based theatre in the 1990s.

secured an international reputation for Northern Ireland as the progenitor of significant and high quality theatre. During the twelve years of its existence (1983-1995), the company performed eighteen new works and four existing plays. During this period, it became one of the most widely toured theatre groups on the island, performing in both the North and south of Ireland,[75] Russia, Germany, Canada, London, the United States as well as at Glasglow's Mayfest, the Edinburgh Festival, and the Brighton Festival at Cardiff, Wales.

Although the impulse to start the company arose from practical concerns, Charabanc was also greatly influenced by the women's and socialist movements stirring in Britain during the 1960s and 1970s. Reflecting on the socio-political conditions that led to the emergence of the troupe, actress Eleanor Methven has said:

> The 60s, 70s were highly politicized decades… Catholic or Protestant, it didn't matter, you were influenced by Britain obviously, and we were influenced by British feminism and British socialism. Those two things had an extraordinary grip… We were just tired of being someone's wife, someone's mother. Why couldn't we be the somebody? We were influenced by [the women's movement] coming from Britain- it was just in the ether.[76]

In addition, several of the Charabanc actresses worked and traveled in the United Kingdom before founding the company and brought these feminist and socialist influences to the work. Methven, for example, acted in Scotland during the early 1980s where she worked with WildCat, a socialist musical theatre company that toured plays around Scotland. Its shows centered on working-class life in Britain, and it used an agitprop performance style, both of which would be employed in

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[75] Cross-border touring was rare at this time.
[76] Eleanor Methven, In-person Interview with Fiona Coffey, Dublin, Ireland, June 27, 2012.

Charabanc's own work. In addition, the socialist theatre festival Mayfest in Glasglow where Charabanc performed several times was a huge influence on their work. The company was thus created from a place of political impulse by a group of women who wanted to upend the status quo. In reaction against the British and male-dominated stage, they set out to write their own working-class experiences and communities onto the stage and to reclaim the theatrical space from an elite male-dominated tradition. Recounting the company's initial impulses, Methven states, "Primarily the main thing was to [write] through working-class women's eyes because those are the voices that weren't heard. [Women] don't write the history books so that became the two things that framed Charabanc: a feminist impulse and a socialist impulse."[77]

Another important influence on the formation of the company was the model of the professional children's theatre group, Playzone, which was part of the first wave of independent theatres created during the 1970s. Marie Jones had been an actress for Playzone, and the company provided a model for what Charabanc strove to be: a community-based theatre dedicated to social change that toured working-class areas. Brenda Winter explains, "Playzone prefigured and influenced Charabanc by its position and politics as 'a theatre of social engagement- committed to bringing about change in specific communities.'"[78] Thus, feminist, socialist, and community-based ideologies were at the core of the

[77] Methven, Interview with Fiona Coffey, June 27, 2012.
[78] Brenda Winter, "That's Not Theatre Love!: The *Lay Up Your Ends* Experience," 20; also quoting Baz Kershaw, *The Politics of Performance: Radical Theatre as Cultural Intervention* (London: Routledge 1992), 5.

company's foundations, and this dedication to promoting a working-class and female experience of the North became the primary contributions of the group.

Another extremely important aspect of Charabanc's identity was that the women came from both Protestant and Catholic backgrounds, creating a unique model for an integrated, non-sectarian theatre group.[79] During a period in which many of the theatre and performance venues were associated with Protestant or government rule, Charabanc was decidedly cross-community and purposefully performed in a variety of locations including loyalist and republican neighborhoods as well as more neutral performance spaces. This integration came naturally to the women who were used to performing professionally in the theatre with actors from both religious backgrounds. Methven reflected, "…we were all in theatre before we were in Charabanc, and when you work in theatre it's a nonsectarian profession. Theatre's a place where you don't have to belong to a tribe. Or rather, you belong to a tribe in theatre anyway, so you can actually cut loose from your childhood tribe."[80] Deriving strength from this identity as theatre practitioners meant that the women of Charabanc identified *professionally* before their religious or ethnic identities, which was extremely unusual during this time. Their status as an integrated group allowed them the legitimacy and access to perform in both Catholic and Protestant neighborhoods as well as to include stories from both communities.

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[79] Although the Field Day Theatre Company had members from both the Protestant and Catholic backgrounds, the company often promoted Nationalist-themed work whereas Charabanc remained purposely non-sectarian. Brenda Winter, a Catholic, left the company in 1983. The remaining actresses were Protestant; however the company always had Catholics involved in the company through administrative roles and other contributions.

[80] Helen Lojek, "Eleanor Methven and Carol Moore in conversation with Helen Lojek" in *Theatre Talk*: *Voices of Irish Theatre Practitioners*, eds. Lilian Chambers, Ger FitzGibbon, and Eamonn Jordan (Carysford Press 2001), 346.

Indeed, one of the most significant examples of this cross-community acceptance was the group's ability to interview Catholic women from the nationalist Divis flats for their play *Somewhere Over the Balcony* (1978). For this production, staunchly nationalist and republican women shared intimate and previously untold stories about the hardships of their lives with three Protestant actresses and then allowed those same Protestant women to portray Catholic voices, bodies, and stories on stage. This was an incredibly significant demonstration of Northern women connecting to each other first and foremost as women rather than through their sectarian identities. Methven has said that one of the most important techniques that Charabanc used in their work was creating compassion and empathy for those identified as the adversary.[81] In every play, Charabanc presented a woman on stage who was funny, smart, hard-working, and showed her common humanity as a mother or a wife. Only after the audience began to like and identify with that woman did Charabanc reveal her sectarian identity.

Charabanc devised their work by conducting interviews with the women in their neighborhoods and by doing historical research in libraries and newspaper archives. The group, which often met at night or on weekends, improvised and sketched out scenes which Marie Jones would later go back and write out into a formal script. The plays' characters tended to be a compilation of many different women interviewed, and the actresses intermixed verbatim dialogue from politicians' speeches or news reports with the dialogue they created based on real women's stories.

[81] Methven, Interview with Fiona Coffey, June 27, 2012.

Because the Arts Council would initially not support a group of unproven actresses, the women first financed their productions through a government unemployment scheme that gave them funding to hire actors who were out of work. The group had initially wanted to hire men for the male roles; however, they were unable to find enough out-of-work male actors who would qualify for their specific funding scheme. As Eleanor Methven reflected, "…it was a very feminist thing that started us off. The guys were all employed, and we weren't. So that's a statement in itself."[82] It was the company's director, Pam Brighton, who suggested that the women play the male roles as well. This started Charabanc's hallmark tradition of the actresses playing both male and female roles in the company.[83] The audiences loved the humor of women portraying their husbands, sons, and bosses, and it also was the first time on the Northern stage that the long tradition of male-constructed portrayals of women were subverted. This decision, initially born out of practical and economic necessity, led to the development of what Charabanc has called the *female gaze*: portraying the world (and men) through the eyes and experiences of women. When they played male roles, the actresses indicated the change primarily through voice, body language, and an occasional prop. As a result, the actresses were often still costumed in skirts or dresses and just substituted a hat or coat to show the audience they were now portraying a male character. This obvious and visible layering of the male on top of the female body made it clear that this was a man as seen through the eyes (and

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[82] Catherine Foster, "Belfast Troupe Takes Irish Drama Abroad," *Christine Science Monitor*, May 14, 1987, 24.
[83] In later years, they did end up hiring some male actors for roles in plays. But in the majority of their work, they performed the male roles themselves.

body) of a woman. If the male characters of the plays were never as fully formed as the female characters, as some critics have contended, this was because the plays reflected the role that men played in real women's lives. In a 1987 interview, Marie Jones defended their portrayals of men saying,

> We took these women's perceptions of men and used that in our play. When they talked about their lives, the men really weren't mentioned very much except things like, "He really wasn't home very much, and he got drunk, and he gave me a hayden [a hit] every now and again." But the men didn't figure very much in their lives; they were just there to bring the money home. That was how they saw it, so that's how we portrayed the men.[84]

Just as the company was known for its cross-community and cross-gender casting, the production aesthetic of the company became another distinctive and well-recognized feature of the group. Sets were extremely minimal, typically comprised of platforms, crates, and scaffolding which allowed the company to tour cheaply and easily. Costumes were equally minimal- shirts, dresses, blouses, and aprons with the addition of hats, coats, or other props that would identify a change in character. Their minimalist aesthetic was influenced by practical and artistic concerns. Their constant lack of funding and the need to tour the plays made their production values necessarily sparse. However, their aesthetic was also born out of a desire to make theatre accessible and unintimidating to the communities that came to see their shows. For the working-class audiences of the North, theatre was considered the purview of an educated elite who could afford to attend performances and who could also travel to the theatre at night in safety. Charabanc made theatre accessible financially and physically by traveling to the

[84] Carol Martin, "Charabanc Theatre Company: 'Quare' Women 'Sleggin' and 'Geggin' the Standards of Northern Ireland by 'Tappin' the People," *The Drama Review*, vol. 31, no. 2 (Summer 1987): 91.

community neighborhoods and performing in safe spaces where families could go at night without fear of violence.

Charabanc's minimalistic style also incorporated Brechtian elements and a Living Newspaper aesthetic. In the Brechtian tradition, the actresses changed costumes and roles on stage and broke the fourth wall to speak directly to the audience. In the Living Newspaper tradition, they often used verbatim dialogue from political speeches and direct-address to explain important historical information about the time period or highlight relevant facts or statistics. It is important to note, however, that the women were not using Brechtian or Living Newspaper techniques in an overt or ideological manner; indeed some of the company's members were not even aware of these theatrical traditions. The form and structure of Charabanc's work was influenced heavily by their British director, Pam Brighton, who had worked with several socialist and feminist theatre companies in Britain. Brighton's direction exposed the company to the traditions of groups like Monstrous Women's Regiment and 7:84. Brighton encouraged the use of anti-realistic devices, and the women embraced this direction because these techniques naturally aided in telling their stories and contributed artistically to their barebones aesthetic. And while the staging and structure of their plays were anti-illusionistic, the women's acting style for the most part was naturalistic.

Charabanc's plays were so significant and influential, in part, because they staged the historical development of the class and ethnic conflict in the North in order to chart how the past influenced the sectarian conditions of the present. The

Charabanc women wanted to disprove the widely held opinion that the North was locked in an inescapable cycle of violence. Much of Charabanc's work emphasized the cyclical and generational nature of the conflict, hoping that if individuals could recognize these historical patterns they could be empowered to change them. The company's first production, *Lay Up Your Ends* (1983), looked at how sectarian divisions and poor working-conditions in the early twentieth century linen mill industry repressed women from both communities. *Gold in the Streets* (1986) charted the history of emigration to England during three different time periods: 1912, 1950, and 1985. Each period showed how the same sectarian prejudices have driven people from the North with little changing in over seventy years. As reflected in these plays, much of Charabanc's work asks a single question: "Must we as a culture continue to behave this way?"[85] In each of their plays, Charabanc also emphasized the role of economic conditions in the repression of Northern women. In *Lay Up Your Ends,* women worked long hours under poor working-conditions for desperately low wages. In *Gold in the Streets*, women were motivated to leave the North due to an inability to financially support their families. In this play, London is the land of economic fortune where they will find "gold in the streets." Similarly, *The Girls in the Big Picture* (1986) followed a group of women in the countryside whose lives are stunted economically, socially, and romantically by poverty and limited options in their rural community.

In addition to staging historical dramas, Charabanc did not shy away from addressing hot-button political issues in the present. Their 1985 play, *Now You're*

[85] Methven, Interview with Fiona Coffey, June 27, 2012.

Talking, centered around a group of Catholics and Protestants at a peace and reconciliation center and showed them talking (and fighting) through some of the most difficult issues of the Troubles. Charabanc was careful to represent both sides of the conflict in the play and also to show a realistic range of moderate and extreme viewpoints. The segregated nature of neighborhoods during the 1980s meant that these types of conversations did not typically occur, and this imagined dialogue, staged by Charabanc in a complex, honest, and fair manner, might be the audience's only opportunity to witness a conversation with the other side that was not entirely partisan.

The complex interplay of all these influences meant that Charabanc's dramatic writing was markedly different from standard Northern drama. While the plots of many Troubles plays centered around sectarian violence, Charabanc approached the conflict from a non-paramilitaristic or violent perspective. While the company did not shy away from the *effects* of violence on individuals and the country as a whole, their shows never centered around violence or sensationalized it on stage. Instead, they used the private politics of selfhood and womanhood in the North as a way to enter into a broader dialogue about the conflict. As Jones commented in 1994, "…our stuff very much reflected what was happening to the working people of Belfast and how politics affected their lives. It was politics with a small "p" in that it dealt with how social issued affected 'small' powerless people."[86] Although second wave feminism failed to achieve a stronghold in the North, its famous slogan, *The personal is political,* certainly encapsulates

86 Helen Lojek, "Playing Politics with Charabanc Theatre Company," in *Politics and Performance in Contemporary Northern Ireland*, eds. John Harrington and Elizabeth Mitchell (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), 99-100.

Charabanc's ideology. Many theatre critics dismissed their work as propagandistic or agitprop because the company directly addressed the political and economic conditions that led to the sectarian conflict. However, Charabanc's plays tempered their historical and political analysis through their intense focus on the personal cost of war and its effects on women's subjectivity.

Charabanc's commitment to the personal politics of female identity and gender norms can be seen clearly through their first production. *Lay Up Your Ends* is set in Belfast during the historic 1911 linen mill strikes during which Catholic and Protestant women protested against low pay and atrocious working conditions. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the working classes were packed into crowded, filthy housing located near the polluting factories. Mill women often worked in knee-high water for twelve to fourteen hours each day. This combined with poor nutrition and unsanitary conditions at home created the conditions for high infant mortality, consumption, and typhoid fever. The play charts the political awakening of the mill women as they fight for basic working rights. When the mill manager, Jim Doran, cuts the women's hours (and thus their salaries) and institutes new stringent rules that the women cannot talk, sing, or stop to fix their hair during working hours, this causes an uproar. The women are further outraged when the mill owner, Mr. Bingham, fires Mary for disobeying the new rules, leading a small group of women to strike. Their decision to protest ultimately inspires two thousand women all over Belfast to walk away from their mill jobs. The women's strike for better working conditions quickly transforms into an impulse to unionize in order to improve conditions for

all women in the mills. The play follows a small group of these mill workers as they negotiate the difficult choice of leaving their jobs and striking despite the great financial hardship to their families.

As in all Charabanc plays, the characters in *Lay Up Your Ends* represent a diverse range of experiences and backgrounds. A bright young girl, Florrie, comes from the Northern countryside with her four siblings in tow. She works at the mill in order to make enough money so that her brothers and sisters may eat. Another mill worker, Lizzie, is trapped in a cycle of poverty because she has too many children to raise. She has stopped sleeping with her husband because her health has been badly compromised by work and multiple births. Her doctor has warned her not to have any more children; however, her husband beats her when she refuses to sleep with him. Belle, the most politically aware of the women, leads the walk-out. She tells her fellow millworkers, "No one man shud have all that money when the ones that made it for him haven't even got what wud put a meal's mate on the table." [87] Belle's determination to have her voice heard and to participate in the political process serves as a catalyst for the other women to fight for their basic rights. As Belle tells the women they are in such desperate straights, they have nothing to lose: "ye can't take nothin' away from nothing."[88]

The play, which is far from a sentimental and heroic tale of courage, does not paint the women as strong, unwavering leaders in the fight for women's rights. Instead, it takes a hard look at the financial cost and personal toll on these women who worry that they will be permanently fired for striking. The protest has

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[87] Charabanc Theatre Company and Martin Lynch, *Lay Up Your Ends: A 25th Anniversary Edition,* ed. Richard Palmer (Belfast: Lagan Press, 2008), 74.
[88] Charabanc, *Lay Up Your Ends,* 74.

other high stakes as well: the women rent their homes from the mill owner and are afraid he will evict their families. One striking woman can no longer pay for her sick child's medication and must go door-to-door and beg for money from her neighbors. Far from depicting a uniformly heroic image of the striking workers, the play also shows how many of the women cave under the pressure of their husbands and the factory owners and go back to the mills. This is characteristic of Charabanc's work, which never shies away from hard, truthful, or unsentimental depictions of life in the North.

The play also shows the internal debates between the women who are conflicted as to whether they should follow trade unionist leader Mary Galway's advice to return to work or socialist and nationalist leader, James Connolly, who urges the women to remain on strike until their demands are met. This dilemma is discussed on both a political level with the women's heated verbal debates as well as on a personal level through the storyline of Lizzie, a Protestant whose husband, Charles, has a good job down at the docks. Charles believes that it is inappropriate for women to be publically demonstrating and that politics are unnatural for women. He tells his wife, "Surely til God, y'don't believe that a crowd of weemin is gonna do anything, do ye?"[89] He goes on to argue that the women should follow the more modest model of Mary Galway because "she's not runnin' around the streets singin' and carryin' on and makin' an eegit of herself. That woman has dignity, Lizzie, dignity."[90] Because Connolly advocates Home Rule (which the Protestant population is against), Charles does not want Lizzie to be

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[89] Charabanc, *Lay Up Your Ends,* 77.
[90] Charabanc, *Lay Up Your Ends,* 77.

seen joining Connolly's support for the women's strikes. Charles believes this would cause other Protestants to think their family supports Home Rule. The play thus shows how women have historically been required to subvert their individual needs as women to those of the larger ethno-national group. Charles also manipulates Lizzie's responsibility to her family as a woman, pressuring her to return to work: "Ye can't deprive your wee childer of a bit in their mouths. I can't be expected til carry on supportin' them on my wages alone. Sacrifices will haft til be made if ya don't…Many another man wud not take this business so light." [91] Lizzie agrees to return to work, and after she leaves the stage, Charles turns to the audience and says, "See weemin? Ye don't bate them wi' that. [*He makes a fist.]* Ye bate them wi' that! [*He points to his head.]"* [92]

The play shows that men's manipulation of women is a powerful force that is difficult for the women to break free from, politically and personally. Throughout the play, various men weigh in on the women's strike:

> Biscuit: Strikin' is for men. See weemin', see my Sadie, she's gonna get that. [*He smacks his fist into the palm of his hand again]*
>
> Alfie: Ya don't talk to weemin', Charlie. A good hidin's the only medicine my Ethna knows. See weemin, they shouldn't be allowed out on strike.
>
> Biscuit: Out on strike! They shouln't be allowed outta the house![93]

It is important to remember, however, that these male roles were played by women in makeshift costumes. Thus, while acknowledging the power of men in

[91] Charabanc, *Lay Up Your Ends,* 78-79.
[92] Charabanc, *Lay Up Your Ends,* 79.
[93] Charabanc, *Lay Up Your Ends,* 88.

women’s lives, the men’s words were also undermined and often derided as they were spoken on stage.

Ultimately, the play is a hard and unsentimental look at the personal cost that these women endured to publically protest the conditions that were keeping them repressed and locked in cycles of poverty. The play does not shy away from the women’s internal disagreements or from how deeply the strike affected their personal relationships, emotions, and financial circumstances. The play also condemns the out-of-touch, wealthy Protestant women who ignored the plight of their fellow working-class women. The play paints the mill owner’s wife as a hypocrite for dismissing the mill workers’ pleas and not seeing how their basic rights affect her as a woman as well.

Although *Lay Up Your Ends* concludes with the women returning to the mills after the strike collapses, the play ultimately does not position the protest as a failure. The women enter the mills defiantly singing; they stop their work and comb their hair; they chat and laugh, taking back some of the privileges they had lost without asking permission. The play argues that the shared strength the women gained from uniting in opposition to unfair working conditions was a success in its own right. Thus women’s bonding and their power as a collective voice are positioned as possible antidotes to male authority and control, encouraging working-class Protestant and Catholic women in the audiences to join their voices together in order to enact real change. It was significant that Charabanc’s first production reenacted a historical period in which working-class women from both traditions came together to fight for their common rights as

workers and as women. This cooperative cross-community action reflected the very project that Charabanc itself was endeavoring to create: bringing Protestant and Catholic women together to advocate for their rights as working-class women and to provide a creative space for their public and private, personal and political, ethnic and gender identities.

The focus on women's lives in Charabanc's work is even more significant given what Enrica Cerquoni calls "the forgotten world of women in post-hunger-strike Northern Ireland."[94] Following the 1981 hunger strikes (during which ten men died), the Catholic community was consumed by the dramatic and very public bodily sacrifice of their husbands, brothers, and sons.[95] The years following the hunger strikes led to an increase in IRA recruitment and paramilitary violence, enveloping the North in a highly militant masculine political atmosphere. Charabanc started performing in 1983, directly in the aftermath of the hunger strikes and during a time when the space for women's voices was more restricted than ever.

Although Charabanc was not founded with the specific goal to create a feminist or even an all-women's theatre troupe, the company's feminism was implicit in the subjects of their plays, in their mission statement, in their initial impulse to create more and better jobs for actresses, and in their desire to show the sectarian conflict from a female perspective. However, the company was

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[94] Enrica Cerquoni, "Women in Rooms: Landscapes of the Missing in Anne Devlin's *Ourselves Alone*" in *Women in Irish Drama*, ed. Melissa Sihra (Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), 163.

[95] Although several women political prisoners had joined the previous hunger strike of 1980 and had participated in the no-wash protests from 1980 to 1981, none of them died, and they did not receive public attention for their contributions. Their sacrifice was dramatized by the British women's theatre group, Trouble and Strife, in a show called *Now and in the Hour of our Death,* which they performed in 1989 in Belfast, Dublin, and New York.

careful to reject feminism as an elitist, upper-class ideology that did not encompass their identities or the project of their company. Eleanor Methven explains that they distanced themselves from the term because, "we were dealing with working-class women, and we didn't want to alienate them."[96] Feminism in the North was often viewed as an anti-male or, alternatively, as a purely republican ideology. Additionally, in a society that imposed essentialist, binary identity markers on all its members (Catholic versus Protestant; Irish versus English; North versus south), the company was wary of embracing yet another label which might alienate them from those who did not identify as feminist. In a 1987 interview, Eleanor Methven said,

> It would be stupid to say we're not 'feminist,' but every time someone says 'feminist,' I want them to define it for me. It has a bad ring to it. If we said we were feminist or socialist or any 'ist'- it would completely alienate those people back in the community centers in Northern Ireland. It would alienate them completely. So what's the point of saying it?[97]

Reinforcing these fears, many theatre critics ignored their denials and declared their plays to be feminist, aligning their work with a strident anti-male ideology or a lesbian lifestyle. Despite the fact that their project was overtly and insistently about promoting women's rights, experiences, and voices, the word *feminist* was clearly not going to be a productive label for the group, and they fought against the media branding them as such. Other female playwrights during this same period struggled to distance themselves from labels that would color their work as sectarian. In a 1982 interview, Christina Reid commented, "I would be appalled at any sort of label-- I mistrust labels, whether they be social, religious or sexual. I

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[96] Methven, Interview with Fiona Coffey, June 27, 2012.
[97] Martin, "Charabanc Theatre Company," 97.

think labels diminish good art. I don't make political statements, I present words and images that are open to interpretation."[98]

This conflicted relationship between the clear feminist and socialist messages of their plays and the group's rejection of such labels has created a very complicated gap between what Charabanc claimed it was doing and what its performances actually conveyed. For example, just as Charabanc rejected the label of feminist, it also denied writing specifically from a "woman's perspective." In an interview with Carol Martin in 1987, the actresses denied the significance of their status as women in their writing. Marie Jones told Martin, "We never actually think [writing from a female perspective] is desperately important- it happens because we are women. We never think we better do this from a feminine point of view. It's just there because we are women." [99] Carol Scanlan added, "It's an unconscious thing; it just comes out." [100] Arguing against ghettoization into the marginalized category of "women's writing," Methven argued,

> You either make it or you don't, regardless if you're a woman or not. We can't deny the fact that we are women and because we're women we write from a woman's point of view. But it's not meant to be agitprop. It's more like human rights than women's rights. We'd fight for a male cause if we saw something that was bad that was being done to males.[101]

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[98] Tom Maguire, *Making Theatre in Northern Ireland: Through And Beyond the Troubles* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2006), 163.
[99] Martin, "Charabanc Theatre Company," 95.
[100] Martin, "Charabanc Theatre Company," 95.
[101] Martin, "Charabanc Theatre Company" 97.

These comments demonstrate a concern about being placed in a special category that prevents their work from being compared against or added to the canon of elite male playwrights. In the same interview, Methven went on to say,

> More women are now writing plays, but, compared to the number of men, it's minimal. And people seem to think we're inundated with women's plays. But they only notice them because they're written by a woman. It's like people are constantly asking us, "Tell us you're a feminist theatre company." Yet if there's a theatre company entirely composed of men, which is quite normal, nobody thinks- not even women- about the fact that they're only seeing men on stage or just one woman. It doesn't occur to them. Suddenly there's something odd about having all women on stage…[102]

Jones added to these comments, arguing, "We've been fighting for three-and-a-half years to say we're a working-class theatre company. That's all we are. People will not accept that. Maybe they're looking for an angle for the press or something. We never really say we're a Belfast women's theatre company."[103] When Jones insisted they were a working-class theatre group, the company was embracing a non-sectarian term that might unite disparate groups within Northern Ireland who shared many of the same daily economic struggles and goals. Thus, Charabanc saw "working-class" as a term that could unite while attaching words such as "feminist" (i.e. republican/anti-male/lesbian), "political" (i.e. sectarian), or "women" (i.e. lesser) threatened to divide and alienate their very audience. Instead, in creating female characters that both nationalist and unionist women could relate to, Charabanc's plays attempted to create empathy for and identification with the opposing group, and they fiercely repudiated any labels that could potentially threaten this project.

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[102] Martin, "Charabanc Theatre Company," 97
[103] Martin, "Charabanc Theatre Company," 97.

Similarly, during the 1980s, the company refused to define their company as being politically motivated in the fear that audiences would interpret their work as sectarian. Instead, the women argued that their plays focused on the issues of selfhood, identity, and individual experience rather than the larger economic, religious, and social politics of the conflict. Despite the valid reasons for rejecting an identity as political theatre, it cannot be denied that the company continually explored politically sensitive topics. In 1993, Maria DiCenzo wrote,

> Charabanc does not promote itself as a 'political theatre' group, but a glance at the programs for these black comedies places them squarely in the political arena. The programs often include documentary material, statistics, and polemical writings. The plays were also intended to serve a political function; along with promising audiences a night's entertainment, Methven claimed that they were interested in getting Catholics and Protestants to listen to one another and in breaking down some of the myths of barriers that are reinforced in a context where the politics become ever more polarized.[104]

Helen Lojek explains, "Charabanc's founders may not always have conceived of themselves as political, but their repeated statement that one motivation in forming the company was fatigue at always being cast 'as somebody's wife or mother or sister' is a political statement however unselfconscious its political nature."[105] It was only after Charabanc disbanded in 1995 that the actresses felt comfortable acknowledging the company's political nature. In 2001, Carol Moore used Michael Etherton's words to define Charabanc's work as plays "that describe Irish politics, but…are not plays which commit their audiences to any

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[104] Maria DiCenzo, "Charabanc Theatre Company: Placing Women Center Stage in Northern Ireland," *Theater Journal,* vol. 45, no 2 (May 1993), 183.
[105] Helen Lojek, "Charabanc Theatre Company's *Lay Up Your Ends,*" *New Hibernia Review,* vol. 2 no. 3 (Autumn, 1998): 106.

political meaning for them."[106] This emphasis that their plays addressed political issues without forcing any political ideology upon the audience reflected their desire to create drama that engaged the political debates of the day without alienating or dividing their audience. Eleanor Methven also confirmed the political nature of their work in 2001 when she defined all of Northern theatre as drama that "addresses the issues that are particular to the Six Counties: political issues."[107] Here, Methven argues that, in contrast to theatre from the Republic, all Northern drama, including that of Charabanc, is inherently political.

Thus, in a country marked by strange contradictions, Charabanc was unable to claim ownership over many of the goals and aims of the company for fear of polarizing the community-base they were trying to reach. They also feared having their intentions misrepresented by the media, which tended to attach a sectarian agenda to all forms of politics. As a result, the Charabanc women, who wrote, created, and performed clearly feminist, socialist, and political drama, spent a lot of time denying that status in an attempt to create a neutral space in which to perform. Despite their denials during the height of their fame, many of Charabanc's members today are able to speak freely about the company's true intensions and embrace feminism as associated with the company. Today, Eleanor Methven defines feminism as "having a female gaze on society,"[108] which was, of course, one of the most recognized and celebrated hallmarks of Charabanc's style.

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[106] Lojek, "Eleanor Methven and Carol Moore in conversation with Helen Lojek" in *Theatre Talk*, 344.
[107] Lojek, "Eleanor Methven and Carol Moore in conversation with Helen Lojek" in *Theatre Talk*, 345.
[108] Methven, Interview with Fiona Coffey, June 27, 2012.

From its initial production, Charabanc was widely embraced by the theatre communities in both the North and south. In a review of *Lay Up Your Ends*, Belfast's *Fortnight Magazine* wrote that the women were embarking on a larger project that would add vital importance to the Northern theatre sector:

> And the world of theatre here is invigorated by the energy, reach, and scale of the project; by the wider competence and new skills gained by local members of the theatre community who form the company; by the new audiences for theatre who are touched by such work; and by the commitment to accessible but serious forms of theatre. This, finally, is the sort of work we must be proud of and quick to encourage.[109]

This last line, that the North must embrace Charabanc's work, is one that was felt throughout the critical and artistic community of the North. There was an immediate sense of pride that innovative creative expression was coming out of Northern Ireland, especially during the Troubles. The cross-community nature of the theatre group may also have made it easier for critics to validate the company's success since the group was promoting understanding and dialogue rather than sectarian division. *The Irish News* wrote that *Lay Up Your Ends* struck "a perfect balance between frequently bawdy comedy and raw social comment, to deliver one of the most powerful works to come out of Belfast for some time."[110] Rosalind Carne of *The Stage Guardian* wrote that the company "marked the beginning of an alternative theatre movement in a place which has relied for a long time on the inspiration of outsiders,"[111] noting as well that British theatre had

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[109] Lynda Henderson and Paul Hadfield, "Nothing Run of the Mill," *Fortnight Magazine*, no. 194 (May 1983): 27.

[110] Eugene Malony, "The Lynch Scalpel Leaves Them in Stitches," *The Irish News*, May 16, 1983 reproduced in *Lay Up Your Ends 25th Anniversary Edition*, 157.

[111] Rosalind Carne, "The Past Put Through the Mill," *The Stage Guardian*, July 8, 1983 reproduced in *Lay Up Your Ends 25th Anniversary Edition*, 168.

sadly lost much of the "humour and exuberance" that characterized Charabanc's work.[112]

Some critics, however, did not understand how to critique the collaborative nature of the company's devised work, preferring a clear separation between the writing/author from the performance/actor. One critic from *The London Times* acerbically declared his confusion when he described *Girls in the Big Picture* as "devised by the company and written by Marie Jones (whatever that precisely means)."[113] In addition, their rough and minimalist production style performed in makeshift halls and community centers allowed a few critics to dismiss the women's work as amateur or community theatre. In actuality, their performances in non-traditional theatre spaces allowed Charabanc to perform for larger audiences than the formal performance venues of Belfast could hold, giving the company wider exposure than many of the city's top professional theatre companies.

Charabanc's influence throughout the island created a new vibrancy and respect for Northern theatre, and it also demonstrated that independent theatre could flourish in Belfast. In the years following Charabanc's success, a series of independent theatres and women-led companies formed. In 1987, Big Telly was established by Kate Batts, Jill Holmes, and Zoe Seaton. In 1988, the Tinderbox theatre company was founded, becoming one of the leading independent theatres

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[112] Carne, "The Past Put Through the Mill," reproduced in *Lay Up Your Ends 25th Anniversary Edition*, 170.
[113] Martin Cropper, "Review of *The Girls in the Big Picture* at the Drill Hall," *The Times* (London), Nov 18, 1986.

in the North today.[114] Replay, a touring theatre-in-education company for children and young adults, was also started in 1988 by Brenda Winter of Charabanc. Kabosh, the North's only site-specific theatre company, was established in 1994. As early as 1993, Maria DiCenzo recognized the impact that Charabanc had made on the independent sector:

> Big Telly, Tinderbox, and Replay are some of the companies in Northern Ireland that owe a debt to Charabanc. The persistence, energy and diversity of theatre companies like Charabanc…bear witness to the popularity of alternative forms of theatre, particularly for audiences who are excluded from or exclude themselves from mainstream or "high art" theatre…[115]

Moreover, Carol Moore views one of Charabanc's greatest contributions as helping to found the independent arts sector in the North: "…there is no doubt that the emergence of other independent theatre companies became a reality because we demonstrated that it was possible to create your own work, company, and power base with nothing but creative ideas and energy."[116] In addition to helping to establish an independent sector, Charabanc, along with the success of playwrights like Anne Devlin and Christina Reid, showed that women were creating some of the most innovative theater on the island. Today, these women's contributions continue to influence Northern drama. Each of the previously mentioned companies- Big Telly, Tinderbox, Replay, and Kabosh- are currently led and managed by women. Thus, a strong independent sector and the women who are now reenergizing Northern drama are arguably a direct result of

[114] Tinderbox was founded by Tim Loane and Lalor Roddy.
[115] DiCenzo, "Charabanc Theatre Company: Placing Women Center Stage in Northern Ireland," 184.
[116] Lojek, "Eleanor Methven and Carol Moore in conversation with Helen Lojek," 352.

Charabanc's increasing visibility and achievements during the 1980s and early 1990s.

It is also important to note that Charabanc was both a training ground and a launching pad for the career for Marie Jones, one of the island's most critically and financially successful playwrights. Jones began her career as an actress and took over the primary writing responsibilities for Charabanc. The company was important in that it gave Jones the space and opportunity to write plays that were produced and widely toured instead of having to struggle and submit her work independently to Irish theatres. The initial success she found with the company led her to write plays independently and have them performed internationally (including on Broadway and the West End). *A Night in November* (1994) and *Stones in his Pockets* (2000) went on to be among her most critically and financially successful works. Being a founding member of Charabanc also afforded her the opportunity and experience to found DubbelJoint in 1991, which would also have a significant impact on Irish theatre.

Perhaps, though, the company's greatest contribution was paradoxically their least visible and the one most often dismissed by critics. Most scholars view Charabanc's decline as beginning in 1990 after Jones and Brighton left to start DubbelJoint. At this time, Charabanc switched its focus from producing original devised works to thinking strategically about the larger infrastructure for the arts in the North. This period of supposed decline (when the company was producing fewer and less successful works) was arguably also a period of great contribution to the larger strength and health of the Northern theatre sector. Rather than

producing new plays, the reduced company, led by Eleanor Methven and Carol Moore, spent their time and funds on creating playwriting workshops, advocating for new funding initiatives, and creating the International Workshop Theatre Festival which brought in foreign theatre professionals to work with Belfast practitioners. They also developed new plays and nurtured new writers. In addition, they founded and ran the Small Sale Theatre Managers Association (SSTMA), a lobbying group for the growing independent sector. SSTMA was the first of its kind in the North and was, arguably, the forerunner of today's Northern Ireland Theatre Association, which currently advocates for theatres and provides training and support opportunities. Charabanc's later contributions- workshops, theatre festivals, increased funding and advocacy- were less tangible or easily measurable achievements that did not directly benefit the company itself, leading many critics to dismiss their contributions during the 1990s. However, the company did add to the vibrancy, growth, and diversity of theatre being developed in the North during this period, and those contributions are still being felt today.

Despite their significant impact on the development of independent and women's theatre in the North, Charabanc's contributions are rarely acknowledged and for the most part remain unknown in the North. One explanation for this is that Charabanc's plays were not published until 2006. Currently, only six of their plays[117] have been published in limited and difficult-to-find editions. This lack of

[117] *Now You're Talking, Gold in the Streets, The Girls in the Big Picture, Somewhere Over the Balcony* were published in a single volume in 2007; *Lay Up Your Ends* was published in 2008; and *The Hamster Wheel* was published in 1995 as part of an anthology entitled *The Crack in the Emerald: New Irish Plays* (David Grant, editor).

previous publication may also be why Charabanc's work has not been studied or produced more extensively. Steve Wilmer in his 1991 article, "Women's Theatre in Ireland," cited the lack of presses interested in publishing feminist theatrical writing as a major reason for the dearth of women's dramatic writing in Ireland.[118] In addition, many of Charabanc's plays can be difficult to understand for an audience uneducated in the history of the Troubles. The plays' specificity in terms of time and place potentially make them inaccessible to a wide audience (although the company did tour internationally). Few productions have been staged of Charabanc's work since the company disbanded. Oregon State University did a production of *Lay Up Your Ends* in April 1997, directed by Charlotte Headrick; however, she used an incomplete script and pieced together the production from personal connections with Charabanc company members.[119] It remains one of the only examples of independent productions of Charabanc's work. Martin Lynch produced one of the only revivals of their work to date. *Lay Up Your Ends* was staged for a short run at the Grand Opera House in Belfast in 2009. Significantly, Marie Jones reprised the role of Belle, the strike-leader, which she originally played in 1983, arguably allowing greater success in capturing the essence of the original production than if the play had been performed without a single member of the original cast.

The company ultimately disbanded in 1995 after being in existence for twelve years. The *Irish Times* literally bemoaned their fate and questioned what group would be able to fill the gap: "Howl, howl, howl. Could there possibly be

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[118] Steve Wilmer, "Women's Theatre in Ireland," *New Theatre Quarterly*, vol. 7, no. 28 (Nov 1991): 357.
[119] Lojek, "Playing Politics with Charabanc Theatre Company," 93.

more depressing news for the Irish theatre lover than that Charabanc Theatre Company has disbanded?"[120] As Charabanc's reputation grew in the 1980s, it became a cultural and perhaps national symbol of a strong, positive, and artistically accomplished North. As the company toured across the island and world, Northern media and audiences became invested in the symbol of Charabanc as a working-class theatre company that devised original work about Northern life.

As the North embraced their accomplishments, however, Charabanc's actresses no longer had ownership or control over the company, which had become an important public voice and storyteller of the working-class experience during the Troubles. When the company shifted its priorities in the early 1990s, producing classic plays like Pierre Corneille's *The Illusion* (1993) and Frederico Garcia Lorca's *The House of Bernarda Alba* (1993), the backlash against these changes was swift and brutal. Critics condemned the company for losing its original mission and producing unoriginal and undistinguished work. When Charabanc tried to grow and vary their offerings, the North and south rejected these changes. While this was frustrating for the company and contributed to its demise in 1995, it can also perversely be seen as evidence of just how influential its plays had become in the North and how important the company was to the working classes who viewed it as an expression of their experiences and lives.

Although the company struggled constantly to maintain financial solvency and was described in 1986 as "chronically short of funds" and "often work[ing]

[120] Victoria White, "Charabanc at the Terminus," *Irish Times*, July 13, 1995.

out of pure desperation,"[121] Charabanc was arguably one of the most influential theatre companies to come out of the North. It revolutionized the subject matter and performance styles of Northern drama and played a significant role in creating new opportunities for women's and independent theatre. Its cross-community, cross-border touring model as well as its commitment to bringing theatre to areas which rarely had access to the arts served as a model for new theatre companies throughout the island. The company supported and grew vital infrastructure during the 1990s, which led to the healthy and sustainable development of the independent theater sector today. Perhaps most significantly, its work played a fundamental role in reframing traditional ways of looking at and engaging with the Troubles. Charabanc's plays illuminated the historical and economic circumstances that led to the sectarian conflict, stressed the commonalities between women's experiences in the Catholic and Protestant communities, retold the Troubles from a specifically women's perspective, and reflected the real lives and realities of the working-class communities of the North. Carol Moore summed up the company's contributions most succinctly when she wrote, "Charabanc reflected the lives of people back to them, gave them a voice, and illustrated that their stories were culturally valuable. It also reflected and/or challenged their political worlds and entertained them in troubled times."[122]

[121] Claudia Harris, "Review of *Somewhere Over the Balcony*," *Theatre Ireland*, no. 13 (1987): 47.
[122] Lojek, "Eleanor Methven and Carol Moore in conversation with Helen Lojek," 352.

Chapter Three: Women Making Waves- DubbelJoint and the JustUs Community Theatre Company

While Charabanc influenced the development of theatre in the North in diverse ways, one can also see its impact through two of its most direct successors: the DubbelJoint Theatre Company and the JustUs Community Theatre. DubbelJoint, founded by Marie Jones and Pam Brighton in 1991, was committed to strengthening cross-border relationships.[123] JustUs, established four years later, reflected the Charabanc model as another women-led theatre group that devised original work and used an agitprop style of performance along with a minimalist aesthetic to create a new working-class women's theatre. These two companies engaged many of the same philosophies and goals as Charabanc: representing women's stories and voices honestly on stage in an unsentimental manner, bringing theatre into working-class communities, training women with new professional skills, and inserting women's voices into the evolving conversation on how to transition to peace. Their contributions to the development of Northern theatre continue to be undervalued and under-researched. A closer examination of both companies demonstrates the continuing influence of women practitioners on Northern theatre throughout the 1990s.

[123] The company is still technically in existence although it has not produced shows since the mid-2000s. In addition, the company website is defunct, and there is no administrative staff. Therefore, this research will refer to the company in the past tense.

DubbelJoint

DubbelJoint was a cross-border project designed to tour productions throughout the North and the Republic, and the name reflected this melding of the North and south: **Dub**lin **Bel**fast **Joint**. Eileen Pollack, a board member of DubbelJoint, explained the derivation of the name:

> DubbelJoint represents Dublin and Belfast joined, and its aim is to express the absence of boundaries in theatre. It is also devoted to producing plays that reflect the worth of everyday lives. Theatre shouldn't necessarily be some kind of escapist activity; people should be able to see appreciations of their own lives on stage, too.[124]

As Pollack pointed out, DubbelJoint, like Charabanc before it, specialized in plays that reflected the real lives of the working and middle classes in Ireland with the desire to highlight the dignity and honor of everyday struggles.

The company was founded by Jones, Brighton, and Mark Lambert after Jones left Charabanc to pursue writing on her own. Although not exclusively female,[125] the company's artistic vision and organization was run by Brighton and Jones who remained the company's chief architects.[126] While Charabanc's strong legacy and reputation stifled Eleanor Methven and Carol Moore's attempts to grow and diversify the company in the late 1980s and early 1990s, DubbelJoint was a new enterprise with an unproven record and no critical or audience expectations against which to chafe. This freedom allowed the company to experiment with a range of productions, doing a mix of original plays written by

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[124] Sophie Gorman, "Mother of All the Behans," *Irish Independent*, July 7, 1998.
[125] They employed male actors and playwrights; actor/director Mark Lambert was a founding member.
[126] The company is still led by Pam Brighton, although Marie Jones has left the company. Brighton and Jones had a falling out after Brighton sued Jones in 2001 for author credit and royalties for *Stones in his Pockets*.

Jones as well as adaptations of classics. The company, which took Charabanc's most gifted writer (Jones) as well as the head of its unified artistic vision (Brighton), was immediately successful with audiences embracing a wide-range of challenging original plays, commercial "holiday hits," as well as European classics. For example, one of the company's first productions was an original piece, *Hang All the Harpers* (1991), written by Jones and Shane Connaughton. The play examined the role of Irish music in the formation of national identity. In contrast, the next year, the company premiered a commercial hit, Jones' comedy *Christmas Eve Can Kill You* (1992), which premiered at the Lyric Theatre during the holiday season. One year later, they switched focus again, producing Jones' much-lauded adaptation of Nikolai Gogol's *The Government Inspector* (1993). Audience acceptance of such diverse offerings along with immediate placement of a DubbelJoint production at the Lyric signals how quickly the company established itself in the community and how Jones and Brighton's reputations from Charabanc soon provided opportunities for their new company.

It was Jones' highly successful adaptation of *The Government Inspector* that really established the company's reputation as high quality theatre. The play premiered in August 1993 at Féile an Phobail, the west Belfast festival which began the company's annual tradition of premiering new work at the summer festival. Jones reset the play in the late nineteenth-century Northern countryside where a small town of corrupt unionists mistake a young English lothario for the government inspector sent by the English crown. During the 1980s, the Field Day Theatre Company had also done several adaptations of classic plays, resetting

them in the North. In 1985, Field Day produced Tom Paulin's *The Riot Act* (a version of Sophocles' *Antigone* which recast Creon as a unionist politician and Antigone as a republican martyr) and Derek Mahon's *High Time* (based on Molière's *School for Husbands* reset in 1984 Derry) to great critical acclaim. These productions served as a model for how foreign classic work could illuminate the North's politics and violence. By resetting *The Government Inspector* in the pre-partition North, DubbelJoint reflected a similar goal to that of Field Day: to disrupt old narratives about the conflict and show parallels between the North and other societies.

Jones' *Government Inspector* is set during the late nineteenth-century when partition was first being contemplated. The play captures the hysteria of corrupt, local politicians who fear their power will be lessened after Ireland is divided. Theatre critic Peter Cromer described the production as "a new play about the prejudices revealed by the threat of partition."[127] The play is set in a small rural town right on the border of the proposed partition between (what will become) the North and the Irish Free State. The unionists in the town are concerned that their land and farms will end up on the wrong side of partition, making them a unionist minority in the Irish Free State rather than a powerful majority in a unionist-controlled North. When they hear that the English Queen is sending an inspector to town, the unionists become panicked because they have been illegally evicting Catholic tenants from their land and deporting them to America. The Protestants have been using the newly abandoned land to raise cattle, which they have been exporting to Europe without paying tax to the British

[127] Peter Cromer, "Cow Trouble," *What's On,* Feb 9, 1993.

crown. Afraid the inspector will report their tax fraud, the play revolves around the town's bribing and cajoling the spurious inspector into keeping their secret.

Although reset in Ireland, Jones stayed loyal to the original plot to a great degree. She did, however, make a significant change to the ending, which infused a subtle feminist slant to the play, reflecting her heritage with Charabanc. Although the mayor's wife and daughter both try to seduce the inspector, they are not the flighty, foolish females of Gogol's original. In fact, the daughter is the first to see through the impostor's affectations: she realizes that he is recycling the poems of Yeats and Merriman and claiming them as his own. The wife and daughter reveal at the end of the play that they both knew the lothario was a fake all along, and they blackmail the con-artist into returning all the bribes the town had given him, thus saving the day. Therefore, Jones positions the daughter and wife as intelligent and educated women who do not fall prey to the same phony charms and seduction that the male officials are taken in by. As Cromer wrote of the production, "Adapter Marie Jones' main change is in making the female characters the only honest voices amongst a horde of ineffectual, cowardly and bullying hypocrites."[128] Despite the mother and daughter's intelligent wit, however, the town, which is full of corrupt unionist hypocrites, does not learn its lesson. When the real inspector arrives the next day, the unionists, not wanting to be duped again, believe the man is another impostor. They tie him to a chair, harass him, and proceed to humorously confess their sins of tax evasion and eviction of the Catholics, guaranteeing their own downfall.

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[128] Cromer, "Cow Trouble," Feb 9, 1993.

The production was highly satirical, and Brighton's direction included heavy physical comedy. Brighton used a melodramatic acting style that included double-takes, freezes, stage tableaux, stage tricks, and grotesque exaggeration that conjured up the Marx Brothers' style of slapstick comedy. Reviews from both Irish and English critics were overwhelmingly positive. Most agreed that Jones had successfully written a highly provocative and politically astute satire of partition, British-Irish stereotypes, cultural misunderstandings, and unionist corruption while making it accessible and enjoyable through a fast-paced, physical production that used humor to critique society's ills.

In addition to exploring unionist corruption in a comedic way, the play also highlights long-held and continuing prejudices that the English hold against the Irish. For example, the false inspector becomes convinced that the Irish are cannibals, believing that Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal* (1729) has been written into law. Throughout the play, the locals serve the inspector and his servant their best beef, which results in panicked hysteria as the British conmen believe that they have been served human flesh. The play also uses unapologetically bawdy humor. The Anglophile unionists in town are enthralled with anything British, and since the inspector comes from London, this gives him air of glamour and sexual allure for the women of the village who attempt to seduce him and his servant at every turn. For example, in what was reportedly one of the funniest scenes in the play, the mayor's wife has orgasms just listening to the impostor recite poetry.

While the play is rife with comical observations about Irish life, it also does not shy away from revealing a dark unionist history that systematically abused Catholics. Mixed with slapstick and sexual humor are dark realities: massive numbers of Catholics in the town are hanging themselves because they have been evicted or can no longer afford to pay the rent. The town officials grumble about the number of corpses which are piling up since the Catholics cannot afford to bury their families. Thus, the primary plotline (the humorous, lavish entertainment of the inspector) is undermined by constant reminders of death, poverty, and suicide caused by the greedy corruption and systematic abuse of the Catholic population by the unionists.

After its premiere at Féile an Phobail, the play toured throughout the island in early 1994, playing in Derry/Londonderry, Newtownabbey, Hollywood, Armagh, Sligo, and Galway. In addition, it played at the Opera House in Belfast (which was typically reserved for commercial European imports), demonstrating the production's wide appeal. Glowing reviews and ticket sales allowed the play to transfer to the Tricycle Theatre in London later that year for an English run.

With tours of *The Inspector General* in the North, the Republic, and England a great success, DubbelJoint established its reputation as a new theatrical force in the North. For the next few years, the company produced several successful plays. *A Night in November*, one of Jones' best known works, premiered at Féile an Phobail in August 1994 and toured during the 1994 IRA ceasefire which added further political resonance to the production. The one-man play, performed by Dan Gordon, is a fictionalized retelling of the real-life events

of November 17, 1993, when sectarian clashes broke out during a World Cup soccer qualifying match between the Northern Ireland and Republic teams. The play follows a unionist man's transformation from sectarian bigot to compassionate Irish citizen and was perceived by audiences and critics alike as representing the possibility for peace in the North after decades of violence. The play toured the island, London, and New York. Two years later, Jones solidified her reputation internationally with the massive hit, *Stones in His Pockets* (1996), which ran in the West End for three years and on Broadway for 198 performances in 2001. The comedic two-man play follows a series of movie extras on the west coast of Ireland where an American film crew is making a movie. The extremely comedic play is marked by tragedy when a young local man drowns himself in the ocean due to poverty and lack of jobs in the rural West. The play shows that the idealistic and romantic rural Ireland depicted by Hollywood often does not actually represent the destitution, isolation, and lack of opportunities that can characterize real life in the West.

Despite several commercial successes, the company never shied away from producing challenging plays that critiqued social and political ills within Ireland. While Charabanc avoided the label of a "political theatre company," DubbelJoint had strong nationalist impulses[129] and addressed many controversial, political issues head-on. Indeed, the company provoked controversy over several productions that it staged in the mid-to-late 1990s. In 1996 and 1997, the company helped several women from west Belfast form their own nationalist

[129] These nationalist impulses were primarily emphasized by Pam Brighton. Staying loyal to her Charabanc roots, Marie Jones never wanted the company to become associated with a sectarian ideology.

theatre company called the JustUs Community Theatre Company. Together, they staged several highly controversial productions that resulted in outraged public calls for DubbelJoint's arts council funding to be rescinded. Then in 1999, the company produced the four-person monologue play, *A Mother's Heart,* by Pearse Elliott. This original work explored the emotional and psychological journey of four women whose children had been killed during the Troubles.

The idea for the play was based on a real-life UDA murder in Belfast in 1994. Sean Monaghan, a young father of twins, was abducted by a loyalist death squad and held in a house in the loyalist-controlled Shankill area of Belfast. Monaghan escaped but was recaptured by neighbors and given back to his abductors who mutilated his body and dumped it on the street as a warning to republicans. The community's complicity in the killing was especially chilling and reverberated throughout the country. *A Mother's Heart* is significant in that it was the first major post-Belfast Agreement play to come out of the North that specifically addressed how people come to terms with the violence of the past. It is also significant in that it marked a clear return to examining the conflict specifically through women's experiences, which Jones and Brighton had done during their time with Charabanc.

Although Charabanc had revealed deep truths about women's lives during the Troubles, there was the sense that *A Mother's Heart* was the first time that a play took grieving and angry women out from behind the private curtain of mourning and presented them in a very public manner, dramatizing and exposing their grief on stage. Actress Brenda Murphy, who played one of the mothers, said,

"It is the first play during my lifetime, during the war, that has addressed the issues that women have kept hidden, and this play allows them to become public."[130] The playwright, Pearse Elliot, added to this sentiment, saying, "This play is a real first. I don't think there has ever been a play like it, that articulates women's rage and humanity, done by women who have lived through it and have something to say."[131] Whereas other painful moments in women's lives had been performed on stage before, Charabanc often used humor and satire as the means through which to express women's fears and hurt. In contrast, *A Mother's Heart* was a serious, painful, and unflinching portrait of four women consumed with grief and anger, and it was also the first play to directly address women's experiences of losing a child through sectarian violence.

The play generated such controversy that DubbelJoint risked losing its arts council funding. The controversy was created mainly through casting decisions. Three of the four actresses were ex-republican prisoners: Brenda Murphy, Bridie McMahon, and Rosena Brown. Brown was especially notorious because in 1992 she had lured a prison officer with the promise of sex into a trap where the IRA executed him. The event earned her the nickname "the IRA's Mata Hari" after the Dutch exotic dancer and courtesan executed by the French after being accused of spying for the Germans during WWI. Brown had been sentenced to twenty years in prison in 1993 but was released only a few years later under the Belfast Agreement. Public outrage, which was already high over her early release, was exacerbated when she agreed to appear on the public stage acting the role of a

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[130] Ned Kelly, "*A Mother's Heart*- to the heart of the conflict," *An Phoblacht,* February 18, 1999, 15.
[131] Kelly, "*A Mother's Heart,*" 15.

loyalist mother grieving over her dead child. Much of the public felt that it was outrageous and offensive for a former IRA operative to embody the story and grief of a loyalist mother on the public stage. The character Brown played was based on the mother of Ulster Volunteer Force member, Brian Robinson, shot dead by the British military in 1989 only minutes after murdering a Catholic. All the killings in the play mirrored other actual victims such as a woman who was beaten to death in a Belfast band hall, Monaghan's abduction by a loyalist death squad, and an IRA volunteer executed by the British military after he killed a policeman. None of the victims in the play died at hands of the IRA, which added to public criticism of the production, and all the Protestant characters were played by Catholic/nationalist women, which was seen by many as incredibly insensitive and offensive.

Brown had been an actress before her imprisonment and had actually performed briefly with Charabanc. The controversy over Brown appearing in a public performance exposed how delicate the early post-Belfast Agreement period was and how uneasy much of the public felt over the early release of prisoners (one of the most integral elements to the signing of the agreement). In response to the production, Jim Rodger, the Ulster Unionist Party Councilor for Belfast, reflected community outrage saying, "This is absolutely disgusting. For Rosena Brown to play this role when the real victims of terrorism are having to come to terms with the early release of prisoners shows she has no conscience."[132]

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[132] Toby Harnden, "IRA 'Mata Hari' to play mother of Troubles victim," *Daily Telegraph,* February 22, 1999.

Criticism of the play tended to reflect sectarian affiliation, and there were multiple press claims that Rosena Brown was "living it up" by performing on stage right after being released from prison. Many critics found the play to be unbalanced and highly polemical, threatening DubbelJoint's reputation for producing complex and even-handed work. Jane Coyle wrote, "Now that DubbelJoint's vision has become more closely aligned with a republican agenda, the days when it produced fine and politically astute work like *The Government Inspector* and *A Night in November* are fading into fond and distant memory."[133] While these two previous works Coyle references had critiqued unionist culture, the Protestant population had found these plays to be more balanced and less politically loaded than *A Mother's Heart*. Elliot's play, which was supposed to be about the universal experience of losing a child, was transformed by public debate into a biased sectarian polemic. The controversy did much to damage DubbelJoint's reputation in the North and calls for the cessation of funding to the company followed soon after.

Funding has always been a highly political issue in the North because there is always intense community scrutiny about whether public money is being funneled to support sectarian causes. Almost all of the articles critical of this production attacked DubbelJoint by calling for an end to its government funding. Unionist politician, Jim Rogers, declared, "I will be asking for an investigation into how this play was given funding by us. The people of Belfast will be horrified when they find out where their money is going."[134] In 1999, DubbelJoint

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[133] Jane Coyle, "Terminator's All Greased Up," *Sunday Life,* no date.
[134] Harnden, "IRA 'Mata Hari' to play mother of Troubles victim," February 22, 1999.

received £62,500 from the Arts Council of Northern Ireland as their yearly funding. £20,000 of this was used for *A Mother's Heart* as well as an additional £6,500 from the Belfast City Council for the production.[135] When applying for this public funding, DubbleJoint had agreed that it would hold workshops in nationalist and loyalist areas in conjunction with the production and that it would cast Protestants in some roles; however, this was not done, and it created the question of whether the company had violated its funding agreements or had solicited funds under false pretenses. These attacks on its funding sources were potentially damaging to the company because DubbelJoint had already had its funding questioned when they co-produced *BinLids* with JustUs only a few years earlier in 1997. To make matters worse, the company also co-produced another highly controversial JustUs production, *Forced Upon Us,* the same year as *A Mother's Heart.* The combination of three highly provocative and arguably nationalist productions called into question whether DubbelJoint was a sectarian theatre company and whether public money should be funding a seemingly nationalist-leaning group.

While unionist politicians called for the withdrawal of public funding for DubbelJoint productions, nationalist newspapers highlighted Rosena Brown's difficult experience in prison and her brave involvement in the no-wash protests, during which republican prisoners refused to leave their cells to bath or use the bathroom.[136] Nationalist critics also focused on Brown's isolation after being

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[135] Harnden, "IRA 'Mata Hari' to play mother of Troubles victim," February 22, 1999.
[136] The "no-wash" or "dirty" protests lasted from 1978 to 1981. The protests started in reaction to the cessation of Special Category Status in 1976. Republican prisoners who previously had been awarded special privileges were now treated as ordinary criminals and forced to wear prison

released from prison, and the fact that she had refused the acting role at first because she was aware that the Protestant community would perceive her involvement as insensitive. She eventually accepted the role, Brown herself argued, as a therapeutic way to rejoin society after years in prison. Part of the mandate of the Belfast Agreement called not only for the release of political prisoners but also their reintegration into society, and this became the nationalist justification for her appearance in the play.[137]

Critical and audience reception continued to be split down sectarian lines. Negative reviews reported that the quality of acting was terrible and that many people left during intermission, while positive reviews claimed the play received standing ovations. Unionists argued that the play was highly biased and sympathetic towards nationalism while pretending to be balanced by showing both Catholic and Protestant women's experiences of losing a loved one. They further argued that the play insinuated that the two Protestant women were "bad" mothers for failing to protect their sons from Troubles violence while the Catholic mothers were positioned as appropriately loving and protective.

Interestingly, the most consistent criticism from Catholic and Protestant reviewers alike came in the form of discomfort with the anger and rage expressed by the mothers on stage. Audiences had expected the play to be about healing and forgiveness, and women in Irish society are usually positioned as the arbiters of peace and reconciliation. However, the women in *A Mother's Heart* were full of

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uniforms rather than their own clothing. The "dirty protests" involved the prisoners refusing to shower, exit their cells, or use the bathroom. Prisoners smeared their excrement on their cell walls and poured their urine under the doorways. Women from the Armagh Women's Prison smeared their menstrual blood on the walls as well.

[137] John Mullin, "A Terrorist in the Wings," *The Gaurdian,* no date.

anger, rage, and vengeance at the deaths of their children. For example, the character played by Brenda Murphy has a recurring nightmare where she breaks into a hospital nursery and kills all the babies to prevent them from entering the cruel world. The play worked directly against notions of women as implicitly peaceful, forgiving, and kind, and this engendered a lot of discomfort for critics and audiences alike.

Controversy notwithstanding, DubbelJoint retained its funding and continued to produce new works into the mid-2000s, including Brian Moore's *Black Taxis* (2003) and *The Ballad of Malachy Mulligan* (2006). In an important departure from the non-sectarian mission of Charabanc, DubbelJoint became increasingly associated with nationalist causes through its premieres at Féile an Phobail, its co-productions with the nationalist JustUs Community Theatre Company, and its production of plays written by ex-republican prisoners Brian Campbell and Laurence McKeown.[138] Despite these differences, DubbelJoint continued several of Charabanc's core traditions such as cross-border touring of politically engaged work, performing in areas without access to theatre, and support of community and women's theatre groups. The company's mission stated that DubbelJoint had "a strong commitment to community venues, particularly in areas that suffer from social, economic and cultural disadvantage and to local writing, and through these, strives to democratize theatre and make it

[138] Plays written by former republican prisoners include *Des* (Campbell, 2000), *The Laughter of Our Children* (Campbell and McKeown, 2001), *A Cold House* (Campbell and McKeown, 2003), and *Voyage of No Return* (Campbell, 2005).

accessible to all."[139] One of its most significant but controversial contributions to Northern theatre was its support and development of the JustUs Community Theatre.

JustUs Community Theatre

JustUs was created in 1996 by a group of amateur, working-class women from west Belfast who wanted to perform their personal experiences of the Troubles for the public. Having seen several DoubleJoint productions at Féile an Phobail, the women approached Pam Brighton to ask her help in producing a play for International Women's Day. This new partnership led to the company's first production, *Just a Prisoner's Wife* (1996), and a new relationship with DubbelJoint. JustUs was made up of politically active nationalist and republican women who wanted a new medium through which to express their voices. Among the women of JustUs were Niamh Flanagan, Anne-Marie Adams, Sue Ramsey, Christine Poland, Orla Adams, Margaret Mooney, and Chrissie Keenan. Most of the members had been politically active in the west Belfast community before founding JustUs. Keenan was married to Provisional IRA member Brian Keenan who was a key participant in negotiating the decommissioning of the IRA during talks leading up to the Belfast Agreement. Chrissie Keenan spearheaded the theatre project and recruited many women from west Belfast to become part of the production. Sue Ramsey also had political experience, serving leadership positions in Sinn Féin and acting as an elected Member of the Legislative

[139] "DubbelJoint Theatre Company," PlayographyIreland, http://www.irishplayography.com/company.aspx?companyid=33.

Assembly on the Northern Ireland Assembly. In 1998, Ramsey made history as one of a handful of women involved in the Belfast Agreement negotiations team. The women that comprised JustUs were, therefore, politically and socially active members of their communities who looked to harness the theatre as another dynamic medium through which women could stage a politically powerful presence. While Charabanc had certainly addressed political issues in their work, JustUs had the live bodies of political activists and city officials on stage, creating a direct connection between the active, ongoing politics of the conflict and the theatrical representation of it.

Through the guidance of DubbelJoint, JustUs adopted many of Charabanc's signature features. While JustUs occasionally used men as writers and actors, the company was created, managed, and produced by women, and its productions were female-focused with the aim of expressing the Troubles from a nationalist women's perspective. As Bill McDonnell asserts, the performances of JustUs "operated as a form of community therapy and political education."[140] Like Charabanc, moreover, JustUs took the model of devising original work based on the experiences of community members. These similarities to Charabanc were most likely in great part due to Pam Brighton who helped shape JustUs' scripts and then directed their shows.

The company had another similar goal to Charabanc's which was providing women with the opportunity to train and work professionally in the otherwise male-dominated profession of the theatre. McDonnell writes that a

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[140] Bill McDonnell, *Theatres of the Troubles: Theatre, Resistance and Liberation in Ireland* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2009), 170.

main goal of the company was "to develop a training programme which would foster the development of women writers and performers."[141] Nationalist newspaper reporter, Eoin O'Broin of *An Phoblacht,* echoed this assertion when she wrote about the company's second production:

> It is also important to point out that *Bin Lids* is not just a play but also a unique drama training programme. DubbelJoint Productions, The Training for Women Network, and Féile an Phobail with assistance from the Open College Network and the Peace and Reconciliation Fund have all assisted in the project, one of whose aims is to provide training and employment for women in non-traditional skills such as script-writing and technical production thus enabling them to gain entrance into what has traditionally been a male dominated profession.[142]

In this way, JustUs provided a unique opportunity for theatre training to a group of working-class women who otherwise would never have had access to these opportunities.

Also, like Charabanc, the women of JustUs viewed the stage as a platform for political expression. Despite the members' active political participation in Sinn Féin, the Legislative Assembly, and elsewhere, these women were still in a community that limited their political participation to certain categories and to specific actions. In an interview about the importance of JustUs, founding member Brenda Murphy reflected, "Acting has given us a way of expressing ourselves that we never thought was possible. If there had been a way of venting our frustration and anger like this thirty years ago, maybe we'd never have become involved [in JustUs]. Who knows?"[143] Here, Murphy identifies the need for a new medium through which women could express themselves both

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[141] McDonnell, *Theatres of the Troubles,* 171.
[142] Eoin O'Broin, "A Community's Starring Role," *An Phoblacht,* August 7, 1997, 15.
[143] Mullin, "A Terrorist in the Wings," no date.

politically and personally. Through the vehicle of theatre, JustUs developed a new creative language that was able to cut through the noise of the violence and the stale rhetoric of masculine Troubles politics to give voice and presence to nationalist women whose experiences had historically been ignored.

Their first production, *Just a Prisoner's Wife* (1995), was a series of monologues presented by four female characters. Similar to Charabanc's model, Chrissie Keenan, Sue Ramsey, and others interviewed and researched the personal experiences of women within their community and translated them (with the help of Pam Brighton) into a stage performance. The play charted women's experiences of supporting a family member in jail. During internment, the no-wash protests, and the hunger strikes,[144] the male prison experience was promoted and recorded as one of the most sacrificial and important contributions to the republican mission. Although there were women political prisoners who participated in the hunger strikes, their stories were rarely told.[145] The economic, social, and psychological cost that women suffered from losing husbands, sons, and brothers to the prison system was rarely publically acknowledged. As the title, *Just a Prisoner's Wife*, suggests, women's sacrifices were considered minor compared to the physical bodily sacrifice that republican men suffered. This

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[144] Internment lasted between August 1971 and December 1975. During this time, the British military and the RUC arrested and detained without trial hundreds of Catholics suspected of being involved with paramilitary activity. Two hunger strikes took place in 1980 and 1981. In 1980, seven prisoners participated in the strike which lasted 53 days with no deaths. After it became clear that the British government had not met any of the demands of the strikers, a second hunger strike started in 1981. Bobby Sands, who was elected a Member of British Parliament while on strike, died along with nine other men. See footnote #136 on no-wash protests.

[145] The only theatrical representation of the women hunger strikers was performed by the British theatre company, Trouble and Strife, which was co-founded by Northern Irish actress Maeve Murphy. The company produced *Now and at the Hour of Our Death* in 1989 about the protests that women from the Armagh prison participated in during the Troubles.

production continued Charabanc's tradition of breaking the silence around women's experience of the Troubles. For the female audience members, it gave legitimacy to their experiences and the knowledge that other women shared their hardships. For the male audience members and the masculine-led politics of the republican mission, it served as a wakeup call that women were suffering trauma and hardship on an equal level to men even if they were not jailed at the same rate.

Just a Prisoner's Wife was a huge success. Although the show was supposed to be performed only once, it was staged more than twenty times throughout different towns in the North. It won the first Belfast City Council award for Best Arts Partnership, signaling citywide recognition of the power of professional and community arts collaboration. It was also the first time that the City Council had awarded a play with a nationalist perspective. Significantly, the production traveled throughout the North and south of Ireland, allowing a cross-border tour. The success of the initial show led the women to officially found the JustUs Community Theatre. These auspicious beginnings evoke those of Charabanc who had also planned only to do a single production of *Lay Up Your Ends* until its success led them to officially found the theatre company. Also like Charabanc, JustUs' mission was "to empower the community to tell their own story, in their own words, through the medium of dramatic arts,"[146] albeit from a nationalist perspective. It is important to note, however, that none of JustUs' founders have cited Charabanc as a direct influence on their formation. Charabanc

[146] JustUs Community Theatre Company, "Production Program of *Murphy's Law,*" March 11-16, 2001.

had performed during the 1980s in west Belfast and other nationalist areas, and some of the JustUs women may have seen their work although it is not clear. Thus, while the company was not consciously trying to replicate Charabanc's model, it clearly continued the legacy of Charabanc's early work and filled a void during the 1990s when Charabanc had ceased to produce community-based, feminist plays.

Following the success of *Just a Prisoner's Wife,* JustUs worked again with DubbelJoint to create several successful but also highly controversial productions. Their next play, *Binlids* (1997), was written by Christine Poland, Brenda Murphy, Danny Morrisson and Jake MacSiacáis with collaboration from the other community actors in the show.[147] While some productions like this one included male actors and writing collaborators, the plays stayed committed to highlighting the strength of women's voices and giving a public platform for women's experience of the Troubles. As reporter Eoin O'Broin remarked of *Binlids*,

> And of course, as with all communities, it is the women who are at its heart. It is no accident that the theatre company is an all female one, made up of community workers, former political prisoners, relatives of currently serving prisoners, political activists and even one city counselor…For this production a number of male professional actors were brought on board, but the focus remains on the women. In their multiple roles as mothers, sisters, daughters, soldiers, activists, and endurors there is never a moment when their strength wavers.[148]

Binlids took its title from the tradition of Catholics banging garbage can lids on the ground to warn their neighbors that the British military or the Royal

[147] The cast included Maura Brown, Bridie McMahon, Sue Ramsey, Jim Doran, Keil Kempton, Christine Poland, Anne Marie Adams, Niamh Flanagan, Brenda Murphy, Margaret Mooney, Mairead Ni Adhmaill, Connor Grimes, Noel McGee, Brid Keenan, John McParkland, Mark O'Shea, and six children.
[148] O'Broin, "A Community's Starring Role," 15.

Ulster Constabulary were coming. The play traced the history of west Belfast since 1971 through a series of loosely connected vignettes that included dramatic scenes, comedic moments, and rallying songs. Similar to European models of agitprop theatre, the company also used dance, skits, statistics, direct address, and ripped-from-the-headlines verbatim dialogue.

Binlids was the result of six months of research and interviews with the west Belfast community. Several of the scenes were rehearsed privately for members of the community in advance to make sure they resonated truthfully,[149] a practice that Charabanc also often employed. The play, which presented the untold history of working-class nationalist Belfast, staged the hardships of everyday life living within sectarian violence along with scenes commemorating important moments in Troubles history such as the Milltown Cemetery massacre in 1988[150] and the Corporals Killings[151] later that same year. Like Charabanc, JustUs often did history-based plays that spanned many years, charting the development of the sectarian conflict and showing the roots of the problem. Reporter Eoin O'Broin of the nationalist newspaper *An Phoblacht* described *Binlids*' unique combination of personal stories mixed with subjective representations of history as "people's personal memories…mixed with political fact and speculation."[152]

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[149] Joseph Hurley, "Ordinary People, Extraordinary Times," *Irish Echo*, vol. 71, no. 42, Oct 21-27, 1998.
[150] During a funeral for three IRA members, a UDA man attacked the crowd gathered at the cemetery, killing three and wounding sixty.
[151] Two British army officers inadvertently drove into the path of an IRA funeral procession and were dragged from their car, beaten, and shot to death.
[152] O'Broin, "A Community's Starring Role," 15.

The set was comprised of four stages and the floor of the auditorium, with the acting shifting back and forth from stage to stage and sometimes into the audience itself. Scaffolding towers dotted the room, showing how claustrophobic and dangerous it was to live in west Belfast. Eighteen actors (professional and amateur) played multiple roles, signaling a transformation of character through small costume changes, physicality, and vocal intonation. A barebones aesthetic and minimal sets and costumes characterized JustUs' productions, which were enhanced greatly with light and sound, similar to Charabanc's signature style.

The action of *Binlids* was also integrated into the audience, giving an environmental theatre experience. Actors playing soldiers walked with machine guns through the crowd of spectators, children distributed political leaflets, and processionals bearing coffins moved through the audience. Actors posed as onlookers at protest rallies, transforming the rest of the audience into participants at the rally and blurring the distinction between actor and spectator. As critic Ben Webster wrote of the production, "When the person beside you cheers at some anti-Brit comment by Adams, you are never quite sure if it is an actor or a member of the audience."[153] Sinn Féin leader, Gerry Adams, wrote of the play, "It is inclusive and gripping theatre where the distinctions between the audience and the actors becomes blurred as they mesh together, so that at times it is hard to tell if the person beside you is a spectator or a performer. In *Binlids* everyone can be a player."[154]

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[153] Ben Webster, "Rattling Out the Historical Myths of Republican Belfast," Newspaper and date unknown, 5.
[154] Gerry Adams, "A Personal Play from Belfast," *Irish Voice*, November 1997, 28.

Smoke canisters simulated bombs and teargas, and expended cartridges from gun blanks flew into the audience, creating a visceral experience. Brighton explained the reasoning behind her direction saying, "I wanted the audience to have a sense of events happening all around them- guns going off, sudden darkness- and be physically frightened. This kind of esthetic is not typical in Ireland, which still favors a writers' theatre."[155] As Brighton recounts, she wanted to create an environmental theatre experience that involved all the senses, breaking with the long tradition of Irish theatre as a primarily literary and text-based form. While critics in New York, where the show toured in 1998, would remark on the tired and passé quality of the show's environmental or immersive aspects, for audiences in Ireland, this was a fresh and exciting new experience of the theatre.

Binlids begins in 1971, during the start of internment, which lasted between August 1971 and December 1975. During this time the British military and the RUC arrested and detained without trial hundreds of Catholics suspected of being involved with paramilitary activity. During this four-and-a-half-year period, 1,874 Catholics were arrested. In contrast, 107 Protestants were detained.[156] Like Charabanc, the play used various Living Newspaper techniques such as breaking from the action to give historical information and statistics directly to the audience, sometimes with limited success. For example, in one scene, the women awkwardly tried to integrate historical information about the

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[155] "Directing *BinLids," Back Stage Magazine*, October 7, 1998, 18.
[156] Martin Melaugh, "Internment- Summary of Main Events," Conflict Archive on the Internet (CAIN), http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/events/intern/sum.htm.

displacement of Catholics due to Troubles violence. Breaking from the easy and conversational dialogue of previous scenes, the women say to each other:

> Mairead: Did you know that nearly 2,000 Catholic families have been burned out since '69?
>
> Sue: '69. Here hold that child, since August '69 and August '70, 21% of Catholic families living Belfast have been moved from their homes. You know, it was the biggest shift in population since World War 2.[157]

Despite how awkward this integration tended to be, the historical information and statistics were part of the company's efforts to publicize the hidden and untold cost of Catholic civilians during the Troubles. Most of this information was not covered by the media or taught in schools.

Also similar to Charabanc and Living Newspaper, JustUs often introduced original songs into their plays. In a scene entitled "No Time for Love," the women sing a heartbreaking song that shows how the Troubles have overtaken every aspect of their lives to the detriment of their emotional health. The refrain is:

> No time for love if they come in the morning,
> No time to show tears or for fears in the morning,
> No time for goodbye, No time to ask why,
> And the wail of the sirens,
> The cry of the mornings.[158]

An important characteristic of both Charabanc and JustUs' work was not only highlighting the extreme tragedies of the war but also showing how seamlessly and naturally war had become integrated into people's lives. Just as Charabanc's *Somewhere Over the Balcony* looked at how the Divis flat neighborhood had become used to the absurd daily machinations of war, *Binlids* looked at how

[157]JustUs Theater Company, *Binlids*, unpublished script, Linen Hall Library theatre archive, 1997, 11-12.
[158] JustUs, *Binlids*, 13.

communities are able to absorb war into their daily lives as a means of survival and how much damage can come from this implicit acceptance.

While the song emphasizes the true cost of war on individuals' lives, it also rallies the nationalist community to keep up the fight:

> So come all your sisters and brothers who
> Give to your people the will to fight on
> You say you can't get used to this war,
> But that doesn't mean that this war isn't gone.
> Just like your people need you,
> And the death squads will only get through to
> Them, if first they can get through to you.[159]

It is interesting to note that in 1997, one year before the historic 1998 Belfast Agreement which arguably signaled the end to the Troubles, this song encourages the community to stay strong, not back down, and to keep up the fight. The song does not echo a war that is winding down to peace; instead, it rallies the community from its complacency, from the everyday banality that the war has become, and asks them to wake up and actively fight.

While *Binlids* takes a hard look at the brutality and injustice of internment and of the British prison and policing systems, it also uses humor to make the work accessible and entertaining. This mixture of dark violence and witty dry humor is often considered to be a defining quality of Northern theatre. Charabanc, DubbelJoint, and JustUs all used dark comedy in their plays, and this distinctive tonal characteristic continues to be central to the work of many Northern playwrights today.

Binlids is thus characterized by vignettes which mix real crisis and tragedy with the everyday humor that allowed women to cope with trauma. Scenes show

[159] JustUs, *Binlids*, 13.

women supporting and helping each other through the day: women grouped together banging binlids to warn their neighborhoods; women working together to solve neighborhood problems such as finding new housing for families whose homes have been burnt down; women allowing each other to use their telephones (which were expensive and rare) to track down their husbands and sons after they have been interned. In one poignant scene, the character of Claire gently cajoles local women into helping their fellow neighbors:

Vera:	Ach, Claire I'm sorry to bother you, it's just I need to use your phone.
Claire:	Of course you can Vera, I'm just making a sign to let people know that if they need a phone they can use this one. I'm really glad to see you- I've got a family who have three wee ones and they were burnt out of Ardoyne this morning and I don't want to put them in the Community Center. Will you take them?
Vera:	Ach Claire, you know Paddy, he's as odd as two left feet.
Claire:	Vera, Paddy's in jail.
Vera:	Ach, I know but I've to look after his ma and everything.
Claire:	Vera these people have only what they're standing up in.
Vera:	Claire, you're right, what am I thinking of. [*to the audience*] Yesterday she was just a woman with a phone, Today she's an incident centre.[160]

This last line is characteristic of JustUs humor. Vera begrudgingly acknowledges her duty but not without making fun of Claire's newfound sense of purpose and leadership. The play focuses on many of these seemingly mundane but important issues that women dealt with on a daily basis but rarely received public attention.

[160] JustUs, *Binlids*, 6-7.

The play thus sheds light on the plight of the women who were left behind to pick up the pieces of their lives as their husbands, son, fathers, and brothers sat in prison indefinitely. These stories were generally not considered worthy of media coverage or dramatic representation in plays written by men.

Women's personal stories of hardship, pain, and perseverance interlaced with humor and optimism again dominate the script. In one section of the play, the women tell a series of comedic stories directly to the audience. One character, Sue, talks about her mother's routine during internment when Sue was only eight:

> One incident that I thought was so funny was when they used to raid our house. We had a 50p electric meter and my ma used to only put enough money in to cover the electric until we went to bed. So when the peelers came to raid there was no lights and they found it hard to do a proper search, so after a couple of raids they got so pissed off and brought their own 50p.[161]

Another woman tells a story about a dog that would retrieve all the bricks that Catholic rioters threw at the British soldiers and give them back to the crowd. One day, a protester threw a nail-bomb at the soldiers. The dog ran and brought it back to the rioters who all started running away from the bomb with the dog in persuit after them. When the bomb exploded and the dog died, the community gave him a military funeral. The British dug up the dog days later for forensic evidence.[162] Stories like these use humor to highlight the absurdity of the conflict.

Although *Binlids* included male actors and showed the brave sacrifices and the intense violence that Catholic men often faced, the focus of the play was consistently on women's experiences and accomplishments within the conflict. Indeed, *Binlids* highlights several important female political leaders during the

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[161] JustUs, *Binlids*, 15.
[162] JustUs, *Binlids*, 15.

Troubles. One scene shows Máire Drumm performing a speech to the community to bolster recruitment to the IRA. Drumm, who was the vice president of Sinn Féin and a commander in CumAnne na mBan (a women's republican paramilitary group), was assassinated in 1976 by loyalists. In another scene, set in jail, the play shows the degradations that women political prisoners faced. Bridie, a 17-year-old woman, appears on stage naked, wet, and beaten, wearing only a towel. She is forced to bend over a table while she is searched internally. The play also highlights the women hunger strikers whose sacrifices were completely overshadowed by the deaths of Bobby Sands and nine other men in 1981. *Binlids* recovers this lost history by telling the story of the Price sisters who went on hunger strike in 1973 for more than 200 days. They were violently force-fed by the British government. In this way, *Binlids* used the extraordinary contributions of female activists as well as those of ordinary women to highlight the wide range of contributions women made to the nationalist fight.

Furthermore, in a departure from standard theatrical representations of the conflict, the play included many painful scenes that showed women not only as victims of the conflict but occasionally as perpetrators of the violence as well. In the most controversial and shocking scene of the play, a group of women lure a young British soldier to his death. The women encounter a lone 18-year-old soldier from Wales and initially converse in a friendly manner with him. The soldier's status as Welsh is particularly poignant for the women since he shares ethnic and religious ties with them. The women attempt to disprove his

assumptions that Catholics are barbarians by pointing out that the women of west Belfast collected money for victims of a recent disaster in a Welsh mining town:

Patricia:	Jesus, Wales. Abervan[163] [sic] I remember, we collected money here for all those poor kids.
Mary:	Aye, so do I.
Patricia:	Sure you'd be too young to remember that.
Solider:	I don't believe yous, you wouldn't' do that- yous all are animals.
Patricia:	Where did you get that stuff about us being animals?
Soldier:	That's what we've been told. That's why we're here to stop you animals from killing each other.
	…
Soldier:	I'm a Catholic.
Vera:	Well now we've got a lot in common, you're a Celt, so are we, you're a Catholic like us.
Soldier:	But you're not Catholics- you're Fenian scum. Its not the Catholics or the Protestants that cause the problems; its ye Fenians.[164]

Fenian is a derogatory slang word for Irish Catholics and/or nationalists. Although the solider is both Catholic and of Celtic origin, he has been told by the British military that Northern Irish Catholics are barbaric, violent animals who bare no relation to his own religious or ethnic background. The women attempt to use reason and persuasion to convince the Welshman that he has joined a military that does not support or respect his people:

Patricia:	…A Welsh man in the British Army, not very Welsh of you, is it? The English don't like the Scots, the Irish or the Welsh, you wee fuckin' moron.

[163] The Aberfan disaster occurred in October 1966. A massive landslide caused by poor mining practices killed 116 children and 28 adults in the Welsh mining town of Aberfan.
[164] JustUs, *Binlids*, 25.

Solider: The mines are closing and it's a living, you can get fed and waged and you get to see the world.[165]

While the women point out the soldier's ignorance and hypocrisy in joining the British army, the play also paints the soldier in a sympathetic light, showing how the British army is often filled with the poorest men with the least options.

The scene then descends into the most complex and highly disturbing moment of the play. As shown above, the women use both emotion and logic to connect with the Welsh solider and to make him realize that he is just as much of a victim and pawn in the British war as Northern Catholics are. The women convince the solider to sit down and relax. Once he does so, the women stealthily take his gun, and an IRA man enters the scene and shoots him point blank in the head. For the audience, the scene begins with the women emotionally connecting to and mothering the young solider. It then unexpectedly turns into a cold execution. This section of the play is complex because the scene takes care to humanize this Welsh boy from an impoverished town only to then show no mercy for the life of this young, inexperienced man. The scene counters notions of women as innately peaceful and instead shows how they were complicit in Troubles violence in both direct and indirect ways.

The scene is further complicated by being sandwiched in between two scenes, which show a young Catholic, Liam, being tortured by British soldiers who are attempting to extract information about members of the IRA. The stage directions demonstrate the visceral brutality and violence exhibited in the play:

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[165] JustUs, *Binlids*, 26.

> *Liam has already received quite a beating so it's not long before his limp body tries to relax. Every time he does so, he is punched in the ribs, kidneys, lower back and then forcibly returned to the same position. Liam's muffled sounds of protest are getting weaker and weaker, along with his body. When his two jailers are quite sure that he has been physically exhausted, they introduce white noise. The introduction of the noise (which is a high pitched hissing sound like that of compressed air being released) startles him at first. Soon after, it agitates him, as if there's something in his ear he can't get out…*[166]

This scene of Liam's torture and interrogation comes immediately before and after the scene with the Welsh solider. As a result, the women's cruelty is juxtaposed against what is happening to their own men. By placing the murder scene of the Welsh solider in the middle of Liam's torture scene, the play arguably repositions the women's actions as justified given the brutality that their community is experiencing.

Justification for republican violence and retaliation is further reinforced later in the play through another song called "Ballad of an Internee's Wife." The song recounts a wife's experience of visiting her husband in prison, the humiliation of the strip searches she must endure in order to gain access to the jail, and how her husband is beaten and broken down by prison guards. The last line of this arresting song is: "I've come to know his jailers and I know what must be done. For the only voice they'll listen to comes from behind the gun."[167] As the song suggests, politicians are not helping and no one outside of the North is listening to the pleas for aid from the Catholic community. The lyrics position Northern Catholics as completely alone and unsupported, forced to take action through violence. This song along with the Welsh soldier scene shows how

[166] JustUs, *Binlids*, 18.
[167] JustUs, *Binlids*, 29.

women in the Catholic community have been radicalized: women have resorted to violence in order to be heard, protect their families, and empower themselves within a country that is doing all it can to destroy the Catholic community. Not surprisingly, the section with the Welsh solider drew strong critical reaction from the unionist community, which used the scene as evidence of republican brutality and immorality. In contrast, the nationalist community, to a large extent, viewed this scene as an example of the unwavering strength and commitment of Catholic women to the cause.

However, the play did bring some balance to this controversial scene (which showed women as cold-blooded killers) by also including moments that showed women's compassion for the declared enemy. One scene depicted events from the Corporal Killings, which occurred in March 1988. Two unsuspecting British soldiers were pulled from their car, beaten by a mob, and shot to death after accidently stumbling upon an IRA funeral procession. The event was captured on television cameras and broadcast widely, becoming an especially shocking and brutal representation of republican violence. In *Binlids*, a mother and daughter discuss their complex emotions relating to the murders. The daughter is confused and internally conflicted over how she is supposed to feel. While she knows the British soldiers represent the enemy, she feels great compassion for them:

> Daughter: Why were they there? What were they doing? Why did it have to happen? I can't understand why I feel like this. I'm confused about what I think I should feel. Why do I…Why am I feeling sorry for those soldiers- I know- I don't know I'm afraid to give them sympathy- I mean they were soldiers- I'm afraid to say I'm sorry they were killed.

Mother: The day you stop feeling like that is the day you should start worrying… Granny was a republican all her life. One day a soldier got shot outside her front door. She went out and put a pillow under his head and said a prayer over him. She got a lot of stick from people…she told them she didn't care what they said, he was somebody's son. That made me proud of her. I knew then I was on the right side.[168]

The daughter feels torn between her compassion for the soldiers and her loyalty to the republican cause. Her mother's response, however, attempts to show that one can exist in that uncomfortable liminal space of having simultaneous compassion for the enemy as well as loyalty to the fight. The mother also shows that Catholics are not innately violent, barbaric animals but emotional humans who are stuck in an impossible and terrifying war.

Binlids was, in many respects, a project to counter the British propaganda machine that for centuries had promoted the image of an atavistic and innately violent Irish in order to justify the violent suppression of uprisings. During the height of the Troubles, the British media further perpetuated this narrative. It argued that the British military was in the North not as an occupying force but as a means to protect the Irish from themselves and to bring peace and civilization to a barbaric population. In contrast to this dominant narrative, *Binlids* wanted to show that the people who were directly involved in the IRA and in the fight against the British were ordinary citizens who, in any other situation, would have led ordinary, peaceful lives. Nationalists and republicans argued that it was *circumstances* rather than an innate tendency for violence and hatred that had led schoolteachers, butchers, and bus drivers to lead brutally violent and dangerous

[168] JustUs, *Binlids*, 75-76.

lives. In fact, Pam Brighton made sure to note in her interview with *Back Stage Magazine* that Sinn Féin "is made up of people who, under other circumstances, would be academics and social workers."[169]

Binlids highlighted this propaganda war by showing how Catholics were portrayed by the media, both British and Irish. In a direct address to the audience, actors read verbatim passages from real newspaper articles such as *The Irish Independent, Daily Star,* and *Daily Mirror,* which described the republican movement as barbaric, violent, and animalistic:

> In every country where a television service operates, millions of people saw the real face of Provisional[170] involvement- a compound of hate, ferocity and animality, which removes its members almost from the human race. If this is the face of nationalism then lets forget about nationalism. It changes humans into animals. The Provisional have caused many here to ask themselves if they would agree to accept the North back if it were offered to them and come up with a definite answer, then NO.[171]

This article suggests that the war has turned so savage that the republicans have lost credibility in the eyes of the world. Even the Republic of Ireland now shuns the violence and vitriolic nature in the North, undermining the supposed goal of reunification with the south. As articles such as this one were read to the audience, the stage filled with a chorus of actors who chanted after each quotation: "That's not us, that's not us, that's not us," highlighting how media portrayal of the conflict was inaccurate and biased. While the media tried to make the conflict black and white, victim versus perpetrator, innocent versus guilty, the play complicated these reductive narratives. As the actors chanted, "That's not

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[169] "Directing *BinLids*" *Back Stage Magazine,* Oct 7, 1998, 19.
[170] Provisional IRA: a splinter group of the Irish Republican Army notorious for its brutal use of violence.
[171] JustUs, *Binlids*, 76.

us," they rejected simplistic notions of the conflict presented by a media which highlighted only the brutal violence and none of the compassion, conflicted emotions, or daily realities of ordinary citizens. During their New York run, cast member Brenda Murphy told National Public Radio, "Ordinary people were dying every day and that was never broadcast. This is a chance for people to hear a story of the other side. We were described in the papers as animals, scum. We're not animals. We're not scum. We're resilient people, and we are here, and we survived it. And we're just telling our story."[172]

Although the play spends ample time justifying republican acts and ideology, it ends without reinforcing a clear sectarian viewpoint; rather, it shows the cacophony of competing voices and opinions within the nationalist community. The last scene of the play is entitled "Public Row about the Troubles." Just the name alone signals an acceptance of allowing opposing voices and opinions to be aired within the nationalist struggle.

> Sally: I'm sick and tired of it. Everybody I know has had somebody jailed or injured in one way or another…I'm friggin' fed up, sick to death with hospitals and jails and funerals, seeing young ones lying in coffins, mothers and fathers broken hearted. Lives destroyed. Bodies maimed. I'm sick of the whole bloody lot, the IRA, the Brits, the Orangies…
>
> Annemarie: The only thing they understand is war.
>
> Conor: The Brits will be out of here in two years, they know they can't win.

[172] Pam Brighton, Bridie McMahon, and Brenda Murphy, "Interview with Liane Hanson," Weekend Edition Sunday, National Public Radio, WNYC, New York, October 18, 1998 in McDonell, *Theatres of the Troubles*, 171.

Marc: You'll never bomb a million Protestants into a peaceful united Ireland. You don't talk to your friends to make peace, you talk to your enemies.

Mairead: What way will out kids grow up if all they know is war. I know we didn't create the war, but we owe it to our kids to create the peace.

Bridie: Peace. Yeah, but not peace at any price.[173]

The competing opinions stress that the Catholic community is made up of a diverse group of people who do not conform to media representations as single-minded, entrenched, violent, or animalistic. The last line of the scene, "not peace at any price," sums up the main argument of the play: the nationalist and republican communities want peace but not at the expense of completely dismissing the basic civil rights of the Catholic community. This is further reinforced with the final lines of the play, which end with verbatim dialogue from a famous speech of Gerry Adams' in which he declared:

> We will pay a high price for peace but we will never go back to being treated as second-class citizens in our own country. We will build a new future for all of our people, Catholic, Protestant and dissenter based on equality and the principals of democracy of freedom and justice, we will move forward. Beidh ar la linn [translation: *Our day will come/Our day will be with us]*.[174]

The play thus ends on a positive note of renewed nationalist vigor tempered with hopes for a peaceful future.

Tom Maguire has argued that *Binlids* played a role in the peace process leading up to the Belfast Agreement because the play showed both how communities can adapt and that the conflict is a result of specific historical circumstances which can also be changed:

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[173] JustUs, *Binlids*, 78-80.
[174] JustUs, *Binlids*, 80.

> …by demonstrating the ways in which the community has evolved in response to its changing context, there is a differentiation between the past and the present. This is a way of showing both that the present is not inevitable but the result of specific historical processes and that the present moment is not the same as the past and therefore presents an opportunity for doing things differently. By making manifest the changes within the community and in the community's external relationships, it articulated the possibility that the conflict is the product of specific historical circumstances which now can be changed. On this basis, the play can be seen to have had a role in the process of peace-making for this community at the precise point of its staging in 1997.[175]

However, this reading seems to contradict many of the lessons communicated in the play. Several of the scenes in *Binlids*, including the play's final scene, rally the community to continue the fight. The play does not reflect a community that is inevitably moving toward peace, but one that is reengaging with the past conflict to make sure that the issues they fought for are not subsumed or weakened by peace negotiations. Instead, an arguably more accurate reading of the play would be as a warning to those engaged in negotiating peace that the history and sacrifices of the Nationalist community must be acknowledged and their story interweaved into the peace talks; otherwise, the community will continue to fight.

This interpretation of the play is further supported by the historical context in which it was performed. An IRA ceasefire was in effect while *Binlids* was in rehearsal and as it toured, adding a complex dimension to audience reception of the production. Audience members watched the play hopeful for peace but also wary of the compromises that each side would have to make. During this period leading up to the Belfast Agreement, Northerners were distrustful that each side would keep the peace and were also concerned that the most important issues that

[175] Tom Maguire, *Making Theatre in Northern Ireland: Through And Beyond the Troubles* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2006), 59.

each community had fought for would be nullified by any agreement at the state level. Thus, the play was being performed during one of the most pivotal and delicate times in the journey towards peace. Journalist Terence O'Neill of the *Irish Echo* summed up the nationalist position clearly (as well as the overall message of *Binlids*) when he said, "Reconciliation is everybody's goal but if that reconciliation is going to kick in behind the peace, the nationalists are going to have to be listened to. It is a very important component of the whole process, that these anxieties, bad memories, and fears be recognized and released and understood"[176]

It is also interesting to note that the political climate of the country in 1997 during the peace talks called for moderation, calm, and non-incendiary speech. The play, however, was extremely controversial, taking an uncompromising and often shocking look at injustice against the nationalist community. The play was thus interpreted by some as counterproductive to the larger political project of peace that permeated the country. Many viewed the play as rejecting the call for moderation and moving beyond the trauma of the past. Indeed, controversy surrounding the play captured the growing tension between whether people need to leave the past behind without receiving official justice or whether the tragic events of the Troubles needed to be publically and formally dealt with before individuals could be expected to move on. The production thus reflected a very specific and complex historical moment in which two warring factions were on the verge of peace but entirely certain that everything they fought for would be sacrificed in its wake.

[176] Hurley, "Ordinary People, Extraordinary Times," Oct 21-27, 1998.

Because Catholics feared their stories and histories would be lost to this dominant peace process narrative, *Binlids* was purposefully polemical and propagandistic with an aim to educate audiences and give voice to an underrepresented portion of the population. A program from the 1998 production directed the audience towards facts emphasizing how the Catholic population in the North was constantly under siege:

> The state forces of heavily armed paramilitary Police (the Royal Ulster Constabulary/RUC) and the British Army currently stand at levels where there is one armed member of the state forces for every 3.7 Catholic males between the ages of 16 and 45. The RUC maintain 161 fortified military bases with the British army occupying 135 bases, the vast majority of which are located garrison style in nationalist districts. The city of Belfast houses 56 military installations making the nationalist area of West Belfast one of the most heavily militarized area in Western Europe. It is against this background and the accompanying conflict that *Binlids* the play is enacted. [177]

The program was also filled with photographs of British soldiers lining Catholics up against walls and strip-searching them along with images of the RUC shooting, hitting, and arresting Catholics. Gerry Adams also wrote a program note, highlighting IRA and Sinn Féin endorsement of the show.[178] Shane Connaughton, who helped develop the script, further emphasized the nationalist ideology of the production by including a program note that read: "If you hate the thought of Irish Unity, don't see this play. If you don't not [sic] want to think or feel don't see this play. In short if you are afraid of having your mind changed then stay at home…"[179] Thus, the audience was warned from the moment they were handed

[177] JustUs Theatre Company, "Play Program of *Binlids*," 1997.
[178] Gerry Adams wrote program notes for *Just a Prisoner's Wife* as well.
[179] JustUs, "Play Program of *Binlids*," 1997.

the program that this play would chart the story of the nationalist minority in highly biased terms. As Pam Brighton said of the show,

> West Belfast is a political community and to tell the story truthfully, the piece had to be one-sided. That's not to say it isn't impeccably honest. But the play was conceived in response to British propaganda against Irish Catholics, whose stories have never been told, and their [the British] demonization of the IRA which they view as an evil terrorist group."[180]

Many in the nationalist community viewed the work of JustUs as the expression of a subjugated minority whose story had been repressed by the British and Northern governments and the unionist-controlled media. Terence O'Neill of the American newspaper, *The Irish Echo,* viewed *Binlids* as an important contribution to and preservation of the oral history of the North: "There's a challenge for recognition involved even to the extent of admitting that we even have a story to tell here. We constantly have to keep proving that we're real and that what we're doing is authentic, and that we have a place in the scheme of things."[181] Similarly, Gerry Adams saw the play as an expression of a minority working-class Catholic experience which had been consistently ignored and repressed:

> *Binlids* is an important play also, because it represents a piece of the jigsaw which has been missing for some time. When I say that it has been missing I mean that it has been kept until now to one side, out of the sight and on the margins. With the rest of us, struggling to be heard. Now it has a voice. A creative voice testing its range and rhythm and trying to sing out for itself in explanation of its existence and celebration of its survival. Telling its own tale. It appears to me that part of the process of making peace includes and needs people reclaiming their own stories and telling their own tales…It is partisan but it is also history relived with all its memories remembered and its myths reborn in a way which makes some sense of it all.[182]

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[180] "Directing *BinLids,"Back Stage Magazine*, 18-19.
[181] Hurley, "Ordinary People, Extraordinary Times," October 21-27, 1998.
[182] Gerry Adams, "A Personal Play from Belfast," *Irish Voice*, November 1997, 28.

As Adams wrote, peace for Northern Ireland is not be possible until the voices of the repressed are heard and recognized. Adams saw the theatre as a powerful medium of creative expression that could legitimize marginalized voices in the North. He and Sinn Féin recognized early on the value of the arts in helping to promote and spread a nationalist ideology in the North and abroad and thus often lent their voices and financial support to nationalist community cultural projects like *Binlids*.[183]

The importance of promoting the nationalist story was further exacerbated by the media's tight control on Troubles narratives. Because the mainstream Northern media was run primarily by Protestants, it historically did not report on Catholic inequalities. Catholics were thus doubly denied a public voice through the media as well as through the Protestant-controlled government. Especially important was the island-wide broadcasting ban on IRA and Sinn Féin voices from 1988 to 1994. Republican faces were shown on television but their voices were not allowed on TV or radio; instead, their words were voiced by an actor, denying republicans of agency, ownership, and the emotion behind the words they expressed. *Binlids* paid homage to this history in a reversal of the historical practice when an actor, dressed as Gerry Adams, mimed the words to a recording of the real voice of Adams.

[183] Other examples of Adams' promotion of cultural activities include: he co-founded Féile an Phobail and currently supports the Cultúrlann McAdam Ó Fiaich, an Irish language arts and cultural centre on the Falls Road in West Belfast which also houses the Irish language theatre company called Aisling Ghéar.

However, while the republican working classes argued that they had long been denied a pubic voice, this notion was challenged by the mainstream press. Malachi O'Doherty of the *Belfast Telegraph* wrote,

> I have asked this before of DubbelJoint Productions: What is the point in going into a community and affirming its most venomous prejudices? If you see west Belfast as a community without a voice; if you imagine that the old republican story has not been heard; if you see the people of west Belfast as cowed and ignored, then there is an argument for enabling those who are passionate about that story to tell it starkly and simply. But there is no case to be made for these things.[184]

Here, O'Doherty argued that *if* the Catholics had historically been denied representation in the media, the Troubles had helped to remedy this imbalance. It is true that during this period, nationalists gained internationally sympathy and recognition for their civil rights demands, and the republican cause was aired on Irish and British televisions nightly. Catholics told the story of the nationalist struggle through film, theatre, novels, poetry, music, and other artistic forms. In fact, many critics have argued that Catholics have been much more successful at promoting and educating audiences about the injustices within their community than their Protestant counterparts. For example, the majority of feature films made about the Troubles (both from Hollywood and from Ireland itself) show Catholics as victims of an unfair and brutal political system while unionist experiences are rarely showcased.

However, when O'Doherty dismissed *Binlids* as a story that has been told before and when he contends that the Catholic population has adequately promoted their experience in the North, he completely dismisses the unique fact

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[184] Malachi O'Doherty, "Play-acting of the wrong kind for an audience in west Belfast," *Belfast Telegraph*, August 3 1999, 10.

that the play was written, produced, and performed in large part by Catholic nationalist *women* who have not had their stories, experiences, or perspectives told within the larger grand narrative of the Catholic Troubles experience. As Eoin O'Broin wrote in defense of JustUs' third production *Forced Upon Us* (1999),

> It must also be pointed out that JustUs, the West Belfast based community theatre group, is not just about making plays. It is also about empowering local women to express their own sense of selves and build their skills in order to improve their employability. On the night I attended *Forced Upon Us*, the vast majority of the audience was made up of women of the same generation as that of the women from JustUs. Viewing their own friends and peers dramatize their life experiences also has a validating effect on the audience, again a constituency usually excluded from history, theatre, and politics. "[185]

Both *Binlids* and *Forced Upon Us* were projects to correct misperceptions about the Catholic minority that had been promoted by the media for decades. It was also an attempt to insert women's experiences into the narrative of the sectarian conflict with the understanding that women's voices were central to the success of the peace process. As Pam Brighton argued,

> *Bin Lids* [sic] in its re-enactment of a community's traumas, in its ritual rejection of the media's distortion of that experience, has a great deal to offer the peace process. It attempts to lay bare the republican experience of the past thirty years and if the peace process is to gain meaning, this experience has to be understood. *Bin Lids* was not seeking a balance within itself but seeking a balance in the overall perception of what makes west Belfast tick.[186]

Binlids sold out during its initial run at Féile an Phobail, and it was restaged for another Belfast run in February 1998. In October, it traveled to New York City for a three-week, off-Broadway run. The show was performed at the

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[185] Eoin O'Broin, "A Clear Case of Political Censorship," *Fortnight Magazine*, September, 1999, 22.

[186] Pam Brighton, "Drama's Portrayal of Forgotten Injustices," *Irish News*, August 14, 1997, 8.

Angel Orensanz Foundation Center for the Arts in Manhattan (a former Jewish synagogue which had been transformed into a performance space). The Belfast City Council, the Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust, and perhaps most significantly, the Training for Women Network all contributed funds to help bring the production over to New York. This last sponsorship from the Training for Women Network signals the recognition JustUs received as advancing women's professional training in the arts. However, because of the controversy surrounding the production, the ACNI declined to give any money to sponsor the tour to New York. *Binlids* actor, Niamh Flanagan, said in response to the arts council's denial, "They don't like political drama." Terence O'Neill who wrote songs for the production added, "But it's more complicated than that. There's a situation with funding agencies in the Six Counties. There's a political agenda at work all the time. If it's perceived that the work is critical of the state, nine time out of ten you will be refused funding."[187]

Despite limited financial support from home, the production had an international, political impact. It initiated a three-year cross-cultural exchange program between Belfast and the United States which was intended to be "a non-secular [sic], apolitical vehicle to promote better understanding of the Irish culture and social cohesion within the Irish American Community and with Northern Ireland."[188] The first step of the exchange program was sponsoring and coordinating *Binlids'* run in New York. The play was an unusual addition to the rest of the Irish theatre being performed in New York that year. Commercial hits

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[187] Hurley, "Ordinary People, Extraordinary Times," Oct 21-27, 1998.
[188] No author, "Executive Summary of the Proposed Cross-Cultural Exchange Program," 1998.

celebrating Irish culture such as *Riverdance* and critically acclaimed dramas such as Martin McDonagh's *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, Conor McPherson's *The Weir,* Frank and Malachy McCourt's *A Couple of Blagaurds*, Jim Nolan's *Moonshine*, and Marie Jones' *A Night in November* all graced the New York stage. *Binlids'* rough aesthetic and agitprop style was in stark contrast to these polished, expensive productions which celebrated less controversial accomplishments of Irish culture.

Binlids was generally well reviewed by foreign critics. Jim Woods of BBC radio reviewed the play favorably, calling *Binlids* "a truth commission allowing people to have their histories publically recognized. That was their truth, their world view, articulated in their own terms with professional accomplishment, clearly, coherently, and most importantly publically."[189] American reviews often included in-depth interviews with the cast as well as history about the Troubles, allowing their readers to better understand the controversial production within its historical context. For the most part, foreign critics did not condemn *Binlids* for being biased or unbalanced. Instead, they accepted the play for what it was: the voice of one particular community.

While *Binlids* was well received by foreign critics from New York and London (who obviously were not burdened by the same complex political and historical ties that critics from the North contended with), it was dismissed by many at home as propaganda. The production was viewed by unionist reporters and politicians as highly antagonistic, and they called for public debate about the

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[189]Derek Scally, "Shake, Rattle and Roll: Belfast Play Prepares for US Debut," *The Craic,* July 22, 1998, 17.

role of art within the peace process. One repeated criticism was that the play failed to address the cost of the IRA on Catholic lives. This arguably left the audience with the inaccurate view that the only paramilitary violence that affected Catholics was loyalist when, in fact, the IRA was known to brutally police its own community. Just as critics condemned DubbelJoint's *A Mother's Heart,* critic Ben Webster accused *Binlids* of only being superficially balanced when, in fact, it downplayed and justified republican violence:

> They have been careful to include a couple of incidents [of republican violence] yet this hardly amounts to "balance" when the violence- unlike with the many British atrocities shown- is narrated rather than enacted. For example, the action in the infamous corporals incident is cut short at the very point in the funeral when the two men were about to be beaten and murdered. The play swiftly switches to the aftermath of the killings, with a young eye-witness, played by Ramsey, describing how the corporals drew their guns, thereby apparently inciting the crowd of mourners. Another character then pronounces that the crowd's response was 'spontaneous, an act of self-defense.' [190]

Tom Maguire believes that critical response to *Binlids* was so harsh in part because viewers assumed that art which engages the Troubles should take an even-handed approach.[191] Sectarian stories are not "authentic" because they do not include all perspectives on the conflict. *Binlids* was decidedly and purposefully one-sided and thus was denied the label of authenticity by many critics. However, as Pam Brighton argued in a rebuttal to many of the attacks on the production's sectarian viewpoint, the show's authenticity was born out of the true stories and experiences of the Nationalist community, a story that was rarely told. Maguire agrees with Brighton, arguing that "the basis of the production's

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[190] Webster, "Rattling out the Historical Myths of Republican Belfast," 5.
[191] Maguire, *Making Theatre in Northern Ireland*, 56.

claim to authenticity is shifted, rooted in the authority of individuals and communities to speak from and act out (of) their own experience."[192]

Similar to the critical reaction from *A Mother's Heart,* many of the Northern reviews were actually highly politicized op-ed pieces that were sectarian in nature. Critic Toby Harnden dismissed the play entirely in an article provocatively entitled "Arts Council funds play that jokes IRA killings." He called the show "a powerful piece of propaganda; a poor piece of theatre."[193] The article went on to only list the cast members who had IRA involvement in the past, stating that the play was "co-written by Danny Morrison, a former Sinn Féin leader jailed in 1990 for an IRA kidnapping. The cast includes Mairéad Ní Adhmaill, whose husband Felim is serving a 25-year sentence for possession of explosives, and Sue Ramsay, a Sinn Féin Councilor."[194] The article also reported in disgust that the audience laughed and clapped when the Welsh soldier was shot and killed. Not surprisingly, as the review's title suggests, the piece also attacked issues of public funding. Harnden was especially outraged that public funding marked for what was termed "peace and reconciliation" had been used for a politically sectarian piece of theatre. The first lines of Harden's article reflect this indignation: "Government subsidies and money from the European Union Fund for Peace and Reconciliation have been used to fund a Belfast community play

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[192] Maguire, *Making Theatre in Northern Ireland*, 57.
[193] Toby Harden, "Arts Council funds play that jokes IRA killings," *Electronic Telegraph,* Issue 808, August 11, 1997.
[194] Harden, "Arts Council funds play that jokes IRA killings," August 11, 1997.

which includes jokes about the IRA Brighton bombing and the shooting of solider."[195]

The media frenzy over the production and the attacks specifically on issues of funding led Philip Hammond, funding officer of the Arts Council of Northern Ireland to defend his organization, clarifying that the council had not specifically funded *Binlids.* Instead, the ACNI had given DubbelJoint its yearly funding scheme of ₤77,000 and had given the West Belfast Festival (which staged the play) ₤10,000 towards its operations. In response to the controversy, Hammond stated, "What we are concerned with is purely artistic standards. We are not in the position of censoring anyone. What they are expressing is their prerogative."[196]

The controversy over whether government funding should support sectarian art exploded during JustUs' next show, *Forced Upon Us,* which premiered at Féile an Phobail in August of 1999. This time the Arts Council arguably bowed to increasing public pressure and refused outright to fund the production. *Forced Upon Us* begins in 1999 with the rape of a young Catholic girl who is afraid to report the assault to the Royal Ulster Constabulary because the organization is made up of the same Protestant policemen who raided Catholic homes and interned Catholic men during the Troubles. The young girl's fear of the very organization that is supposed to be protecting her and ensuring her civil rights causes her father to yell out in anguish, "Sweet Jesus- what kind of a country do we live in? How the f**k are we supposed to live like this? How the

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[195] Harden, "Arts Council funds play that jokes IRA killings," August 11, 1997.
[196] Harden, "Arts Council funds play that jokes IRA killings," August 11, 1997.

f**k are we left in this state? How?"[197] This desperate plea is the catalyst for the rest of the play which then explores the historical conditions that have left present-day Catholics in such difficult circumstances. The play goes back in time to cover the early part of the twentieth century during the building of the *Titanic*, the signing of Ulster Covenant,[198] and the formation of Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), a loyalist paramilitary group.

Controversy over the play came in large part from the shocking opening scene of a rape victim unable to report her abuse followed by an even more gruesome scene when a group of Protestant ship workers attack a Catholic worker, tie him to a lamppost, pour paint thinner over him, and set him on fire. As demonstrated by these opening scenes, *Forced Upon Us* never shied away from graphically describing or depicting violence on stage. One scene narrates the story of two Catholic men pulled from their beds at random by the B- Specials.[199] The men are brutally beaten, genitals ripped off, bones broken, skin torn by barbed wire, and left to die in a field. Another scene shows the burning of homes by the UVF, and another shows the cold-blooded execution of Catholics by the police force:

> *Men run down the ramp to opposite platform, which is Donnelly's pub. They enter pub to find Mrs. Donnelly with her daughter who she pushes under a table as the men troop in and begin to wreck the place. They are all screaming at her to tell them where her husband is. Mrs. Donnelly starts to cry.*

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[197] JustUs Theater Company, "Forced Upon Us," unpublished script, Linen Hall Library theatre archive, 1999, 3.

[198] In 1912, half a million Protestant men and women all over Ireland signed a pledge against Home Rule in Ireland which became known as the Ulster Covenant.

[199] B-Specials was a reserve police force in Northern Ireland known for their brutal raids on Catholics during the Troubles.

Mrs. Donnelly: Please, please stop. Please! My husband is not here, I swear to you he is not here.

Touches Nixon's arm as he is standing with gun in hand.

Mrs. Donnelly: Please sir, are you in charge? Please tell them to stop. My husband is not here.

Nixon: Do not touch me.

He shoots her twice in the stomach and walks out followed by his men.[200]

Like *Binlids*, critics again were split down sectarian lines with many calling the production highly offensive, grotesquely exaggerated, and sectarian in nature while others lauded the production for exposing the continued repression of Catholic voices and bodies. Malachi O'Doherty of the major Northern newspaper the *Belfast Telegraph* summed up the Protestant view succinctly, saying, "it is a sectarian play which sees all modern history in Northern Ireland as the suppression of Good Catholics by Bad Protestants."[201]

DubbelJoint had already experienced calls for its funding to be cut with *A Mother's Heart* and *Binlids*; thus, in retrospect, it was not entirely surprising when the ACNI withdrew its funding before the production even premiered. The refusal to fund the play immediately polarized the Belfast community. One side condemned the use of public money for art that promoted a specifically nationalist agenda while others accused the Arts Council of politically motivated censorship against the Catholic population.

DubbelJoint produced the show despite the loss of funding and then promptly sued the Arts Council for censorship. Brighton called the ACNI "a

[200] JustUs Theater Company, "Forced Upon Us," 45-46.
[201] O'Doherty, "Play-acting of the wrong kind for an audience in west Belfast," August 3 1999, 10.

quango, nobody knows who appoints them, there is no public accessibility to their decisions, there is no forum in which we can appeal this decision outside them and beyond them- it is a most extraordinary decision."[202] The controversy which played out on the court of public opinion certainly helped packed the auditorium and *Forced Upon Us* played to sold out houses. DubbelJoint/Just Us would later use the controversy in their marketing materials to attract large audiences in their later touring productions.

The Arts Council ultimately denied any wrongdoing, arguing that its decision was based purely on artistic merit. Damien Smyth of the Arts Council defended the organization, saying that the script "was deemed not of a sufficiently high artistic standard to warrant a huge injection of public subsidy."[203] He accused critics of the Arts Council of hypocrisy: "It is safer to cry 'They've censored us' than 'They think we're rubbish.'"[204] Due to the uproar, the ACNI released its anonymous reader notes upon which they had based their funding rejection. The readers judged the play to be: "a propagandistic play [which] could only serve to deepen existing prejudices," "distasteful," and "exploitive," concluding that "as…an expose of the force's [RUC] bias, it is very poorly realized."[205] Brian Ferran, Arts Council Director, said that the three external examiners agreed that the play's "characters were wooden- 'cardboard' I believe

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[202] Robert McMillen, "Anti-RUC play has funding removed," *Irish News*, January 23, 1999, 14.
[203] Damian Smyth, "Shots in the Arts," *Fortnight Magazine,* November 1999, 22.
[204] Smyth, "Shots in the Arts," 22.
[205] Sharon Jennings, "Artists lobby for change," *Fortnight Magazine*, November 1999, 22.

the word was used. It was also deficient in structure, and the quality of the writing was as bad as anything the assessors had ever read."[206]

Although the Arts Council claimed that it was denying funding based on artistic merit rather than sectarian ideology, a more realistic explanation may have involved new standards associated with the Belfast Agreement. *Forced Upon Us* was produced in the direct aftermath of the Belfast Agreement when a renewed atmosphere of tolerance, cross-community participation, and nonsectarian narratives were being advocated at the highest levels of government. The North had also received hundreds of millions of pounds from the European Union to promote "peace and reconciliation" and "cross-community partnerships."[207] *Forced Upon Us* was arguably a project that went directly against these new directives for non-partisan and non-incendiary speech and could possibly have violated the spirit in which funds had been designated, fueling public outrage.

Debate over whether sectarian art should be funded consumed the press. *Fortnight Magazine* published a multi-page article which included commentary from all perspectives. Just as in debates surrounding *A Mother's Heart,* the issue of whether art that engaged the conflict must be balanced and objective was at the center of the dispute. Malachi O'Doherty of the *Belfast Telegraph* stated, "This is a disappointing play. It is nasty and sectarian. If it is supposed to be evidence of reflective thinking in a more politically mature republican culture, then we are in

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[206] Mic Moroney, "Just as a Play," *Irish Times*, July 29, 1999.
[207] The Special European Union Programs Body was established under the Belfast Agreement in part to administer funds to promote cross-community and cross-border peace and reconciliation. Between 1995 and 2013, the Northern Irish government received almost €2 billion from the European Union and other sources to promote peace.

trouble." O'Doherty went on to dismiss the work as political propaganda because "explicit party political propaganda is surely always bad drama."[208]

In contrast, nationalist publications denied that stories about the Troubles had to be objective or show both sides of the conflict. Eoin O'Broin from the Republican newspaper, *An Phoblacht*, defended the production in his article entitled, "A Clear Case of Political Censorship." He argued that the play "does not pretend to be an objective historical document of the complex and turbulent period it deals with. Rather it offers the audience an interpretation in tune with the feelings and historical memory of the community who will make up its primary audience."[209] He went on to declare:

> …the play also attempts to write a number of omissions into the local historical dramatic and political canon, namely the experiences and needs of nationalist working-class communities from Belfast. And in doing so, it provides all theatre goers with an insight into a particular Belfast community, both past and present, who are usually absent from public view."[210]

Others took a more strident approach with writer and actor, Shane Connaughton, declaring, "The idea that funding is conditional upon Arts Council 'external assessors' liking a particular script is a Stalinist criteria hitherto unpracticed by the council."[211] On July 30, 1999, several important writers and artists such as Connaughton, Marina Carr, Frank McGuiness, Marie Jones, Peter Sheridan, Trevor Griffiths and others, published an open letter in the *Irish Times* that called the withdrawal of funding a political act that trampled on freedom of expression.

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[208] Malachi O'Doherty, "Double Trouble," *Fortnight Magazine*, September 1999, 21-22.
[209] Eoin O'Broin, "A Clear Case of Political Censorship," *Fortnight Magazine*, September 1999, 22.
[210] O'Broin, "A Clear Case of Political Censorship," 22.
[211] Padraig MacDabhaid, "Arts Council Censorship," *An Phoblacht*, July 29, 1999, 17.

Just as the ceasefire and the tense months leading up the Belfast Agreement colored audience reception of *Binlids*, the political context again had a significant impact on the North's interpretation and reaction to *Forced Upon Us*. An important part of the peace process and of the Belfast Agreement was the renaming and reorganization of the police force. The sectarian name of the Royal Ulster Constabulary,[212] its role in brutally suppressing the Catholic population, and its long history of abuse and corruption caused the organization to be given a new neutral and nonsectarian label in 2001: The Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI). In addition, according to new reforms mandated by the Belfast Agreement, the police force had to recruit an equal number of Protestant and Catholic police officers to balance out a law force that historically been comprised of more than 90% Protestants.[213] *Forced Upon Us*, which is largely a scathing critique of the RUC, was performed in 1999 when a lot of these changes to the force were being debated and worked through as part of the continuing transition to peace. Thus attacks on the merit, quality, and subject matter of the play were filtered, in part, through the lens of an ongoing political debate about the future, form, and structure of policing in the North.

Although JustUs departed significantly from Charabanc's model as a cross-community, non-sectarian organization, the parallels between the two companies remain powerful. Just as Charabanc looked toward the past in plays such as *Lay Up Your Ends* and *Gold in the Streets* to understand how present-day,

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[212] The *Royal* part of the name implied allegiance to the British crown and the term *Ulster* legitimized the partition of the six counties into a separate country.
[213] Although the goal was to have an equal number of Catholics and Protestants in the PSNI, the heavy recruitment and promotion of Catholics ended in 2011. In March of 2011, Protestants encompassed 70% of the police force with Catholics making up the remaining 30%.

sectarian divisions were molded by history, JustUs also examined how history shapes the present. Through its uncompromising work, the company looked specifically at how continuing prejudices and an unjust legal/political system had repressed generations of Catholics and perpetuated violence. Furthermore, JustUs continued Charabanc's tradition of being a theatrical enterprise committed to expressing (nationalist) women's experiences of the Troubles. JustUs also provided professional training in playwriting, acting, and arts management to a portion of the population that had never had access to these skills before. It is also significant that the administration of JustUs remained entirely female throughout its tenure with the management committee being composed of Bridie McMahon, Jeanette Keenan, Marie Jones, Sue Ramsey, Margaret Mooney, Christine Poland, Anne Marie Meenan, Chrissie Mac Siacais, and Maureen McGuinness and the staff composed of Donna McGarry and Anne-Marie Keenan. Whether consciously or not, JustUs replicated many of Charabanc's main tenets, and Brighton's help in shaping their writing and productions made their work similar to Charabanc's original model. An important difference between the two companies, however, was that JustUs' tenure was defined by controversy and polarizing sectarian dialogue whereas Charabanc was fully embraced in the North and emphasized the commonalities between Catholic and Protestant women's experiences.

Together, Charabanc, DubbelJoint, and JustUs secured a new respect for women on the Irish stage. Instead of accepting the status quo and waiting for their shows to be produced at the Lyric theatre and other reputable Belfast venues,

these women broke the rules by writing, directing, performing, and producing their own work. They created a new audience-base for their productions and established a new model of bringing artistic work into rural and working-class areas. Whereas so many politicians and state officials had failed to make a lasting impact on the sectarian conflict, the companies' cross-community and cross-border paradigms served as inspiration for what the performing arts could accomplish within the Troubles. Charabanc was also important in its service as an incubator for Marie Jones and Pam Brighton who were able to found DubbelJoint. DubbelJoint then continued Charabanc's tradition of cross-border touring while expanding the form, genre, and content of its theatrical offerings. The company was then able to use the security of its reputation and its firm positioning within the Irish theatre scene to take new risks by co-producing with JustUs. It is fortuitous that in 1995, the same year that Charabanc officially disbanded, JustUs performed their first production, *Just a Prisoner's Wife*, continuing the tradition of women playwrights and actresses devising original work about their lives during the Troubles. Although JustUs was a decidedly nationalist theatre company, it engaged many of the same philosophies and goals as its predecessors: representing women's stories and voices honestly on stage in an unsentimental manner, bringing theatre into working-class communities, training women with new professional skills, and inserting women's voices into the evolving conversation on how to transition to peace.

Thus, the 1990s was a dramatically different landscape than the early 1980s, which had been dominated by male theatre boards, one-dimensional

female characters, a lack of opportunities for women theatre practitioners, and a dearth of productions written by women playwrights. Instead, with the major advancements of Charabanc, DubbelJoint, and JustUs, supportive venues such as Féile an Phobail,[214] and seminal productions of plays like Anne Devlin's *Ourselves Alone* and Christina Reid's *Tea in a China Cup*, Northern Irish theatre of the 1990s was characterized by a growing independent theatre sector and a new standard for women's writing and participation in the theatre. The impact that these theatre artists had within the historically male-dominated tradition of Irish theatre was even more extraordinary given the level of violence, sectarian politics, and repression of women's voices and bodies during the Troubles. Together, these three groups forged a lasting space for women's politically and socially active

[214] It is also important to note the contribution of the Féile an Phobail in supporting and giving a platform for DubbelJoint and JustUs. The festival was started in 1988 in nationalist west Belfast by Gerry Adams and a group of women including Siobhán O'Hanlon, Geraldine McAteer, and Caitriona Ruaneas**.** In the face of increasing violence and conflict, the festival's goal was to showcase the positive aspects of the nationalist community, highlighting its creative, artistic, and imaginative talents within an atmosphere that increasingly categorized Catholics as violent and animalistic. Their website described the festival as:

> …a direct response of the West Belfast Community to the neglect and discrimination which the area suffered in terms of facilities and resources…The dual purpose of *Féile* was to create from within West Belfast the resources and facilities which had been withheld from it and to take control of its own image-making to create a show-case of creativity, talent and energy. (Maguire, *Making Theatre in Northern Ireland,* 51)

In addition, during the 1970s and 1980s, violence and territorial claims on neighborhoods (which were patrolled by British soldiers and paramilitary groups) made it dangerous to go out at night. The festival was a vehicle through which to take back the physical space of west Belfast in a positive way and to provide entertainment in a safe place at an affordable price. In addition to producing a wide range of music, dance, theatre, performance, readings, stand-up comedy, and political talks, the festival provided vital support for DubbelJoint and JustUs' initial efforts. The festival was essentially a space with a built-in supportive audience, taking away some of the challenges that these new theatre companies initially faced when building an audience from scratch. Féile an Phobail began as a yearly event in August showcasing nationalist creative and political talent. Today, the festival produces events year-round and is the largest community arts festival on the island. While the festival was founded by nationalist impulses, the current-day festival has expanded and diversified greatly to include representation from the unionist community as well as a diverse range of international groups such as the Harlem Gospel Choir and the English rock group Atomic Kitten.

voices on the Northern stage and created a tradition of women's activism through the theatre that has transformed the makeup of the Northern theatre sector today.

Chapter Four: Abbie Spallen and the Rural North

Because of the important contributions made by women theatre practitioners in the 1980s and 1990s, the North today is characterized by a growing and innovative independent theatre sector, predominantly run by women. Just as Charabanc, DubbelJoint, and JustUs dramatized women's and minorities' experiences during the Troubles, women playwrights today are similarly engaged in sorting through the complex and shifting grounds of the peace process with a special view as to how women are being affected. Playwrights such as Abbie Spallen, Stacey Gregg, Jaki McCarrick, Lisa McGee, Lucy Caldwell, and others are exploring women's political, social, gender, and economic roles within the peace process. Despite significant political advancements and fifteen years of a delicate peace, these playwrights highlight new ways in which Northern women continue to be marginalized. Certain themes recur again and again in contemporary women's writing. Children are in peril, violence (especially sexual violence) is used as a weapon against women, and poverty is still positioned as a central impediment towards women's liberation. Sectarian violence, a male-dominated political sphere, and proscribed gender norms also characterize the contemporary North. The dramatically changing landscape of Belfast (economically, ethnically, structurally, and aesthetically) is critiqued, questioned, championed, and attacked. Whereas hope for change defined women's writing during the 1980s and 1990s, a deep cynicism pervades current-day analysis of the peace process. Furthermore, in contrast to the plays of Charabanc and JustUs,

which showed how community strength is forged through women's relationships, female bonding is no longer positioned as an alternative to male violence.

While women challenge notions that the North has truly progressed since the height of the violence, they also continue to struggle for professional recognition. Despite the important inroads that Charabanc and others made during the 1980s, contemporary women playwrights are still significantly under-produced and underfunded in the North compared with their male counterparts. In addition, achieving success and legitimacy abroad has historically been a common requirement before being accepted within the Irish theatre sector (for men and women alike), and several Northern women writers are proving themselves in London and the United States before being welcomed in their homeland. This complex tangle of issues has meant that women's voices are once again being excluded from the peace process, both on the theatrical and national political stages.

It is important to note that almost all of the women interviewed for this research denied that their work was directly influenced or inspired by Charabanc, DubbelJoint, or JustUs. Most did not experience these companies' work firsthand during the 1980s and 1990s, and none were taught theatre history in school. Yet, Charabanc and the others clearly have had a significant impact on the Northern theatre sector today. Whether they are aware of it or not, contemporary women playwrights are direct beneficiaries of the groundwork forged for them during the late twentieth century, and these playwrights have continued to explore many of the same themes that their predecessors found to be central in achieving greater

rights for women. An examination of the major women playwrights writing about and working in the North today reveals the extent of these early companies' legacies and also shows the significant continuing struggles that women theatre practitioners face.

Abbie Spallen

The career of actress and playwright Abbie Spallen is exemplary of the broad professional challenges that contemporary women playwrights struggle with on a daily basis. Although Spallen is one of the North's most talented playwrights and has received significant recognition for her work in England and America, her presence in Irish theatre remains marginalized. Her work is rarely produced on the island, and commissions from several renowned theatres in England have prompted her to move permanently to London where the theatre community actively supports her work. Spallen's struggle to be recognized as a playwright in Ireland, the North's seeming discomfort with the subject matter of her work, and the prejudices that women still face in the historically male-dominated field of Irish playwriting are exemplary of the challenges that other women face today.

Spallen's unflinching and unapologetic examination of Northern society may have contributed to a lack of support for her work in Ireland. In her plays, Spallen shows how deeply entrenched cycles of poverty, lack of education and employment, and hyper definitions of masculinity and femininity have arrested social development in the North, especially for women. Her plays tend to feature children in peril, sexual violence, and the Troubles as a force that still haunts and

terrorizes the citizens of the North. An examination of her career, including the personal experiences and decisions that have led her to leave Ireland, reveals many of the common struggles that Northern women playwrights face today. In addition, analysis of two of her best works, *Pumpgirl* and *Strandline*, reveals how deeply traditional gender roles still dictate women's (and men's) positioning in the North more than fifteen years into the peace process.

Spallen is a self-professed outsider. Raised in the border town of Newry, her identity has been informed by the liminal position of the border regions, which were often the sites of intense conflict during the Troubles. The borders were heavily patrolled by the British military to prevent paramilitary members from moving into and out of the country, and the citizens of this area were subject to heavy monitoring and tracking of their activities. For many border communities, British military presence, paramilitary activity, and strong sectarian affiliation were the norm. The symbolic split-identity of the border regions was literally embodied with family members living on each side, and farmers who had fields split by partition, subjecting themselves to a border crossing each time they needed to access both sides of their land. The border region essentially acted out the core disagreement of the Northern conflict on a daily basis: the liminal and contested status of whether the land was British or Irish. In addition, the experience of living so close to the Republic was a constant reminder for Northern Catholics of what they did not have but wished for and for Northern Protestants of what they feared most. Northerners could literally look across to the south and see a country that was identical to theirs; however, it had a foreign

currency, different laws, independent sovereignty, and no meaningful violent conflict. This sense of marginalization was exacerbated as the center of politics and commerce in the North was and continues to be centered in Belfast. People in the border regions thus often felt excluded from both their country's urban center of power as well as from life in the Republic. Thus, the experience of living in the border regions during the Troubles could be one of otherness, marginalization, hybridity, and ultimately of liminality.

Not fully integrated into the North and not quite from the South, Spallen, like the region, has always felt like "not one thing or the other."[215] She has said, "I'm fascinated with the border because there is a different sense there. You grow up in neither one nor the other. You are in the North… and yet being so close to [the Republic] …you are really close to it but you are not part of it….and I think that informs a lot of people from that area. It's a very closed-off area."[216] Growing up, she found that the small-town life of Newry was quite conservative and cloistered. Creative and artistic pursuits were not considered real professions, and thus she found herself marginalized in three significant ways: from Ireland (as a Northern), from the North (as a member of the rural border region), and from her own community (as actress and then playwright). However, Spallen has also said that she has "always been on the outside…and I think it's important to stay on the outside."[217] She has found that her marginalized status has been essential to her ability to view her community with a critical and creative eye and to write about the changes she has seen occur in the last several decades. Two of Spallen's plays,

[215] Abbie Spallen, Phone interview with Fiona Coffey, May 22, 2012.
[216] Spallen, Interview with Fiona Coffey, May 22, 2012.
[217] Spallen, Interview with Fiona Coffey, May 22, 2012.

Pumpgirl (2006) and *Strandline* (2009)*,* are set in small, conservative border towns, and the characters are based upon an amalgamation of the personalities Spallen saw in her community growing up. Northern theatre has traditionally been an urban phenomenon with the majority of plays set in urban spaces and performed in Belfast. Her work, therefore, highlights a minority rural experience that is not often represented on the Northern stage.

Spallen left Newry at the age of twenty-six to be an actress, living primarily between Dublin and London. She found limited work in television and the stage, appearing in shows at the Lyric Theatre, Replay, Rattlebag, and even in Charabanc's 1995 production of *A Wife, A Dog, and A Maple Tree*. Her impulse to start writing plays was similar to the one that gave rise to Charabanc in the early 1980s: "It was the knowledge that I was going to end up playing mammies for the rest of my life. There is a serious lack of roles for women. It's no game for a lady, really and truly. That sounds awful, but I just became more disillusioned."[218] Despite the inroads that Charabanc, JustUs, DubbelJoint, Reid, Devlin and others had made, extremely limited opportunities were still available for actresses in the North during the 1990s. As an actress, Spallen experienced being in such a restricted position and thus wrote her own plays to create more opportunities for herself, mirroring the initial impulses of the Charabanc women.

Spallen first started to write in the late 1990s when she accompanied a friend to a playwriting workshop. Her first play, *Abeyance*, about ghosts haunting a home in Belfast, was the result of that effort. Spallen's entry into playwriting through a writing workshop emphasizes the importance of training and

[218] Pavel Barter, "That Petrol Emotion," *The Sunday Times* (London), August 24, 2008, 8.

educational opportunities in developing women playwrights who otherwise might not view the historically male-dominated theatre scene as a viable professional option. *Abeyance* was given a workshop production by Galway's Druid Theatre in 2001 as part of their developing writers program. However, this was followed by a period of seven years, 2001 until 2008, in which no Irish companies produced her work. Spallen wrote her second full-length play, *Pumpgirl,* while acting in Shay Healy's *The Wire Men,* at the Gaiety theatre in Dublin in 2005. While working as an actor, she sent *Pumpgirl* to theatres in Ireland and the UK. London's Bush Theatre and a few other producers in England responded enthusiastically and quickly. However, Irish theatres were not as encouraging, and many failed to respond at all: "I sat for two years in Dublin while all this was happening, and all I could hear was that a) there were no new writers in Ireland, and b) there were no female writers in Ireland. I was both, and so was thinking, 'I don't know, maybe I'm just invisible."[219]

Not waiting for Irish recognition, Spallen's career accelerated through support from British and American theatre companies. *Pumpgirl* premiered at the Traverse theatre at the Edinburgh Theatre Festival in 2006 and then transferred to the Bush Theatre in London later that year.[220] The production was a critical success, and Faber & Faber published the play, an essential step towards ensuring that her work would receive more productions and greater recognition from both the theatre and academic communities. The Bush production and the play's

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[219] Barter, "That Petrol Emotion," 8.
[220] Although the North's Tinderbox Theatre was initially interested in producing the play, they did not have the funding. This illustrates how funding issues can also contribute to Northern theatres losing opportunities to stage their best playwrights.

publication attracted the attention of the Manhattan Theatre Company, which staged a production in New York City in 2007. That same year, Spallen was a co-winner of the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize given to outstanding female playwrights in the English-language theatre. After successful productions of *Pumpgirl* in London and New York, the Lyric Theatre allegedly “discovered” the play on the Internet[221] and sponsored a short Irish tour of the production in 2008. The Lyric production was nominated for Best New Play by the *Irish Times* Theatre Awards in 2009, and a film version was made that same year by PG Productions and Northern Ireland Screen, directed by Charabanc’s Carol Moore. Why it took two years for an Irish theatre to produce such a limited run of the play, Spallen ponders, "I think that question needs to be put to the theatres in Ireland. The play was sent out to each and every one of them... It's not for lack of trying. It's not me ignoring Ireland."[222] Seeming disinterest from the Irish theatre community and the immediate support for *Pumpgirl* by foreign theatres reinforced Spallen’s belief that she should focus on getting produced abroad.

Like many Irish playwrights before her, Spallen left Ireland and moved permanently to London in 2010.[223] She has said, "I don't know how to put it without sounding as if I'm having a go, but it saddens me sometimes. I look back and see it as being historical - it's something that has happened again and again. Writers have to leave Ireland. It has been going on for hundreds of years."[224] Even

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[221] Barter, “That Petrol Emotion,” 8.
[222] Barter, “That Petrol Emotion,” 8.
[223] Ireland has been a long history of its writers and artists going abroad in order to establish themselves dating back at least as early as the sixteenth century. More recently, Joyce, Beckett, Wilde, and Shaw all found initial acceptance of their work in foreign lands.
[224] Barter, “That Petrol Emotion,” 8.

as her career has progressed with productions in England and the United States, Spallen generally has not been asked to write for theatres in the North or in the Republic. When asked why she thought this was, she half-jokingly replied that she had probably "pissed some people off."[225] However, when pressed further, it does seem that the small, traditional, and rather insular nature of Irish theatre has limited Spallen's opportunities there: "It's the same people getting the same jobs. It's very cliquey."[226] Her process of working and her creative ideas do not seem to mesh well with the expectations and desires of theatre producers in Ireland. In her opinion, she has experienced less creative freedom and less artistic control in the development of her work with Irish theatres than with British ones. In Ireland, "it is who you are and who you know. In London, people read my work before meeting me" and therefore make judgments based on her writing rather than on her personality or reputation. She tells her fellow playwrights, "Until things change further, get out. That probably sounds quite nihilistic and depressing but I wouldn't lie to anybody and say you're going to have a ball. The only way for things to change is for people to say that, instead of pretending everything's tickety-boo."[227]

The North's lack of support or recognition for one of their most talented playwrights has not gone unnoticed by some critics. In a glowing review for the

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[225] Spallen, Phone interview by Fiona Coffey, May 22, 2012.
[226] "The Driver, the Pumpgirl, her lover and his wife," *Belfast Telegraph*, August 29, 2008, http://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/entertainment/theatre-arts/the-driver-the-pumpgirl-her-lover-and-his-wife-13955613.html#ixzz2663FxcyF.
[227] Acharya Kiran, "Abbie Spallen," Culture Northern Ireland, September 12, 2010, http://www.culturenorthernireland.org/article/1488/abbie-spallen.

Lyric's production of *Pumpgirl*, *Culture Northern Ireland* critic, David Lewis, wrote,

> Like [Owen] McCafferty, Spallen's work was produced first outside of Ireland, enjoying success in London and New York, before returning home. Let's hope that this production and new productions from McCafferty and Lucy Caldwell at this year's Belfast Festival at Queen's, herald the end of NI's most gifted playwrights being forced into exile. Perhaps the powers-that-be at NI's producing theatre companies will wake up and start investing in our widely recognized playwriting talent, before they sell another generation of writers and theatre-goers short.[228]

Similarly, the Belfast Telegraph started out its review of *Pumpgirl* with the following lines: "Why does it take so long to see a local play staged in an Ulster theatre? And are there really so few female dramatists in Northern Ireland?"[229] Therefore, while these issues have been raised by the media, academics, and even theater companies themselves, there seems to be a disconnect between awareness of the issue and the knowledge of how to fix the problem.

London, of course, has far greater opportunities for theatrical productions given the larger size of the economy, audiences, and theatre industry in England, and it would be hard for Ireland to compete on that scale. However, it is not just fewer opportunities that have encouraged many playwrights to leave Ireland. Spallen has also found British theatres to be more welcoming and easier to navigate than Irish ones. She describes working for British theatre as "less fussy" and "fewer strings attached."[230] Furthermore, the very qualities that seemed to prevent Spallen from being produced in Ireland- her "honesty, openness, and

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[228] David Lewis, "Theatre Review: *Pumpgirl,*" Culture Northern Ireland, October 12, 2010, http://www.culturenorthernireland.org/article.aspx?art_id=1518.
[229] "The Driver, the Pumpgirl, her lover and his wife," *Belfast Telegraph*, August 29, 2008.
[230] Spallen, Phone interview with Fiona Coffey, May 22, 2012.

forthright, outspoken nature"[231]- are the very things that the British theatre seems to embrace. For example, when the Lyric produced *Pumpgirl* in 2008, a letter was written to the *Irish News* stating that the play was "gratuitously sensationalist" and should not be shown in the North.[232] Indeed, before the show opened, the *Belfast Telegraph* reported that "there have already been rumblings about the strong language and loose morals of *Pumpgirl*, and Spallen wonders if there might be protests outside the theatre."[233] In the same article, the playwright commented, "I'm sure the play will rattle a few cages. Let's face it, Northern Ireland isn't exactly at the forefront of liberal thinking. But it needs to realize that the rest of the world has moved into the 21st century. Maybe I'll have my very own picket on opening night. I'd really know I was home then!" [234]

In the few years since she has moved to London, Spallen has found an outpouring of support for her work with three attachments from British theatres: two from the Royal Court Theatre and one from the National Theatre. [235] Commenting on the lack of interest in her work in Ireland, she says, "I think it's very telling that I am writing a play for the National Theatre [in England], and I am not writing a play for the Abbey." [236] She also finds the Irish theatre community's common complaint that there are no women writing for the theatre incredibly frustrating:

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[231] Spallen, Phone interview with Fiona Coffey, May 22, 2012.
[232] Lewis, "Theatre Review: *Pumpgirl,*" Culture Northern Ireland, October 12, 2010.
[233] "The Driver, the Pumpgirl, her lover and his wife," *Belfast Telegraph*, August 29, 2008.
[234] "The Driver, the Pumpgirl, her lover and his wife," *Belfast Telegraph*, August 29, 2008.
[235] British and Irish theatre create a distinction between "commissions" and "attachments." A commission is when a theatre pays the playwright to write an original play. An attachment, however, typically involves a commissioned play as well as a larger amount of support including office space, official affiliation with the company, and some minor responsibilities such as running a writing workshop or community outreach.
[236] Spallen, Phone interview with Fiona Coffey, May 22, 2012.

> People say there are no writers and there are no new female writers in Ireland, and it's just oul' blather. Oul' barstool blather. It's as if they keep saying these people don't exist, then they don't have to go out looking for them. The fact is English theatre companies and American theatre companies are tripping over Irish playwrights. What is going on?[237]

It may also be easier, of course, for British and American audiences to see harsh critiques of Ireland than for Irish audiences to embrace criticism about their own society. In addition, prejudice against Northern plays continues to be a significant issue in the Republic. Few play critics from the south travel to see productions in the North, and the theatre sector in the Republic rarely collaborates with Northern companies or follows trends coming out of the North.

Spallen also speculates that her success in London may have amplified her outsider status in Ireland and created less support for her within the island. This suggests that there are two antithetical impulses at work. Plays often need recognition and status from the UK or America before Irish theatres will recognize a playwright; at the same time, Irish theatres may want to discover and then hone the talent of new writers in order to claim some connection to or responsibility for developing their work.

Despite the difficulties in getting produced in Ireland, Spallen has forged a successful and growing career in London and increasingly the United States. Her one-act play, *Shaving The Pickle*, premiered at the First Irish Festival in 2008 in New York City, and that same year, she won the Tony Doyle Award for screenwriting from the BBC for her television screenplay, *Seven Drunken Knights*. In addition, several regional theatres in the United States have staged *Pumpgirl,* including Chicago's A Red Orchid Theatre in 2009 and Philadelphia's

[237] Barter, "That Petrol Emotion," August 24, 2008, 8.

Inis Nua in 2011. Writing workshops and retreats were again central to Spallen's career when she received the 2008 Stewart Parker Trust award, which allowed her to spend one of the "best weeks of [her] life" at a workshop at the Tyrone Guthrie Centre at Anneaghmakerrig in County Monaghan, Ireland.[238] Here, she worked with Graham Whybrow of the Royal Court and formed an important relationship that led her to receive two attachments from the prestigious British theatre in 2010 and 2012. As her work continues to be lauded by foreign theatres, academics, and critics, Ireland has slowly begun to recognize her importance as a playwright. In 2009, the Dublin-based Fishamble Theatre premiered *Strandline,* and, in August 2012, the Lyric Theatre appointed Spallen their writer-in-residence: a year-long post that will include writing a new play, running community out-reach workshops, and developing new writing talent. Spallen is thrilled and proud to have the position, saying, "I'm very, very grateful to them for the opportunity and would hope that it's the start of a long and fruitful partnership."[239]

The appointment at the Lyric was a surprising and hard-fought achievement, one that Spallen now wants to embrace as evidence of how Northern theatre is becoming more inclusive. Thus, less than four months after my initial interview with her in which she expressed frustration at the disinterest in her work in Ireland, Spallen wrote me another carefully crafted email reversing much of her previous thoughts on the subject. She wrote, "While it's probably true that I may have felt that my work was more welcome outside Ireland in the past…I have to say that the Lyric has been one of the exceptions and I see this

[238] Deirdre Falvey, "In Spallen We Trust, with Bursary Award," *Irish Times*, April 25, 2009, 8.
[239] Abbie Spallen, Email Correpondence with Fiona Coffey, Sept 10, 2012.

now as a vote of confidence in my work from a theatre that has in fact supported me in the past."[240] Given her burgeoning career, Spallen is clearly wary of appearing angry with Irish theatres as it could potentially preclude her from further opportunities. In the same email, she suggested that the Lyric residency may prove that the persistent notion of her work being unwelcome in Ireland is (and perhaps was) not entirely accurate. Despite these new assertions, this recent show of support by the Lyric may actually prove that Spallen's previous complaints were well-founded. The Lyric did a limited run of her best work, *Pumpgirl*, two years after it received glowing reviews abroad. However, the theatre did not approach Spallen to have any relationship until four years after their *Pumpgirl* tour, during which point she had already established herself internationally. The Lyric's new interest in her work may also stem from a complete overhaul and restructuring of the theatre, which was completed in 2011. An entirely new building was erected and new spaces and programs devoted to developing new playwriting were included in the new structure. Richard Croxford, formerly artistic director of the independent theatre, Replay, was appointed the head of the Lyric in 2008, bringing a new commitment to staging and developing new works. These changes at the Lyric suggest that a progressive and more inclusive approach is being forged, perhaps one that will now include more indigenous women's writing outside of classic works by Marie Jones, Christina Reid, and Anne Devlin.

In addition, Spallen's attempts to revise her previous comments only further prove how careful playwrights have to be in the small world of Irish

[240] Spallen, Email Correpondence with Fiona Coffey, Sept 10, 2012.

theatre. Fear of angering Irish theatre producers and further alienating herself from the inner circle made Spallen retract her previous, widely-reported frustrations with Northern theatre and begin to praise the Lyric. Despite her change in thinking, it is impossible to ignore the path that Spallen's career took before she was granted a residency at the North's main producing house and how her career is exemplary of other playwrights' experiences as well. While she seems to have taken a significant step into the revered world of the Irish theatrical canon, the road she took to get there is indicative of larger problems and patterns within Irish theatre. As Spallen said, Ireland has a long history of having its writers leave in order to forge successful careers; however, these issues are arguably more pertinent for Northern playwrights who are often overlooked within Irish theatre and are perhaps most significant for Northern women playwrights, who remain among the most marginalized within the island.

Pumpgirl

Spallen's work explores contemporary Northern Irish society, engaging with the questions of how the legacy of sectarian violence and the current-day peace process have affected the political, economic, and cultural lives of Northern citizens. Spallen wrote *Pumpgirl* in 2006, at the height of the Celtic Tiger and following a period of growth and relative calm in the North. The Celtic Tiger was a period of rapid economic development primarily in the Republic of Ireland from the late 1990s until 2008 when Ireland experienced a massive economic collapse along with the global economy. Because the North was tied to the currency, laws, and economy of the United Kingdom, it did not experience the same influx of

wealth and development during the Celtic Tiger years; however, the North did benefit from spillover effects across the border such as increased tourism and consumer spending. While life in the Republic was at its bacchanalian height of pleasure and money in 2006, however, Spallen's play portrayed the rural North as a community that had been left behind in terms of money, jobs, opportunity, and women's rights.

Pumpgirl, which is set in an unnamed border town in Northern Ireland, follows the lives of Sinead, a housewife, her husband Hammy, an unemployed racecar aficionado, and Pumpgirl, a local petrol station attendant. This three-character monologue play[241] brims with the complicated inner-lives of its characters, exploring the emotional and psychological effects of poverty and violence on the citizens of the North. Sinead lives a suffocating and small life, trapped in the domestic roles of wife and mother. She dreams of leaving her husband and experiencing life outside of a small town. Out of boredom and desperation to feel loved, she has an affair with a man she meets at the local market. When she learns that she is pregnant, she tells her lover who angrily beats her, leaving her in the dirt, torn and bloody, to walk several miles back home. Hammy, Sinead's neglectful, emasculated, and womanizing husband, is obsessed with racing cars. He frequents the petrol station where Pumpgirl works and uses

[241] The monologue play has been an extremely popular genre in contemporary Irish playwriting. Scholars speculate that this stems from the ancient Irish story-telling tradition and oral culture. Financial and logistical considerations (such smaller cast size and limited sets) have also popularized the form, making it easier and less expensive to produce and tour. Irish critic Fintan O'Toole has also identified the success of Brian Friel's *Faith Healer* in 1979 as beginning a shift in the popularity of the monologue play. Countless Irish playwrights have written monologue plays including Samuel Beckett, Marie Jones, Owen McCafferty, Jennifer Johnston, Lucy Caldwell, Gary Mitchell, Frank McGuiness, Enda Walsh, Conor McPherson, Mark O'Rowe, and Eugene O'Brien.

her for quick and meaningless sex. Without a steady job, his only purpose in life is racing cars, trying to get an adrenaline rush so he can feel alive amidst a broken marriage, unemployment, and a dead-end town. Pumpgirl, a town outcast with her butch haircut and dirty work overalls, rejects all that is feminine. She has seen how the roles of wife and mother trap women in her town, and she scorns femininity, associating it with that which is weak. She prefers to hang out with the guys at the petrol station and with Hammy, with whom she is in love. However, Pumpgirl pays a price for her refusal to inhabit the feminine sphere. Hammy and his friends pick up Pumpgirl one evening for a joyride and end up gang-raping her in the back of the car.

Spallen presents two very different women: one who has dutifully followed the proscribed roles of wife and mother (until Sinead's rebellious affair) and one who has rejected traditional notions of femininity. Yet, despite these differences, both women are trapped in an impoverished town, are tragically attached to Hammy, and end up violently used and rejected by men. Spallen seems to be suggesting that despite women's different choices or positions in the contemporary rural North, their options are ultimately limited and the end result is tragically the same. Furthermore, women's limited social positioning is exacerbated by men's emasculation. Unemployed, mired in poverty, and without an active conflict through which to define themselves, the men in the play are angry and directionless, channeling their frustrations through the sexual exploitation and subjugation of women.

Pumpgirl's real name is Sandra; yet, few call her by her proper name. Instead, she is literally defined by her dead-end job in a rundown petrol station. Pumpgirl revels in the masculine nature of her job, while rejecting anything associated with femininity. Pumpgirl participates in female-bashing with the men around her, completely seeming to disavow or acknowledge that she, herself, is female. The traditional exchange between Hammy and Pumpgirl whenever Hammy comes into the garage demonstrates Pumpgirl's complicity in the misogyny that surrounds her:

> 'How's the cunt?' says I, meaning his wife. It's always the same.
> 'Still a cunt,' says he and we laugh.
> 'How's the cunt?' says he, meaning my cunt.
> 'Still a cunt,' says I. It's our wee game.
>
> There isn't a person in the whole world I can talk to like Hammy. I'm that glad he's my friend.[242]

However, Pumpgirl's refusal to accept traditional feminine roles makes her the town outcast- the women make fun of her and the men, simultaneously attracted and repelled by her, treat her as an intriguing freak, someone they can use for their own amusement and then discard. Pumpgirl occupies a liminal and dangerous space between the proscribed masculine and feminine worlds. Refusing to comply with the feminine one and never being accepted by the masculine, she is isolated, denied entry into either. Spallen suggests that an atmosphere which has stifled and trapped women in traditional roles has perhaps led Pumpgirl to reject everything feminine and to deny any association with womanhood. However, while she scorns traditional gender roles, she has unwittingly fallen into

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[242] Abbie Spallen, *Pumpgirl* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), 16. Hereafter abrieviated as *Pumpgirl* and page number.

one as well- that of Hammy's submissive mistress who subverts her own needs and desires to those of her man.

In contrast to Pumpgirl, Sinead is initially positioned as the quintessential housewife. She has married her hometown sweetheart and become the dutiful wife and mother. Spallen presents Sinead as a smart, capable, and intellectually curious woman who is stuck in poverty and a loveless marriage. Had she received education, had someone taught her that she didn't have to become a wife and mother, she might have had an intellectually and emotionally fulfilling life and career.[243] Instead, she sits at home, going through the motions of raising children, suppressing her ambitions, and boiling in a hatred and anger that defines her existence. In this way, *Pumpgirl* departs from a long tradition of Northern Irish plays, which portray women as perfect mothers and wives, concerned entirely with peace and a positive future for their children. As critic Tom Maguire states, "These women figures remain behind loyally awaiting the return of their absent husbands, essentially passive victims, brides awaiting fulfillment through the love of the right man."[244] However, Sinead is a woman deeply conflicted about her role as wife and mother. While she provides all the appropriate care and nourishment for her children, she does so in a robotic manner. She describes her day to the audience: "I tidied the house…waited smokin' cigarettes for the two kids to arrive, and then fed, washed, minded, said 'Aye right' and 'Don't pull the dog's tail' and the other pieces of robot crap that tumble out of the mouths of

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[243] Eugene Lovendusky, "Cast of 'Pumpgirl' Filling the Tank at MTC," *Broadwayworld.com,* http://www.broadwayworld.com/article/Cast_of_Pumpgirl_Filling_the_Tank_at_MTC_20071203.
[244] Maguire, *Making Theatre in Northern Ireland,* 105.

mas…"[245] Spallen discredits the image of the passive, content wife/mother and instead shows how oppressive and debilitating these roles can be. Spallen has publically stated that Sinead is the alternative life the playwright would have had if she had stayed in Newry, emphasizing how limiting life is in the rural North.[246]

Sinead's negative relationship with motherhood is also one that Helen Lojek identifies as a trend in Northern women's writing. Many Northern women writers tend to associate pregnancy and motherhood with entrapment. Lojek lists several examples of female characters in Northern drama who fear the consequences of having children:

> Sarah in Christina Reid's *Tea in a China Cup*, learning her daughter has begun to menstruate, declares, 'God help you child, this is the start of all your troubles.' Sandra in Reid's *Joyriders* refuses to romanticize motherhood and deliberately avoids Belfast's Botanic Garden because it is the site of sexual activity that resulted in a friend's unwed pregnancy. Karen, in Jennifer Johnston's 1993 'Twinkle Toes,' reflecting on her 17-year-old daughter's pregnancy and upcoming marriage wonders "What about her freedom now?...In Northern Irish drama, escape from the trap of motherhood is persistently associated with emigration to England… Married or unmarried, mothers or not, women are freer in England than in Northern Ireland. The themes carries through the plays by Devlin, Reid, and Jones, and reflect real-life choices made by Reid and Devlin."[247]

This same trend from late twentieth century plays can be seen in more recent writing which shows young women rejecting (sometimes violently) any association with motherhood. In Stacey Gregg's *Lagan* (2011), a young, unwed teen must travel to England for an abortion in order to save herself from a life of poverty and servitude. In Lisa McGee's *Girls and Dolls* (2006), two teenage girls

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[245] *Pumpgirl,* 37.

[246] Denise Foley, "Review: Inis Nua's *Pumpgirl,*" Irishphiladelphia.com, January 14, 2011, http://irishphiladelphia.com/2011/01/review-inis-nuas-pumpgirl/.

[247] Helen Lojek, "Not So Sainted: Mothers on the Contemporary Irish Stage," in *Essays and Scripts on how Mothers are Portrayed on Stage,* ed. Beth Osnes and Anna Andes (London: Edwin Mellon Press, 2010), 189-190. Lojek does note that motherhood is treated very differently in Anne Devlin's *After Easter* in which motherhood helps Greta reject suicide.

kill a local toddler and then bury her body in the woods. In Spallen's *Strandline* (2009), Máirín viciously rejects her role as step-mother to Tríona, hurling abuse at the young woman. Few recent plays show positive images of motherhood, and most position childhood as a fraught and dangerous condition.

In *Pumpgirl*, Sinead, the imprisoned mother and wife, has developed an active fantasy life where she imagines breaking free of her husband and acting out her violent desires:

> I can feel the first of his low snores beginning to form from the pillow beside me. His bottom lip odes in and out with each snore, like a baby's. I used to think that was cute.
>
> 'Your honour. It was the way his bottom lip puckered when he snored that made me put the hatchet through his head.'
>
> How's that for a country and western song, Hammy? I could call it 'And I'm Praying for a Female Judge.'[248]

Sinead's joke that she would pray for a female judge is revealing. She believes that only another woman could possibly understand what it is like to be trapped in a suffocating and loveless marriage. It is important to note as well that Sinead sees no way out of her situation. She never suggests leaving Hammy or her children, going back to school, or moving to another town. Frankly, these are not options for her. She quite simply has nowhere to go and no skills to draw upon, and she is too entrenched in the proscribed societal expectations of woman as wife and mother to imagine herself outside of those roles. Even her violent inner daydreams are only fantasies- something to imagine in her subconscious in order to calm her rage but never something that she acts upon.

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[248] *Pumpgirl*, 18.

Spallen shows that women are not the only victims of poverty and limiting social norms in Northern Ireland. Hammy has been out of work for a long time, collecting the dole (unemployment) and also secretly cleaning out the local chicken hatchery for extra money. He is a local boy who never left town and is stuck without an education and few job from which to choose. He is emasculated by his inability to provide for his family and resorts to highly dangerous activities to remind himself that he is alive. Instead of repressing and internalizing his emotions as Sinead does, Hammy acts out physically by racing cars and sleeping around. Indeed, Hammy treats women like racecars: there for his own pleasure and expendable after the ride is over. In fact, all the men in *Pumpgirl* view women as expendable sexual objects for their consumption. Hammy describes riding in the car with his friends and competing about how many women they are all sleeping with:

> Shawshank's all pally-wally, sayin' to me stuff about women, women he's had. Conversations goes on and on and becomes a bit more of a competition. He's coming' out with some Fantasy Island bullshit guff about some PE teaching he's riding in Lisleagh. McManus starts chippin' in about this mother and daughter combo he's taking' turns with in Culloville. Shawshank comes right back at him with some housewife he's left not two hours ago with a smile on her face like Liberace in a locker room. Doot's throwin' in his 50p, too, some English bird, manager of Dixons, gets him free blank videos, but they don't stay blank long.[249]

Hammy and his friends see women as conquests. None are faithful to their wives, and they only see women in relation to their sexual availability. As Sinead sums up perfectly, "In this town you're either a slut or a snob, no inbetweens."[250]

[249] *Pumpgirl*, 25.
[250] *Pumpgirl*, 27.

Women are either sexually available and therefore promiscuous; or, they rebuff sexual advances and therefore are prudes.

In *Pumpgirl*, sex has also disturbingly become linked to violence, and the men in town use sex as a weapon to prevent women from deviating from tightly regulated gender norms. Sex is linked to violence in one of two ways. Sex is presented as direct violence (i.e. rape), or past violence is conjured up during the act of sex, inextricably intertwining them. In the play, Troubles violence is often a reference point during sexual acts. For example, the make-out spot where Pumpgirl and Hammy have sex is the location where two Protestants were killed fifteen years ago. Pumpgirl notes that their families still hang wreaths and flowers on the site of the killings, now the location of illicit sex.[251] Furthermore, while she and Hammy are having sex, Pumpgirl envisions images of violence in her mind. While making out under the tree of the dead Protestants, she notices there are some scratches on the ceiling of Hammy's car, which remind her of a local car accident:

> Hammy pulls the front seat down and lies on top of me. I don't move much. While I'm lying there, watching my feet flappin' away just either sides of his ears, there's these marks I can see in the plastic on the ceiling of the car… [they remind] me of this story I was told of this car that had gone into the bog up round Camlough. The people had been trapped inside. The car sank with them in it and they were there for ages, stuck, air running out, but no one could see it from the road except maybe the number plate and only if you were lookin'. And when the car was dragged out they found marks in the ceiling, like animal scratches, and bits of the beigy white roof-plastic under the fingernails of the people inside. They'd tried to claw their way out of the car while they were dying in the dark.[252]

[251] *Pumpgirl*, 20.
[252] *Pumpgirl,* 20.

As Hammy "makes love" to Pumpgirl, all she can think about is the horrific drowning deaths of some local residents who desperately clawed at the ceiling of the car as they slowly died. Violent death is thus linked to sex even before Pumpgirl's gang-rape. Furthermore, the image of a person clawing at the ceiling of a sinking car also parallels the situations of Pumpgirl and Sinead who are both stuck in poverty, trapped and essentially drowning in a society that suffocates women's ambitions. Pumpgirl again focuses on the scratches in the car ceiling when she is gang-raped later in the play. As Hammy's friend, McManus, is forcing himself upon her, Pumpgirl says:

> And I can't help thinking of the people whose car went into the bog. My head is moving back and forward and I'm looking at the scratches on the roof above. Four people on a night out in Warrenpoint. Four people scratchin' on the roof of a car. Broken fingernails, silent screams, stiletto shoes and Saturday-night boots banging against black squeezing windows.[253]

Instead of screaming and resisting herself, Pumpgirl imagines the violent deaths of those who drown in the car. The "broken fingernails" and "silent screams" are, of course, also those of Pumpgirl being raped. Spallen thus presents sex as a form of violence, suffocation, and death for women.

Even Sinead's steamy affair with a man from the local market is interwoven with the telling of Pumpgirl's sexual attack, linking Sinead's affair with violent rape in the audience's mind. Sinead and Pumpgirl alternate telling their stories to the audience. Sinead meets a handsome man at the local market who charms her with some intellectual banter. She brings him home, and they have sex. It is the first time in years that she feels alive, youthful, and excited:

[253] *Pumpgirl,* 35.

> He undresses me with so much love, so much kindness, that I want to cry…and I think for seconds, maybe even a minute, I'm going to be able to forget about being someone's wife, a man or just a woman doin' something that's bad…there's a gap. Just enough. A gap that's filled with nothing. I get my moment. I lose myself as the fear, the grief, the loneliness, the hate on the washing-line, and the solitude slips from my mind…[254]

Interlaced throughout Sinead's description, Pumpgirl slowly recounts her rape. Hammy and his friends, Shawshank and McManus, pick up Pumpgirl from work to go to Shawshank's house. Pumpgirl becomes ill and goes to lie down in Hammy's car. The men come outside and take turns raping her. She recounts:

> Hammy stands watching as Shawshank's mouth is pressed against mine…My face is pressed into the back of the seat now as he turns me over…I'm turned round again, and this time it's McManus. Hammy's standing behind him with this mad face on and I can't help feeling I've done something wrong…Hammy is the last, and when he stops he rests his head beside me and he looks so sad I whisper in his ear, 'It's okay.'[255]

Slowly as Sinead and Pumpgirl unveil their stories, it becomes clear that the person having the affair with Sinead is the same man who instigated the gang rape of Pumpgirl: Shawshank. The ex-convict was recently released from Maghaberry Prison: one of the hardest and most notorious penitentiaries in the North, known for housing republican dissidents. While the play does not explicitly link Shawshank as a former paramilitary prisoner, it does position him as the product of an infamously violent prison system, suggesting that he too may be a victim of a stark Troubles past. Thus, Sinead unwittingly has sex with a vicious rapist, and Pumpgirl is abused and raped by three men, one of whom she thought loved her. In this way, both forms of sex- one consensual, one rape- are presented as violating and false.

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[254] *Pumpgirl,* 33-34.
[255] *Pumpgirl*, 34-35.

By the end of the play, Sinead's affair turns from a casual one-night stand into a tragic lesson about straying from one's proper sphere. Although they only sleep together once, Sinead becomes pregnant with Shawshank's baby. The poverty and entrapment of two children and a neglectful husband has now been exacerbated with yet another (illicit) child. This situation is only intensified by Shawshank's reaction to the pregnancy. Sinead returns to the market to tell him that she is pregnant with his child. Before she is able, however, he assumes she knows about the rape. He takes her out to a deserted road and beats her. When she reveals the pregnancy, he simply laughs, leaving her bloody and bruised on the side of the road. Sinead has to walk miles back to town with torn clothes and bloody skin:

> After he left me in the lay-by I had to walk for miles before one stopped. Walkin' along the road like a drunk woman with my tights in shreds and blood on my knees…And I'm sad. I feel sad, and I feel frightened in my ripped clothes and I feel like a fool…my legs are shaking as I make my way into the safety of my home. [256]

The image of a bloody woman with her clothes in shreds, walking along the side of the road after having been thrown out of a man's car eerily evokes that of a rape victim, reframing the initial sexual encounter from a casual extra-martial fling to a more sinister act of exploitation. Through his fists and his indifference to her pregnancy, Shawshank has shown Sinead what happens to women who transgress outside of marriage.

Sinead and Pumpgirl are so harshly punished because they threaten the tenuous societal rules to which their post-Troubles community desperately clings. As Fidelma Ashe has said, women are representations of the nation's honor and

[256] *Pumpgirl*, 59.

morality in nationalist discourse: "Both nationalist discourses in Northern Ireland have associated women with the cultural stability and morality of the ethnic group. The behavior of women in both communities has been closely linked to the integrity and morality of the nation as a whole..."[257] Thus, the women's rebellion against proscribed gender norms is brutally punished because they are expected to act as moral guides within a society that historically has been entrenched in chaos and violence.

The play ends with Sinead submissively returning to the domestic sphere. After being beaten and abandoned on the side of the road, she returns home, bruised and bloody and resumes her domestic activities, making tea for Hammy and the children:

> And I'm sad. I feel sad, and I feel frightened in my ripped clothes and I feel like a fool. He just got into the car and drove off and left me. Laughed at me, picked up his belt and screeched off in the car…my legs are shaking as I make my way into the safety of my home…I make my way into the kitchen and get out a pot from the cupboard above the cooker…Hammy and the kids'll be home soon and I start to make the tea.

Her trauma is subverted to her duties as wife and mother, and she represses her sadness and fear, pushing it down into the same deep, dark space where she hides her daily frustrations and anger as a housewife.

Pumpgirl's transformation after the gang rape is even more disturbing. Calm and submissive, she returns to work the day after the assault and, disturbingly, seems to accept a level of responsibility for the rape. As McManus is assaulting her, she sees "Hammy standing behind him with this mad face on and

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[257] Fidelma Ashe, "The Virgin Mary Connection: Reflecting on Feminism and Northern Irish Politics," *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy,* vol. 9, no. 4 (Dec. 2006): 574-575.

[she] can't help feeling [she's] done something wrong."[258] In addition, when she sees Hammy with his family out at the shops, she tries to let him know that she is not angry: 'I'm wonderin' should I go up to talk to him, but his look says not…I'm trying to say 'It's okay but I miss you' with my eyes…[259] She even tries to comfort Hammy during the rape, telling him "it's okay," not wanting him to feel sad. Pumpgirl's unsettling acceptance of the rape is rendered even more troubling by her sudden feminine dress. In the days after the rape, Pumpgirl wears a skirt and sandals, having "put the baseball hat in the bin."[260] She discards her entire physical identity, the defining characteristics that set her apart from others and made her strong and unique.

While the women internalize their fear and guilt and silently move back into the constricted traditional roles of womanhood, Hammy, in contrast, is emotionally unable to deal with his role in the rape and acts out with violence. He oscillates between incredible guilt that he took part in the rape and anger that his friends took advantage of "his" woman. While he feels guilty about hurting Pumpgirl, her presence also angers him, reminding him of his shameful and violent act. When he sees a man accidentally bump into Pumpgirl in the street with his shopping cart, Hammy reacts with anger toward Pumpgirl, the man, and ultimately toward himself: "And she looks hurt, she does. And I want to smash her face in. And I want to smash his face in too, the bastard with the trolley, but most of all I want to put my own face through the glass in front of me, again and

[258] *Pumpgirl*, 34.
[259] *Pumpgirl*, 42.
[260] *Pumpgirl*, 41.

again back and forward, and lacerate my head to bits."[261] Hammy has a nervous breakdown after the rape, acting out his confusion and rage through destructive acts. He drives by the petrol station several times a day afraid that Pumpgirl might report the rape. He races his car and ends up crashing, smashing his head into the front window. He finds Shawshank at a bar and sets his truck on fire in retaliation.

Without anywhere else to go, Hammy drives to his job at the chicken hatchery to powerspray chicken droppings off of the coops. The hatchery job represents the desperation and debasement that poverty has led him to. In an act of frustration and anger, he takes the water-pump and sprays high velocity water around the entire yard, showering chicken feces everywhere and snapping the heads of chickens who get caught up in the spray:

> One bird hits the wall with such a force that its neck snaps and there's this strangled noise as I have it pinned to the wall with a giant jet of water. I'm screaming at the top of my lungs this fucking animal yell and I'm smashing everything around me. Boxes upon boxes of eggs splattered to fuck and panic stricken birds runnin' about trying to escape from me and my mighty weapon. And I start to laugh. I slide down the wall with the water gun in my hand just dribblin' now, and I'm laughin' so hard I think I'm gonna pass out, and I sit there for what seems like hours, every now and again laughing with the hilarity of it all.[262]

The imagery of Hammy violently spraying the chicken hatchery conjures up sexual imagery, again linking sex with violence. Hammy's "mighty weapon," a "water gun" in his hand, sprays water, smashing eggs and splattering them "to fuck." After leaving the chicken coop, Hammy climbs into his prized Toyota Celica and commits suicide through carbon dioxide poisoning. Hammy ultimately cannot deal with the desperation of his life and ends it rather than face reality.

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[261] *Pumpgirl*, 43.
[262] *Pumpgirl*, 54-55.

Women and men are not the only victims of an impoverished and violent post-Troubles society. Children are often in peril in Spallen's work. This reflects a concern that although the next generation has grown up in peacetime, these children and teenagers still being harmed by the lingering effects of the Troubles. Pumpgirl returns to work the day after the rape, hoping that Hammy will come by the petrol station and tell her that he still loves her. It is only after he silently rebuffs her in the street that Pumpgirl decides to exact revenge. She lures Hammy's children to an old abandoned house on the outskirts of town. The children excitedly tell her that they are about to get a new sibling. Neither Hammy nor Pumpgirl knows the baby is really Shawshank's, and the idea of Hammy having another child with his wife creates a new rage in Pumpgirl. Her anger at being raped and then rejected by Hammy bubbles up from a deeply repressed area. As Hammy's youngest son, Darren, perches over a huge hole in the floor of the dilapidated house, Pumpgirl contemplates pushing him in:

> He's climbin' round the edge of the big hole in the floor, hangin' on to the old ivy roots and I go and stand behind him, quietly….I'm close enough to him now, but he's no idea I'm there…We stand there for about a minute that's just like an hour with him near breaking his neck twisting round his head first to one side then to another trying to see who's behind him and the whole time I'm leaned over him with my face about two inches from his. Just watchin' his wee face twichin' and jerkin' with the panic and the wee hands grapplin' and twistin' and tryin' to hold on to the roots. And it's deep, that drop behind him. Very deep.[263]

When Hammy's daughter, Kelly, sees Darren on the edge of the hole and screams, she startles Pumpgirl, bringing her to her senses. Pumpgirl pulls Darren back from the hole, realizing that the children are innocent in Hammy's betrayal:

[263] *Pumpgirl*, 56.

"It's wee soft baby arms I'm holdin' in my hands. Soft tiny arms with bones moving inside two wee scraps of things that have done no harm to me."[264]

The play ends with Sinead in her home unwittingly laying out tea for her family, further trapped by three children with neither a husband nor an income to support her family. Pumpgirl ends the play also by returning to the domestic space, now clothed in "proper" women's dress. In contrast to the millworkers of Charabanc's *Lay Up Your Ends* who march back into the factory singing (although they have lost the strike), Spallen shows women who have been broken down and return submissively to their proscribed roles. Although Sinead and Pumpgirl attempt to rebel against suffocating and limiting gender norms, Spallen ultimately demonstrates that the rest of their town has not been able to move past these archaic values and instead are violently reinforcing them. The discomfort of searching for new meaning and definition in peacetime has made many in their community cling more desperately to the past, unwilling to let go of the strict gender roles that defined their nationalist fight. Spallen shows that unless women and men are able to move away from hyper-definitions of masculinity and femininity, the Northern Irish community will continue to be in crisis, poverty will persist, and violence will continue to be a defining aspect of Northern life.

Reviews for the three productions in England, America, and Ireland were generally positive. Critics from the 2006 London production were uniformly favorable with *The Observer* calling the Bush production "enthralling" and the *Evening Standard* declaring that Spallen's writing was full of "terrific zeal." *The Independent* wrote, "Spallen structures her play like a piece of music, seamlessly

[264] *Pumpgirl*, 58.

slipping between subject and counter-subject, orchestrating faster and slower movements, themes in a formidable coda."[265] The Hollywood industry magazine, *Variety*, praised the Manhattan Theatre Club 2007 production saying, "Spallen's language matches her elegant plotting. She writes in slangy Irish prose that makes room for beautiful images, so her characters sound like real people who just happen to understand metaphor."[266] The *New York Times* called the same production a "fiercely observed, unflinching play,"[267] and the review went on to praise Spallen's writing: "Ms. Spallen's penetrating language and unsentimental view place it among the most powerful" [268] contemporary plays coming out of Ireland. *New York Times* critic Caryn James continued, "No bog of plummy prose or nostalgia for her. Adding a fresh, female voice to the boys' club of Irish playwrights, she infuses her monologues with slightly dated pop culture references that make her characters contemporary while revealing the tacky limits of their horizons." [269] The Irish reviews were similarly flattering with *Culture Northern Ireland* declaring that Spallen's writing "sparks and fizzes, with sharp lines and terrific jokes…"[270] The critical success of this 2008 production led to the Dublin-based Fishamble theatre company producing Spallen's next play *Strandline* in 2009.

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[265] Lynne Walker, "Festival reviews: *Pumpgirl,* Traverse Theatre," *The Independent* (London), August 10, 2006, 20.
[266] Mark Blankenship, "*Pumpgirl," Variety Magazine,* December 10, 2007, 70.
[267] Caryn James, "From Ireland, Love Songs In the Key of Desperation," *New York Times*, December 5, 2007, 5.
[268] James, "From Ireland, Love Songs In the Key of Desperation," 5.
[269] James, "From Ireland, Love Songs In the Key of Desperation," 5.
[270] Lewis, "Review: *Pumpgirl,*" Oct 12, 2010.

Strandline

Like *Pumpgirl, Strandline* explores a rural border-community that is dealing with the changes of a post-conflict North. *Strandline* is set in an unnamed coastal town in 2009. The main character, Máirín, left her community to become a successful artist in London. She returned to marry a local widower, Tom, who dies in a boating accident in the opening scene. The majority of the play takes place a month later on the night of Tom's wake, during which terrible secrets about the town's past are revealed. A strandline is the high water mark that the tide makes on the shoreline after the water retreats. Debris from the ocean is often deposited on the strandline, leaving seaweed, driftwood, and human trash. The play's title suggests that just as the waters retreat during low tide to reveal hidden trash and debris, the Troubles has retreated from this small town to reveal in its wake dark and terrible secrets.

The play begins with the wedding night of Tom's daughter and Máirín's stepdaughter, Tríona. The chaos of the wedding with drunken revelers, dancing partygoers, and an inebriated, belligerent bride compliments the dark storm that is brewing offshore, causing rough waters. In the opening scene, Tom has taken his boat out into the middle of the storm to save a group of tourists who have capsized. Three people watch from shore: Eileen, a local woman; Sweeney, a precocious and opinionated thirteen-year-old boy who is described as "part bore, part mystic, part idiot"[271]; and Máirín. The three observers worry that if the visitors drown, it will destroy the little tourism that had been coming to their

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[271] Abbie Spallen, *Strandline* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), 10. Hereafter abreviated as *Strandline* and page number.

economically depressed town. Staring at the ocean, Sweeney tells the women, "I heard tell they were foreign. Not immigrants like but tourists. Real tourists. Bona fide. Put us back that will now. Even further like."[272] In this one casual exchange, Spallen references the several economic and social issues that the town is facing: the influx of immigrants coming into the North bringing a wave of ethnic diversity to the region for the first time and the lack of tourism given the economic depression in the region. Eileen's husband has not been able to find work in two-and-a- half years, and Clodagh, the town matriarch, says, "No one comin' here for the shoppin'…Nothin' here would drag a body in."[273] While Northern Ireland did not experience the Celtic Tiger like the Republic, it did receive benefits from shopping and tourism which spilled over the border. In the boom days, Clodagh built and sold a large housing development, and tourists brought business to the community; however, today, the town's inhabitants can barely find work. Thus, from the very first moments of the play, the town's recent economic decline after decades of prosperity and increased tourism is shown to be a central issue in the community. As in *Pumpgirl*, lack of jobs and opportunities have trapped some people and exacerbated divisions within the town between the wealthy and the poor.

While the poverty of the town in *Pumpgirl* is palpable and affects all the characters in the play, in *Strandline* there is a tense divide between the impoverished seaside village that has limited job opportunities and the financial and professional success of Máirín. The opening stage directions state, "*Máirín*

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[272] *Strandline,* 10.
[273] *Strandline,* 65.

and Eileen stand on the beach looking out. They're both dressed in clothes for a wedding. Eileen has stupid heels, peach silk, one of those half-hat things perched on her head and wobbling. Máirín is classy, expensive, arty. This sets her apart."[274] Máirín's house, where the majority of the play takes place, is a symbol of the wealth that she has achieved, marginalizing her from the rest of the struggling town. The stage directions describe the home as "*magnificent*" and "*a minimalist dream*."[275] One wall of the house is entirely glass, overlooking the ocean. In the main living room, there is a large weaving loom, a constant reminder of Máirín's status as an artist and of her financial success. On the wall hangs one of her hand-woven tapestries that is "*modern, yet containing traditional elements*."[276] She has made her money by taking the traditional Irish craft of weaving and creating luxurious tapestries to sell to wealthy collectors in London. The stage directions state, "*It is very obvious that Máirín has done very well for herself…This isn't some sort of cottage industry. She is stinking rich. There is also the feeling, however, that the place is soulless.*"[277] Here, Spallen suggests that a loss of heart and compassion has accompanied the accumulation of Máirín's riches. This is, perhaps, a comment on the Celtic Tiger phenomenon, which brought great wealth to the island along with greed, over-consumption, and greater class divisions. In a 2007 interview with the *New York Times*, Spallen referred to the Celtic Tiger saying,

> The country is almost like a lottery winner, and there are problems that come along with that, almost like a frightening slipping away of

[274] *Strandline*, 9.
[275] *Strandline*, 18.
[276] *Strandline*, 18.
[277] *Strandline*, 18.

> humanity…With great wealth can come an uneasiness about self and an uneasiness about identity…I left Dublin because I saw that around me, and I just think it's such a terrible thing to lose, the heart and soul of the country.[278]

In her play, Spallen also shows how wealth can corrupt individuals and destroy communities.

The divide between the town and Máirín is both economic as well as cultural. Máirín is now wealthy, owning the most expensive house in town, and the community considers her to be a snob. She left because the town was unable to provide intellectually, artistically, or financially for her. Her time spent in the cosmopolitan and cultured city of London has marked her as an outsider. She has shed her country accent and now speaks in an educated city dialect. Furthermore, she is an artist, a creative entrepreneur in a town that values physical and practical labor over creative or intellectual ones. Just as Sinead in *Pumpgirl* represents some aspects of Spallen's personal experience, Máirín may embody Spallen's own status as a playwright who left Newry for London in order to achieve a level of professional and artistic success that would be unobtainable in her hometown.

Although Máirín has gained financial success and social status, the play contends that she has lost her empathy, her heart, and her connection to her Northern roots. This is perhaps most directly portrayed through her relationship with her step-daughter with whom she has a contentious and bitter relationship. Máirín's rapport with Tríona is marked by aggression and blame. In the first scene, Máirín exhibits outright hostility to the bride on her wedding day, calling her a maggot and trying to hit her with a shoe. Máirín is portrayed as a woman

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[278] Justin Bergman, "Memo to Yeats: Ireland has changed," *The New York Times*, November 18, 2007, 10.

who has begrudgingly inherited a child and is unable or unwilling to mother. In Tríona's view, Máirín "stole" her father away from her and created a new home, erasing the marks of Tríona's biological and caring mother:

> You threw me out of my home…Turfed me out on my ear.… You…made it so as I couldn't stay here. You did. You…every time I scratched myself you were there. Sniffin' around like an oul' cat lookin' meat. Your oul' face in mine. Tidyin', rearrangin'. You'da stuck me under the stairs with the Hoover if you could. Life was dandy till you came along, nice wee house, my ma's things about. All pink and ribbons and…you could smell her on the cushions still...[279]

Focused on her career and her relationship with Tom, Máirín was uninterested in mothering and thus exiled Tríona from her own home. In addition, Máirín razed the cozy modest house of Tríona's mother and, in its place, built a modern and soulless monstrosity that exudes money and pretension rather than warmth and love. Her disinterest in fulfilling the role of "good mother" has made her a pariah in the town and alienated her from her community.

Indeed, Máirín's professional success and ambition seems to have derailed her from "proper" motherhood and even wifehood. Tríona claims that Máirín was so cold, unloving, and career obsessed that Tom escaped to the village pub every night to reconnect with his community and friends. She tells Máirín,

> It's like rememberin two different men. I remember a sad oul' broken cowp of a man, once your oul' wormin' magic wore away. And him reduced to putting on a pair of shorts and a vest and head to the pub every night. To get away from you…You wore off quick, Máirín, and that's what he used to do. Laugh with his mates. With the normal people round here. With his daughter too. Never seen a man so unhappy, Máirín. So glad to be away from a woman…Women of the town queuing up to dirty his clothes. Thinkin' up ways to make stuff look like sweat. Laughing. Laughing at you. Sitting up here knitting razor blades.[280]

[279] *Strandline*, 47.
[280] *Strandline,* 48-49.

The image of Máirín knitting razor blades is especially noteworthy as it contrasts a traditional Irish notion of domestic womanhood against a dangerous and lethal weapon. Máirín's exploitation of traditional Irish weaving into a profitable business has become a violent affront to the community around her. Tríona continues her attack on her stepmother, suggesting that her father's drowning was a welcome release from the prison of his marriage: "He was laughing his teeth off as he slipped under the water. Glad for the release. For the escape from the her. Must have been a pure release all right. That water must have been like a warm fucking blanket compared to the cold clammy dirty oul' air hanging between her fucking thighs."[281] The attack on Máirín's sexuality as a middle-aged woman is also striking. Because she is no longer fertile, Tríona suggests that Tom must not have been attracted to her. Ultimately, Máirín's professional ambition and her disinterest in mothering Tríona are condemned by the community around her which still adheres to traditional roles for women and which rejects those who leave their community to find success in the outside world.

While Máirín is attacked for not being motherly or operating under traditional notions of womanhood, Sweeney's mother remains a potent symbol throughout the play of the retribution that occurs when women venture outside of gender norms. Several years before the play begins, Shirley Sweeney was sleeping with too many married men in town, and the community went to Clodagh, the town matriarch, to seek retribution. Like Máirín, Clodagh operates directly against classic notions of womanhood as chaste, peaceful and motherly. Instead, she belongs in a hyper-masculine realm of violence and control, planning

[281] *Strandline,* 50.

and orchestrating Shirley's murder. During Tom's wake, Clodagh punishes Máirín by revealing the town's darkest secret: Tom was involved in the brutal murder of Shirley Sweeney. Clodagh revels in cruelly describing to Máirín how Tom first seduced and then strangled Shirley:

> …so him and Derek's invited, invited by her, back to the caravan, her shyness suddenly having disappeared, you could say…He used a pair of her oul' tights that were drying on the fire…And when he puts them round her neck wasn't the steam comin' off in puffs and up round him and he couldn't get a grip all right…[282]

It is not only Clodagh's ease at ordering the killing of Shirley but also her delight in recounting it which so strongly disrupts traditional ideas of femininity. Clodagh is also shown to have no motherly instincts and instead jokes about the letters that she and the townspeople continue to send Sweeney following his mother's "disappearance:" "Dear son, I am sorry, awful sorry. I took one look at your ugly wee face and done a runner…"[283] The town together has conspired to cover up the murder and has told Sweeney that his mother simply left with a lover and is roaming around Europe. Over the years, as community members went on vacation around Europe, they sent back postcards to Sweeney from his "mother." At the end of the play, when Sweeney decides to leave town and search for his mother, Clodagh tries to dissuade him by viciously telling Sweeney that his mother never loved him: "Why don't you realize that there is no way on this planet a woman would want a thing like you around the place? Gimpy wee head on you, sure even Máirín threw you out. And as for your ma…she used to say the same. 'Keep that

[282] *Strandline*, 83.
[283] *Strandline*, 84.

thing away from me. The head on that child.'"[284] She goes on to tell Sweeney that his mother was a whore: "But Máirín's husband knew your mammy…Shirley was the fellahs' fave."[285] Clodagh's orchestration of Shirley's murder, her indifference to Sweeney's pain at losing a mother, and her pleasure in revealing Tom's murderous past to Máirín bespeaks of an almost pathological pleasure for violence and cruelty.

The similarities between Clodagh's role as a powerful matriarch policing her community to that of a paramilitary leader regulating his town is an extremely troubling but important parallel. The play seems to suggest that the line between civilian and solider has been blurred even in peacetime. It appears that the violence and trauma of the Troubles has permanently altered the people of the North to the point where its women have become just as sadistic and cruel as its worse paramilitary members. Clodagh is presented as a cruel, almost monstrous woman: she has an affair with Tom, she orders the execution of Shirley Sweeney, she bullies and manipulates everyone in the community, and she threatens the life of young Sweeney.

However, it is also suggested that Clodagh is not a naturally cruel and violent individual but is a product, like the rest of the town, of decades, if not centuries, of violent sectarian conflict. Clodagh, herself, is aware that the Troubles has had a traumatic psychological effect on herself and the rest of the town's inhabitants:

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[284] *Strandline,* 95.
[285] *Strandline,* 95-96.

> Whatever the ones in a town's been up to, they're just all trying to scratch on, Máirín. Trying to survive these times and maybe have a bit of craic. With weddings and drinking and fights and feuds. And sometimes bad things get done. Sometimes bad things get done. Jesus we had thirty years of bad things being done. Terrible, shockin' things done, if you take yourself back. There comes a time when you have to turn a blind eye.[286]

Clodagh explains away Shirley's murder as simply an extension of the Troubles. Shirley's death was just another "terrible, shockin'' thing from the past that blends in with all the other traumas that the town went through; and, at some point, one must simply "turn a blind eye" and forget the past. Clodagh wants Máirín to believe that Shirley's death is just one more dark secret from the Troubles to bury and keep hidden. However, the play shows that the past always has a way of bleeding into the present, not only with secrets revealed but also with a lingering psychological and emotional scarring. The Troubles, with all of its violent secrets and dark past, lingers just under the surface of this community, lying in abeyance, always threatening to rise up and poison the progress of peace. The play suggests that in trying to suppress and reject their violent past, the community only succeeds in creating more violence: implicating the town in a vicious murder and turning the women of the community like Clodagh into monstrous killers.

The normalization of Troubles' violence and a warfare mentality (even fifteen years into the peace process) has broken the moral compass of the town's inhabitants. Máirín's own hypocrisy and lack of moral character is reinforced when she assures Clodagh that she will not be revealing the town's secrets. Although Máirín knows the right thing would be to inform the police about

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[286] *Strandline*, 65-66.

Shirley Sweeney's murder, she does not want the depravity of her hometown affecting the reputation of her business: "And speaking out would be the brave thing. The right thing. The big thing, wouldn't it? But now, Clodagh, wouldn't I be affected all the same? Me…I'm good at keeping secrets too. Born till it, I am. 'Whatever you say, say nothin'."[287] Here, Máirín references the most infamous saying of the Troubles: *Whatever you say, say nothing.* This mantra reflected an atmosphere where silence was the only safe option during a period in which the state and the police were often at odds with the Catholic community. Revealing information to anyone could lead to terrible and unforeseen consequences. Spallen suggests that this culture of secrets and silence arising from the Troubles is still an insidious and ongoing issue during the peace process. Instead of confronting and uncovering the terrible events of the past, communities are burying their secrets and pushing them underground lest they cause further damage in the present. However, the play demonstrates how the secrets of the Troubles, no matter how hard they are hidden or repressed, will always find a way to surface, delivering new and further harm to those in the present.

In *Pumpgirl* and *Strandline*, children often receive the brunt of lingering Troubles violence. As Spallen says, "The most difficult thing to be in this world and the most dangerous thing to be is a woman or a child. I have a lot of children in peril." [288] Although children like Sweeney (as well as Sinead's children in *Pumpgirl)* are the first generation to be born into the peace process and to have no living memory of the Troubles, they all inherit a legacy of violence and are

[287] *Strandline,* 66.
[288] Spallen, Phone interview with Fiona Coffey, May 22, 2012.

directly affected by it: Sweeney's mother is killed and his own life is threatened while Sinead's children lose their father and are almost killed by Pumpgirl. In addition to a lingering Troubles legacy haunting the North today, the effects of peacetime on the next generation are positioned as unstable. In *Strandline*, the town feels that Sweeney's generation has become weak and needy. Because Sweeney is a child of peacetime, he has not been hardened to life in the same way that the rest of the town has. Clodagh says, "That's what happens, son, when you don't grow up in a war."[289] Eileen adds, "Benefit of a bit of conflict would have done you no harm at all."[290] While this is a very humorous moment in the play, the women of the town are perversely arguing that the Troubles made them strong, independent, and aggressive, able to fight their own battles and fend for themselves. According to Clodagh and Eileen, the peacetime generation lacks these skills. However, Spallen seems to be arguing that it is not the peacetime generation which lacks character but the Troubles generation which has been unable to adapt to peacetime. Members of the older generation are still perpetuating the violent cycles of the past, unable to change their psychology, habits, and survival skills that they developed during the height of the conflict. The Troubles may technically be over, Spallen asserts, but the conflict still defines the way that people operate and the way they view the world.

Reviews from the 2009 Fishamble production in Dublin were generally positive and encouraging of Spallen's work. Fine direction and stunning sets that

[289] *Strandline,* 96.
[290] *Strandline,* 96.

evoked the grandness of Máirín's house against the wild ocean enhanced the production. The British newspaper, *The Sunday Times,* wrote:

> Abbie Spallen's drama works well on several levels, combining complex thriller, treatise on identity and brooding character study. The setting, an isolated rural seaside community on the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic, is superbly sketched out via Spallen's blackly comic use of vernacular. Despite the wide open spaces of Sabine Dargent's superb set, the director, Jim Culleton, guides proceedings with an air of clammy claustrophobia, building tension as the storm outside comes to mirror the conflict within the house.[291]

However, many reviewers remarked that Spallen mixed too many complex themes into the play, muddying a clear thesis and making it difficult for the audience to sort through the play's competing demands for attention. The British newspaper, *The Guardian,* complained about the play's lack of clear focus:

> Spallen's gift for explosive dialogue is reinforced here. This time she works larger themes into the women's verbal jousting, so many, in fact, that it is not always clear what the main focus is. Post-peace-process politics, the environment, inequality, class envy, the role of the artist: all of these are tossed around, leaving the impression of a whirlpool of ideas, and a writer with big ambitions.[292]

The *Irish Times* agreed, complaining:

> Spallen weaves so many strands into the fabric of the play property, economy, mythology, environment, banditry, artistry that it is a challenge to tie them together, to resolve a play thick with detail in a twist of heavy menace: part State of the Nation, part Wicker Man… Between a fastidious plot and a wide scope of allusions, it may be hard to take in everything during one sitting. Yet that owes something to the high tide of Spallen's ideas: awash with style and verve, wit and intellect, provoking further thoughts when those waves roll out.[293]

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[291] Declan Burke, "Strandline," *The Sunday Times (London),* November 29, 2009, 34.
[292] Helen Meany, "Review: *Strandline,*" *The Guardian,* November 23, 2009, 34.
[293] Peter Crawley, "*Strandline," The Irish Times*, November 21, 2009, 8.

Despite some weaknesses of the script, all the reviewers agreed that the play's themes were astute and illuminating, revealing a hidden side of the peace process that is rarely talked about in the North or shown on the theatrical stage.

A common criticism of Spallen's work from Northern audiences is that her plays reflect an outdated and unsophisticated representation of the North. In *Pumpgirl* and *Strandline*, Spallen certainly does not present the progressive "new Belfast" or "New Northern Ireland" that the government is so focused on promoting. Both plays are specific to a certain area of the North- a borderlands region that remains very rural, very poor, and very insular. There has not been much change economically and socially in that region since the start of the peace process, and factions of the Real IRA and Continuity IRA still patrol the area. Spallen says of the region,

> There are no prospects and nothing to do. In a normal environment, a lot of those young men [who are now in the IRA] would be swallowed up by the [British] army. But you can't join the army in Northern Ireland and that is not going to change overnight….those are the [military] jobs that would usually suck those people up. The Celtic Tiger really didn't hit [the borderlands].[294]

While Belfast might be trying to reposition itself as a new modern and progressive state, parts of the North, Spallen suggests, are being left behind. *Pumpgirl* is set at the height of the Celtic Tiger, and *Strandline* is set in the immediate aftermath of its fall. Yet, both plays suggest that the Celtic Tiger was a relatively limited event, benefitting primarily those in urban locations such as Belfast and Dublin. Spallen also highlights the fact that the North never

[294] Spallen, Phone interview with Fiona Coffey, May 22, 2012.

experienced the same growth and influx of wealth that the Republic enjoyed, which enhanced the already wide divide between the North and south.

Thirty years after the start of the Troubles and over a decade into a fragile peace, *Pumpgirl* and *Strandline* present a Northern Ireland that is laboring to move forward and cast off its tumultuous past. Men and women are struggling to determine whether the same definitions of masculinity and femininity used in wartime are useful in peacetime. Without an active violent struggle through which to define their own masculinity, men's roles in society are starting to shift. In *Pumpgirl*, poverty and lack of jobs have aggravated feelings of diminished or lost masculinity. Unable to provide for their families and no longer able to align themselves with a greater cause or group, the men in *Pumpgirl* are searching for a new way to define themselves and their lives. Similarly, in *Strandline*, Tom has been emasculated through Máirín's financial success. He has resorted to illegal dumping of toxic waste, having affairs, and secretly going to the pub every night. It is interesting to note the only onstage male role in *Strandline* is a young vulnerable boy/orphan; men are talked about but they do not appear on stage, suggesting that men's prominent role in society may have diminished in importance during peacetime.

In addition, while women were expected to be subservient to the needs of the nation during the protracted period of the Troubles, the introduction of peacetime would appear to be a new opportunity for women to make strides forward in terms of jobs, education, and social status within the community and at

home. However, in *Pumpgirl,* Spallen shows that intense poverty and lingering violence has stunted this potential growth, preventing women from moving outside of traditional roles. Instead, men's emasculation has pushed women back into a tighter feminine domain. Furthermore, in *Strandline,* the lingering effects of the Troubles have turned the women of the town into murders, bullies, and liars, demonstrating how women can also become radicalized by the sectarian conflict.

It is important to note that when writing these works, Spallen insists that she did not consciously construct her plays around post-Troubles gender roles. Instead, Spallen wrote *Pumpgirl* and *Strandline* based on her experiences growing up in the North and seeing members of her community trapped in poverty and cycles of violence. The themes in her plays came naturally and organically out of her experiences living in the region. Spallen is careful to say, "I only write about what I know; I am not writing about something and making a comment about it. For me, it's perfectly normal. And when other people say [my work is] violent, it sort of depends on your perception of violence."[295] Thus, when critics accuse her of being gratuitously violent or showing anachronistic representations of the rural North, it surprises Spallen who views her plays as honest, genuine, and realistic.

Furthermore, if there is one thing that Spallen is most decidedly not, it is a "woman writer," and she dislikes having her writing put into a gendered category. While the Irish theatre sector has recently tried to rectify a long unbalanced gender bias in the theatre, Spallen finds the island's recent focus on women's writing "reductive" and "prehistoric."[296] She finds it less pervasive in London

[295] Spallen, Phone interview with Fiona Coffey, May 22, 2012.
[296] Spallen, Phone interview with Fiona Coffey, May 22, 2012.

where "you will not be marketed or bracketed as a woman writer. It does exist here but you are not specifically seen in terms of gender."[297] While she is dismissive of the role of feminism and any strength that can come from the category of women's writing, she is also aware that the island has ignored women's contributions to drama: "They have always been there — Anne Devlin, Christina Reid, Marie Jones? Women's voices have always been there. Maybe people haven't wanted to hear what we want to say."[298] Although Spallen denies any overt or conscious efforts to explore issues of gender in her plays, her works speak to the otherwise; *Pumpgirl* and *Strandline* strongly revolve around gender politics, bringing to light important and often ignored issues about the status of rural women in the North today.

Overall, Spallen's work explores the complex and ever-shifting landscape of Northern Irish culture and the lingering effects that the sectarian conflict has had on the emotional and psychological development of individuals in the North. Instead of embracing the government and media's push to reposition the country as a peaceful and progressive modern state, Spallen remains an important and defiant voice that refuses to gloss over vital issues that dominate contemporary Northern society such as violence, class divide, and restrictive gender norms. While this commitment to examining the darker sides of Northern culture has made it difficult for her work to be produced on the island, her recent appointment as the Lyric's writer-in-residence signals, perhaps, a new push to show more inclusive and diverse representations of Northern life on the Irish stage.

[297] Spallen, Phone interview with Fiona Coffey, May 22, 2012.
[298] "The Driver, the Pumpgirl, her lover and his wife," *Belfast Telegraph*, August 29, 2008.

Chapter Five: Stacey Gregg and the Urban Underclass

In contrast to Abbie Spallen's focus on the rural borderlands of the North, Stacey Gregg writes about life in urban Belfast. Despite this significant difference, many of the themes in their work are similar, and Gregg's career trajectory has also taken a comparably difficult path. Like Spallen, Gregg explores increasing class divisions, sexuality and gender politics, and the effects of the peace process on Northern citizens. In addition, she looks at the changing economic, ethnic, and cultural landscape of Belfast as it progresses into a decade and a half of peace. Like Spallen, Gregg also struggled for years to be recognized by the Irish theatre sector. Theatres rejected her highly political and often controversial images of the North, and her propensity to write in an anti-realistic style made her plays less commercially appealing. Gregg currently lives in London where she too has found more consistent support from British theatres.

Gregg comes from Dundonald in east Belfast known for its staunchly conservative loyalist culture and its working-class community. Like many working-class Protestants, her father and brother both have careers in the civil service. Gregg spent her youth duplicating her father's loyalist politics although she never held deep personal beliefs about them. It was only at college, when she left the North to attend Cambridge University in England, that she had the space and autonomy to develop a more independent and authentic voice of her own. Greg reflects, "Until I left home at eighteen, I was just parroting back what my

dad said with great conviction. That is quite a journey for anyone from here to go out and realize that not everybody thinks the way you do or the way that you have been told you should."[299]

Like Spallen, Gregg has felt like an outsider for most of her life: "Growing up in a ways, feeling that you're slightly different, slightly on the edge, like as though you are watching the way you are supposed to do things has had an impact." [300] She channeled this persistent feeling of alienation from her working-class, loyalist background into her writing. Gregg believes that her outsider status within loyalist culture allowed her to develop a natural empathy for the Catholic experience and perspective. She integrates both Protestant and Catholic characters in her work, showing compassion and understanding for multiple points of view, a mindset that is not easily achieved growing up in a deeply sectarian community. Indeed, one of Gregg's greatest strengths as a writer is her ability to show the best and worst sides of each community without condemnation or judgment. Gregg finds humanity in all of her characters- whether it is the racist Catholic cab driver who is afraid that his job is going to be taken over by an immigrant or the Protestant ex-pat returning home to Belfast for the first time in years with deep ambiguity towards what he views as the closed-minded and parochial culture of the North.

Just like Spallen's hometown of Newry, artistic careers were frowned upon in loyalist Belfast not only for practical and economic reasons but also for unique cultural ones. In reaction to a perceived flamboyance and emotion

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[299] Stacey Gregg, "In-person Interview with Fiona Coffey," Belfast, Northern Ireland, May 27, 2012.
[300] Gregg, "Interview with Fiona Coffey," May 27, 2012.

associated with the Catholic community, Northern Protestant culture has historically worked hard to define itself in direct opposition to these characteristics, embracing a somber and serious conservatism. Correspondingly, it has viewed artistic or theatrical enterprises with suspicion. As Gregg described, "Anything that smelled remotely of equal rights or artsy was gay or Catholic."[301] Gregg was taught that the theatre was Catholic popery and, unsurprisingly, she was not exposed to theatre growing up or within her secondary education. The arts were thus considered by many within the Protestant community as the lesser domain of the Catholics, and something in which good Protestants would not engage.

Discomfort with artistic expression has led to the commonly held view that there are few Protestant artists from the North and that the Catholics have been more effective in using the arts to promote their side of the conflict. In reality, however, many Protestants have engaged with the theatre. Charabanc was founded, of course, by several Protestant women; Marie Jones and Christina Reid are both Protestant; and two of the North's most celebrated playwrights, Gary Mitchell and Stewart Parker, come from the Protestant faith. Despite these examples, this stereotype persists within Protestant culture.[302] In a 2000 interview with the *Guardian* newspaper, Gary Mitchell, who, like Gregg, is from a loyalist background, explained the general mindset of the Protestant culture: "Protestants don't write plays, you see. You must be a Catholic or a Catholic sympathizer, or a

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[301]Gregg, "Interview with Fiona Coffey," May 27, 2012.
[302] David McKittrick "Why Irish Protestants are Hungry for a Voice," *The Independent,* October 31, 2008, http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/features/why-irish-protestants-are-hungry-for-a-voice-979855.html.

homosexual to do that. No one in our community does that because playwriting is a silly, pretend thing."[303] Growing up within this ideology that shunned the arts, Gregg was the first in her family to go to college and the first to explore an artistic career.

Gregg offers another interesting explanation for the strong history of arts in the Catholic communities versus the relative lack thereof in the Protestant. Historically, the majority of housing in the North was reserved for Protestants who lived in larger homes spread out over wider areas. In contrast, Catholic housing tended to be crowded with large families living in small homes, which were physically close together. This crowded Catholic structure tended to encourage community gatherings whether it be church services on Sunday, the Gaelic Athletic Association, political rallies, or Irish Fèis. Class divisions were also less severe in the Catholic communities than in Protestant ones. While there were few middle and upper-class Catholic families during the Troubles, the Protestant community was deeply stratified into the extremely poor, the working/middle class, and the upper class. Playwrights such as Gary Mitchell have addressed the stratified nature of this class-system in which the loyalist working class was expected to fight for and defend Northern territory while rich Protestants lived outside of the warzones in the wealthy suburbs. These politically powerful, Protestant business owners benefitted from the sectarian divisions politically and economically without having to directly engage in the violence or endanger their own families. The Catholic community, however, was primarily

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[303] Fiachra Gibbons, "Truth and Nail," *The Guardian,* April 9, 2000, http://www.guardian.co.uk/culture/2000/apr/10/artsfeatures.northernireland.

working-class and thus typically had fewer of the same class divisions and resentments within their community. Gregg believes, this flatter class-structure plus the physical intimacy of the Catholic community may have allowed the arts to spread more easily, creating a richer tradition for and greater acceptance of artistic expression.

Gregg initially was interested in pursuing visual arts and had intended to study drawing, sculpture, and painting in college. However, when she was accepted into Cambridge University to study literature (a high honor in any circumstance but amplified by the fact that she was the first to attend college in her family), she immediately accepted. Despite an extremely difficult cultural transition to the highly privileged environment of Cambridge, Gregg was introduced for the first time to the classical canon of theatre as well as to theatre history. Unimpressed with the classical plays that the university was producing, she directed several experimental shows at Cambridge, focusing on Steven Berkoff, Edward Bond, and European expressionist works: "My exposure to theatre was really piecemeal….I was really attracted to Berkoff, Bond, and more expressionist European stuff, and it didn't occur to me that wasn't going on because I didn't see what was going on because I never went to theatre. I just assumed that was theatre."[304] As Gregg notes, because she was first exposed to theatre at Cambridge, she was unaware that her attraction to avant-garde theatre was not necessarily reflective of contemporary Irish or British theatre practices. As a result, she does not take much inspiration from Irish theatre and instead has looked primarily towards the visual performance of German expressionism and

[304] Gregg, "Interview with Fiona Coffey," May 27, 2012.

the experimental theatre traditions of 1960s America. This lack of connection to Irish theatrical history is both a strength and a failure of Northern theatre today. Without a connection to the past, Gregg perhaps feels liberated to try new forms and styles, thus bringing fresh, outside influences to Northern theatre. However, not understanding how her work fits into the larger history of Northern drama means that she often does not recognize or acknowledge the large debt she owes to the writers who came before her or the distinctly Northern traditions that she has continued in her writing.

Gregg wrote her first play, *Ismeme,* in 2006 after she graduated from Cambridge University. Similar to the Field Day and DubbelJoint models of resetting European classics within contemporary Northern Ireland, *Ismene* is based on the Greek myth *Antigone* but reset in Troubles Belfast. The play's protagonist is Antigone's sister, Ismene, and the play revolves around her response to her brother's death. Gregg's version was inspired by the true story of the McCartney sisters, five Catholic women who fought for justice after their brother was killed by the IRA in 2005. The play explores how *Antigone*'s original themes of mourning, violence, and revenge resonate deeply within the Troubled North. The play, which was produced by a student group at Cambridge, won her a literary agent. However, Gregg then spent several years writing experimental works which failed to get produced by any professional theatres. She speculates that because these plays were anti-illusionistic with highly poetic language and strong visual aesthetics, theatres, which were used to more realistic, dialogue-based Irish playwriting, were confused and disinterested: "It has been tough. The

stuff I write has often not been naturalist and the predominant taste in theatre is so naturalist -- particularly in London."[305] She did manage to get a few short plays and collaborative pieces produced at smaller theatres which had development programs such as such as *The Grand Tour* (Rough Magic SEEDS program, 2007) and *Bruised* (Tinderbox, 2008; collaboration).

It is important to note that in the past ten to fifteen years, many Irish theatres have encouraged collaborative writing with a disproportionate amount of women being involved in these joint projects. This shift occurred during the early 2000s primarily due to restricted funding as well as a new mandate from the Belfast Agreement that the North be more inclusive with all its citizens. The Northern Irish Arts Council, in order to fund more groups and projects, encouraged theatres to split their limited funding among as many artists as possible. This has led to theatres demonstrating "diversity" and "inclusivity" by often grouping together women writers, emerging writers, or ethnic minority writers into collaborative writing projects to demonstrate that they are working with and supporting marginalized members of the community. Gregg reflects, "I feel like, because of funding issues and because the way the industry works, there was a real pressure…it felt like tick off 'emerging writer' or 'women writers' box and what better way to do that is than make one play and use six of them all at once. And I don't really believe it gives the best results."[306] She finds that collaborative projects can often result in less successful theatre especially when writers are assigned to work together rather than collaborating naturally: "I am not

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[305]Andrea Byrne, "Young Playwright in Class of her own," *Independent.ie*, May 29, 2011. http://www.independent.ie/incoming/young-playwright-in-class-of-her-own-2660765.html.
[306] Gregg, "Interview with Fiona Coffey," May 27, 2012.

convinced, unless it is an organic collaboration and you have sat in the pub with someone for several months and say come on, let's do this, I am not convinced what you get out of that."[307] In addition to *Bruised* at Tinderbox, she has done collaborative pieces with the Bush Theatre in London (*50 Ways to Leave Your Lover*, 2008) and Paines Plough (*Come to Where I'm From*, 2012).

Despite her reservations about the quality of collaborative work, Gregg was grateful for these development opportunities, which helped expose her writing to other theatres. Another workshop opportunity came in 2008 when the Abbey Theatre's developing playwrights program invited Gregg to write a twenty-minute play, which was then produced in a staged public reading. This experience allowed Gregg to form a relationship with the Abbey and to become better known by other Irish theatres. The success of her short play, *When Cows Go Boom*, led to a joint-commission by the Abbey and the Goethe Institute of her next play, *Shibboleath*.

Gregg wrote *Shibboleath* in the German language as part of the "2009 After the Fall" project*:* a pan-European initiative to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. The play takes its title from the Hebrew word meaning an often-outdated cultural custom which distinguishes a particular social group. Addressing a subject matter that is very relevant to the North, the term is often used in reference to coded language which clearly identifies membership within a specific sect. *Shibboleath* is about the paradoxical increase in the number of so-called "peace walls" which have been erected in Belfast since 1998. Despite declarations of peace and the signing of the Belfast Agreement,

[307] Gregg, "Interview with Fiona Coffey," May 27, 2012.

there were nine walls erected in 1998 in areas of Belfast where Catholic and Protestant communities joined in order to separate and "protect" the residents. There are now over forty peace walls in the city since the signing of the agreement. The play explores the contradiction that fifteen years into the peace process, Belfast remains deeply segregated with separate schools and community facilities for Catholic and Protestant neighborhoods. An exchange between Darren, a young boy, and his father, Alan, who is building a new peace wall captures the essence of the play's message:

Darren	What's a peace wall do when there's no war?
Alan	I dunno, suppose people like the idea of them. They paint them up dead nice now, with murals about all the peace we're havin. And they bring the tourists.[308]

As Alan posits, the walls are a fundamental paradox: painted with murals about the peace process, they portend to maintain the peace while in reality they continue to segregate the community and perpetuate sectarian divisions. The walls have become a natural and expected part of the physical landscape of Belfast; and the community, like Alan, has become unable to recognize that the walls exacerbate tensions rather than quell them. Furthermore, tourists expect the peace walls to be an integral part of the Belfast experience, signaling how the economics of Troubles tourism has inadvertently prolonged divisions. Darren, however, represents a new generation that has grown up in peacetime and has not witnessed the violence that led to the walls' erection. It takes his questioning of the wall's purpose for his father to think more deeply about the role of peace walls in

[308] Stacey Gregg, *Shibboleth*, unpublished manuscript with no page numbers, 2009. Hereafter referred to *Shibboleth* and date.

Northern society. Darren is part of a new generation that often questions accepted practices. For example, he also wishes to attend the "integrated" school which educates Protestant and Catholic children together, despite his parent's wishes.

The play also addresses how Belfast has changed dramatically with the immigration of eastern Europeans and Africans into the city, generating new class and ethnic prejudices. As the workers slowly the build the peace wall, they reflect on how the physical landscape has changed since the height of the conflict. Belfast has transformed from a bombed-out war zone into a cosmopolitan city. As one worker remarks, "Development: hotels, spas, Nandos, boutiques. Few years ago ya couldn't get yourself a latte in Belfast City. Now look."[309] Although prosperity and development has come to Belfast, economic gain still remains in the hands of an elite. That elite is made up of the same politicians and upper-class citizens who benefited from the violence during the Troubles. One worker remembers, "when politicians were incitin' us fodder to fight while they sat back and shook their heads, pursed their lips, washed their lily white hands."[310] Throughout the play, politicians are shown to be ineffectual, selfish, and cowardly, unable to stand up for what it right even in peacetime. Furthermore, Gregg argues, the peacetime economic development in the North has only benefitted the same privileged few who also received financial gain from the Troubles.

Gregg uses several nonrealistic devices in this play. The peace wall is played by an actor who sings and speaks to the audience. The "brickies," who are

[309] *Shibboleth*, 2009.
[310] *Shibboleth*, 2009.

building the wall, move in and out of naturalistic dialogue to include rhythmic verse and chant. They also narrate the sounds of building the wall: "Crack!," "Flop!," "Smack!," "Whack!"[311] Gregg also made certain lines in the dialogue optional for the ensemble to articulate. Therefore, a character will start a thought or sentence but it will be finished by one or more other characters. In doing so, the audience is never able to comfortably settle into standard Irish social-realism. The anti-illusionistic techniques require the audience to look at the play's issues in a new light and to question accepted practices such as the paradoxical nature of the peace walls and who is really benefitting from peacetime economic development.

Despite their initial support of the work, the Abbey found the themes of the play too controversial to stage. Out of frustration that theatres were not responding to her more experimental work, Gregg decided to write a more commercial and traditional piece as a last attempt to fully break into the professional theatre scene. She wrote *Perve* and *Lagan* at the same time between 2010 and 2011; however, the two plays cannot be more different. Gregg describes *Perve* as a "paint by numbers social realist" play while *Lagan* is a stream of consciousness monologue play that eschews any realistic narrative structure. Gregg commented:

> Compared to the stuff I usually do, [*Perve* is] very compact and it's very sparse, and that's part of the aesthetic….I had written all these mad plays with like twelve people and singing walls and people taking limbs off. And then I wrote this one play [*Perve*] that was a bit kind of easy and it got immediately picked up [by the Abbey]. [312]

[311] *Shibboleth*, 2009.
[312] Gregg "Interview with Fiona Coffey," May 27, 2012.

Thus, Gregg went from an unknown playwright in 2010 to landing arguably the most competitive and coveted platform in all of Irish theatre in 2011.

Although *Perve* does not explore the post-Troubles North like the rest of the plays included in this research, it is Gregg's most recognized, wildly produced play and thus deserves brief analysis. *Perve* is set in an indeterminate, middle-class suburb in the present day. Although the characters' dialects locate the play in Ireland, no stage directions specify a location or country. Indeed, the play purposefully has a neutrality to it, making it easily adaptable to any western country. This has already extended its production life with several regional stagings in Australia and Canada. Despite Gregg's natural affinity for experimental and nonrealistic writing, Gregg is ironically best known for her most traditional and realistic work.

Sixteen-year-old Sarah is bullied at school. A few girls photo-shop her head onto a naked body and text it to the entire student population. Gethin, her twenty-three-year-old brother, is an aspiring documentary filmmaker still living at home. A neighbor has been accused of being a child molester, and the town has collectively shunned and harassed him. Gethin is not convinced that the neighbor is guilty and believes that cultural hysteria surrounding child molestation has created an environment wherein innocent people can easily be accused of crimes. He decides to prove his point by conducting an experiment. Gethin convinces Sarah to spread a false rumor at her high school that he is a child molester. His plan is to document the hysteria and false accusations that follow with his video camera in order to show how rumors and suspicions can destroy innocent lives.

Perve is plot-driven, focusing on the dangers of social media and technology, school bullying, and media/community hysteria regarding sexual molestation. The realistic dialogue is straightforward and unremarkable while the characters lack the complexity of Gregg's other work. However, the strength of the play comes from its timely relevance regarding the intersection of sex, teens, and technology. It also, importantly, taps into the cultural fallout from the Catholic priest sex abuse scandal that has rocked Ireland in the past two decades.[313] As rumors start to swirl that Gethin has molested children, the police start to uncover the young man's past, stirring up circumstantial evidence of guilt that Gethin failed to anticipate. During high school, his best friend, Nick, showed Gethin a naked picture of Nick's girlfriend; Gethin texted the picture to friends, and it ended up spreading throughout the school. The police also find porn on Gethin's computer along with naked pictures of himself (which he had taken in order to track his progress lifting weights). Slowly the police build a case of circumstantial evidence that convinces them of Gethin's guilt. When he tries to show the police the computer files he has compiled along the way to prove his innocence, he discovers that Nick has erased them from his hard drive in revenge for his distribution of the naked photo years ago. His friend's angry vengeance is not fully explained, however, until the end of the play when it is revealed that Nick was sexually abused as a child by Gethin's uncle. The play insinuates that Gethin's mother suspected the abuse but did nothing. The play ends with Nick

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[313] Starting in the 1990s, lawsuits and government inquires uncovered a large-scale sexual abuse scandal within the Irish Catholic church. The government-sponsored Ryan Report, which was released in 2009, researched allegations of sexual abuse in Ireland starting from the 1930s. The report found that rape and sexual molestation were "endemic" in church-run industrial schools and orphanages for decades in Ireland.

agreeing to argue Gethin's innocence to the police; however, it is unclear whether things have spun so far out of control that Gethin is beyond redemption. The play is a parable about the dangers when naïve teens recklessly mix technology and sex, and it speaks to the power of rumor and innuendo to destroy lives.

The reaction to the Abbey's production was shaped significantly by the Ryan Report, which was released in 2009. The 2,600-page report was the result of a nine-year inquiry into the sex abuse scandal within the Catholic Church. It found that abuse was "endemic" within church-run schools and orphanages for decades, thrusting child sexual abuse into the media glare and severely weakening the Church's authority in Ireland. Although Gregg did not write *Perve* with Ireland specifically in mind, Irish audiences and reviewers naturally viewed the play as a commentary on the widespread child molestation in their country. Gregg recalled, "I didn't write it to go on in Ireland. When it was picked up to go on in Ireland, I thought, holy moly this could be interesting because Ireland had just come through the Ryan Report and was in a real state of crisis."[314]

While Gregg intended the focus of the play to be on the dangerous intersection between sex and technology and how group hysteria can warp such issues, audiences and critics repeatedly honed in on the sex abuse aspect of the play. *The Guardian* wrote, "While the premise is intriguing in the abstract, it doesn't delve deeply enough into the difficult subjects it raises. Revelations of childhood abuse that have been buried in memory are thrown away almost as soon as they surface, leading to a rushed ending that is unsatisfactorily chirpy,

[314] Gregg "Interview with Fiona Coffey," May 27, 2012.

beating a hasty retreat from painful reality."[315] As the *Guardian* piece reflects, Gregg predicted that many critics would not understand the message of *Perve*: "I knew that people would call it a pedophile play…The most widespread response to *Perve* was there is not enough pedophilia. Where is the abuse? I paid to see an abuse play? Whereas I felt I was writing about something a bit different."[316] Like *The Guardian, The Irish Times* criticized the play for talking around the sexual abuse instead of confronting it directly: "[the play's] argument is so couched in ambiguity and deniability that little is ventured…Even the specter of actual abuse, when it finally appears, is glibly summoned and dispelled. This makes the play unsettling but not challenging, questioning but not brave."[317] The article concludes that the play is an "abstract on sexual and social perversity that is afraid to get itself dirty."[318] While cultural and historical specificity may have led some critics to focus on the sex abuse aspects of the play rather than the playwright's intended topics, Gregg is certainly not a writer who is afraid to get herself dirty. Indeed, it was Irish theatres including the Abbey that declined to stage her more hard-hitting and controversial work.

Irish theatres shying away from controversy would again be an issue when Gregg wrote her play *Lagan,* which deals with similar themes as *Shibboleth*. To date, no theatre in Ireland has staged the play although it is a much more sophisticated and compelling piece than *Perve*. The same year as the Abbey's production of *Perve*, the independent British theatre companies Oval House

[315] Helen Meany, "*Perve*- Review," *The Guardian,* June 6, 2011, http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2011/jun/06/perve-review.
[316] Gregg "Interview with Fiona Coffey," May 27, 2012.
[317] Peter Crawley, "This week we were…," *The Irish Times,* June 4, 2011, 8.
[318] Crawley, "This week we were…," 8.

Theatre and Root Theatre Company produced *Lagan*. This piece was Gregg's attempt at writing a traditional Irish monologue play, although she tried to push and stretch the form further with stream of consciousness writing: "Lagan came out as, 'If everyone is writing these Irish monologue plays, then f**k it, I am going to write one'….I was trying to push beyond a lot of that great tradition of Irish monologue direct-address plays because I wanted to make something really vital that was absolutely in the moment, absolutely of now."[319] *Lagan* grew out of several small, disconnected vignettes she had been writing. When she looked at them as a whole, Gregg realized that she had been working out her feelings about Northern Ireland's transition into the peace process. *Lagan* has, what Gregg considers to be, a cumulative effect through the stream of consciousness monologue; the voices, emotions, and characters build up over the course of the play, creating, what she calls, a "density of experience." Her goal was to heighten and condense all the sounds, images, and emotions of present-day Northern Ireland so the audience could view the intense changes that the North is currently experiencing with a more critical eye. Gregg explained, "I wanted to immerse people in Northern Irishness, family, all those claustrophobic things going on…"[320] The dense, poetic, stream of consciousness prose of the play recalls Mark O'Rowe's experimental monologue play, *Terminus;* although Gregg had not seen this play before she wrote *Lagan*. Unlike *Terminus*, however, *Lagan* breaks from highly lyrical and poetic monologues to also include naturalistic dialogue.

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[319] Gregg "Interview with Fiona Coffey," May 27, 2012.
[320] Gregg, "Interview with Fiona Coffey," May 27, 2012.

Thus, in stark contrast to the straightforward plot and realistic dialogue of *Perve*, *Lagan* is an ensemble play that mixes overlapping, sometimes disjointed dialogue with often cryptic monologues. While *Perve* uses casual colloquial speech, *Lagan* is characterized by poetic and lyrical language that is dominated by symbolism and metaphor. The play follows nine individuals in Belfast as they flow into and out of each other's lives. Twenty-four-year-old Ian, an aspiring writer, reluctantly returns home from London after many years away. His mother, Anne, has summoned him to Belfast where he is to accompany his seventeen-year-old sister, Aoife, back to London for an abortion. Aoife has had an affair with a forty-six-year-old man, Terry, who is the abusive father of twenty-one-year-old Fiona. Fiona is stuck in a dead-end job as a checkout girl and after many years of abuse at the hands of her father, she self-harms, cutting her body with razors. She falls in love with Emmett, the only surviving son of Joan. Joan is the ghost of a Catholic woman who haunts the stage, reliving the moment that a bomb took the life of her son, Ryan. Joan, herself now deceased, is stuck in a purgatory of Belfast, unable to reach her son in heaven and unable to support her living son. The Taximan is a working-class Catholic, enraged that his jobs and city are being taken over by immigrants. His children, Tracey (eight) and Phil (fifteen) struggle to make sense of a Northern Ireland that is inundated with a modern highly sexualized consumer culture yet fails to provide its young people with any positive options for the future.

The play does not have a linear narrative structure like *Perve*. Time moves slowly and then speeds up; there are scenes with the living and the dead;

characters narrate their own stage directions; and some characters comment on the scene like a Greek chorus. The play alternates between naturalistic dialogue and overlapping, poetic monologues; the two forms flow into each other, slowly revealing characters' private inner thoughts and feelings. The name of the play refers to the River Lagan that runs through Belfast. As *The Telegraph* wrote of the play, the characters "are all connected - either unknowingly or knowingly - and they flow in and out of each others' lives as the Lagan river flows through Belfast."[321] Thus, the free flowing river serves a metaphor both for the stream of conscious language that flows out of the mouths of the characters as well as for the movement of the characters who travel in and out of each others' lives.

Lagan uses several different theatrical techniques that constantly prevent the play from descending into realism. For example, it evokes Brechtian influences when the actors speak their own stage directions, talk in the third person, and break from dialogue with another actor to express an internal monologue directly to the audience. The actors also make special effects noises themselves such as the beeping of the check out scanner when Fiona is ringing up groceries at the local store. However, Gregg did not overtly or consciously integrate Brechtian techniques and did not intend them to pull the audience out of the illusion of the play in order to think critically about what they are seeing. Instead, Gregg views the theatre as an overtly constructed art form. Theatre is at its best, she argues, not when it tries to reflect real life, but when it embraces its theatrical and fabricated nature, highlighting its constructs and conventions. In

[321] Daisey Bowie-Sell, "Stacey Gregg's new play *Lagan* at the Oval House is ambitious and a little misguided," *The Telegraph,* November 10, 2011.

addition to Brechtian anti-realistic devices, Gregg also includes a kind of Greek chorus made up of an ensemble of characters who comment on the action occurring on stage. Beckett's influence is also evoked with the character of Joan who walks back and forth in a deep groove on the stage, created by years of pacing. The repetitive, senseless action of pacing and how it has come to define her life recalls the similarly stylized and meaningless repetition of many of Beckett's characters including those in *Footfalls* (1975).

Like *Shibboleth, Lagan* captures the many diverse and competing voices, perspectives, and experiences that contemporary Belfast now encapsulates. Fifteen years into the peace process, this "new" Belfast has transformed physically, politically, economically, and ethnically; however, many of the same problems, prejudices, and cycles of violence remain. Transformed from a rundown warzone, Belfast is now a modern European city with fancy restaurants, coffee shops, shiny new shopping malls, and luxury apartments. However, with the modernization of the city has also come new crime and violence as well as an influx of immigrants changing the color, language, and culture of the city. Taximan represents one Catholic working-class perspective. He has seen the peace process and economic development bring an influx of new immigrants into the city who are now competing for his jobs: "I says to him no one sticks up for the white man. No one sticks up for the white workin' man."[322] He is angry that the land his Catholic community fought so long and hard for is now being populated by outsiders who do not understand the complex culture or history of

[322] Stacey Gregg, *Lagan* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2012), 8. Hereafter abreviated *Lagan* and page number.

the country. Instead, he sees his interests as becoming subsumed by the peace process, immigration, and political reform. Taximan's language is laced with racist remarks, grumbling that immigrants are taking jobs away from the native Irish: "…if we just had to worry about the odd Chink runnin a takeaway that'd be dead-on…but y'know these Romanians or whatever,- everywhere now…You never used to get blacks over here…Poles is on construction…jobs is short, halfa Belfast's at the taxi-in now to get by."[323] As the Taximan feels his job opportunities slipping away within the increasingly crowded economy, he lashes out at any ethnicity that can be blamed for changing the economic and racial landscape of the new North. Despite his complaints, Taximan is also astute enough to realize that the new immigrant populations in the North are not his biggest obstacles:

> But this fucken 'Peace process'- loada tax-dodgin bastards up at Stormont, two, three incomes and claimin expenses for birdie baths and ponies and whathaveye. We're busy down here getting Annoyed at the immigrants and slabberin over scraps when we should be askin who's got it all in the first place. Young ones with halfa brain still taking off 'England…[324]

Like *Shibboleth*, *Lagan* argues that the politicians who are supposed to be guiding Northern Ireland into a new era of peace are corrupt. Just as the working classes were distracted by fighting during the Troubles (allowing the elite to gain an economic and political stronghold on the country), this cycle is repeating itself during the peace process. The Protestant and Catholic working classes are again being consumed by competition for jobs, while politicians and the rich are left to rule the country and enact legislation that continues to favor the elite and repress

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[323] *Lagan,* 9.
[324] *Lagan,* 9.

the lower classes. In addition, the country's future remains so bleak that youths are still leaving in droves. This has created a "brain-drain" in the North and prevents much hope for a resilient future. Thus, the peace process is positioned as a phenomenon that is making politicians wealthy and powerful but is not benefitting the average man. Peace and reconciliation, Gregg contends, are being conducted in Stormont and elite political arenas instead of within communities. Alarmingly, regular citizens remain unconnected to and uninvolved in the peace process in any essential manner.

In addition to the dramatically changing landscape of Belfast, an important question in *Lagan* is whether the North can ever escape its past or whether it will continue to be haunted by the traumas of the Troubles and the generational cycles of poverty, violence, and prejudice that have been born from centuries of conflict. This struggle between the past and the future is best exemplified through the character of Joan. The stage directions state that Joan is "between worlds." She is essentially a ghost, stuck in an anguished limbo, weighed down by grief and regret, and unable to accept her own death as well as that of her son Ryan. Joan recalls how she spent her life haunted by an IRA bomb, which took the life of her son. She was killed several years later when she went to the local mall and became disoriented as she relived the nightmare of her son's death. She wandered off into a construction site and was accidently crushed by falling scaffolding. The manner of her death is significant- her son was killed by Troubles violence while she was killed by the overbuilding and overconsumption of the peace process, arguably another kind of (cultural) destruction. Thus, Joan haunts Belfast and the

stage; she is a symbol of those whose lives were destroyed by sectarian violence, unable to accept the past and unable to move forward. As Joan says, "Everywhere has ghosts, but we've them comin out our friggin ears…"[325] *Lagan* thus positions the North as a location that is haunted by its history, stuck in its own purgatory, and unable to fully move forward into a more positive future. This is similar to Spallen's *Strandline* and Lisa McGee's *Girls and Dolls* which also show how past violence has leaked into the present-day North, arresting society in its wake.

Despite current-day pressures to embrace the North's new identity as progressive and peaceful, *Lagan* is primarily a portrait of those, like Joan, who have been silenced and marginalized within the peace process. Gregg believes that those who were sidelined during the Troubles (i.e. the working classes) are the same groups that today are disconnected from the peace being championed by the government. She explains this theme in *Lagan*:

> In terms of Northern Ireland and the feeling I was trying to get at is that there is a lot going on in that we are still a very closed people and it almost feels like you are talking about two different places. There is the place that is rushed on, and it's peacetime and there has been investment and it's been developed and it's great. And then there are the people who are still bleeding and who still have wounds and it is becoming and less and less acceptable or popular to talk about that. …We've reached a point where people are celebrating [the modernization and peace which has come to Belfast] but it is often at the expense of acknowledging people who are being left behind. And I don't say that with any sense of melodrama. I think that people who were most impoverished and most affected by the Troubles are still those same people, and they don't really have much of a voice and they did during the Troubles and they don't now and that must be very confusing, and I speak of this from experience given my background. [326]

[325] *Lagan,* 26.
[326] Gregg, Interview with Fiona Coffey, May 27, 2012.

Joan is a prime example of this marginalized group still entrenched in the trauma of the past and unable to keep up with the rapid pace of change the country has recently experienced.

This division between those intent on leaving the Troubles behind and building a new modern Northern Ireland and those who are still stuck in the trauma of the past is further exemplified through the character of Ian. Like Máirín in Spallen's *Strandline*, Ian is perceived by his community to be elitist because he now dresses and sounds like a Londoner. He wears cardigans, his hair is longer, and he has adopted a foreign culture and accent. Friends and neighbors perceive him to be a snob, and even his mother is embarrassed by the changes in him. When the Taximan picks Ian up from the train station, he is angered by the young man's arrogant rejection of Belfast: "Pick up some posh twat can't wait to fuck him out on his ear, gabblin on about the ferry and how he should write a book, doesn't like it here et cetera…"[327] Gregg shows that those who have left the North to forge futures elsewhere are generally looked upon with suspicion by their communities once they return. This theme is exhibited in countless women's writings including Charabanc's *Gold in the Streets* (1986), Anne Devlin's *After Easter* (1994), Morna Regan's *Midden* (2001), and Spallen's *Strandline* (2009). For Gregg and Spallen, the feeling of rejection/alienation that their characters experience upon return to the North may reflect the personal choices and experiences that each playwright made in deciding to move permanently to London to pursue their careers. Ultimately, Ian and Joan are at the heart of the play, symbolizing the North's constant struggle between the past and the future.

[327] *Lagan,* 8.

Joan is a woman trapped in the past while Ian has fled the North in order to secure a more positive future in England.

Sexuality in relation to the changing face of Belfast is also explored in *Lagan*. Aoife is pregnant with the baby of a much older man: a successful banker who is known in the neighborhood for watching porn and being a "first class wanker."[328] Aoife's pregnancy has shocked and shamed her mother, Anne, who views her daughter as a whore for getting pregnant. In contrast to her "slutty" daughter, Anne revers her son, Ian, whom she sees as smart, successful, and masculine: "Children are so soft these days, soft as boiled eggs, not like her own strapping Ian, all twelve stone of him, making his fry with capable man-hands, breaking eggs and cursing, not even pausing to fish out the shell. Girls are different. Loose. Cats. Whores."[329] However, the play also subtly suggests that Ian may not be who Anne assumes he is; this strong, masculine man may also be gay. In one scene, when Anne declares that Ian is single only because he has failed to find the right woman, there is an awkward moment that suggests that Anne may not know her son too well.

> Anne — Ian, visiting from London- where he has a really spacious flat, -has made an Ulster fry, left the place a bombsite. But she didn't mind, typical boy just, he'd eaten well, just needs a wife. Just needs to meet the right woman.
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> *A moment. Everyone fidgets, looks off.*[330]

Although Anne is unaware, the rest of the characters seem to be cognizant, on some level, that Ian is gay. Furthermore, Anne may be ready to privately

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[328] *Lagan,* 33.
[329] *Lagan,* 20.
[330] *Lagan,* 19.

admonish Aoife's sexuality, but she is equally unwilling to address the subject directly with her daughter, preferring to pretend as though Aoife's pregnancy is not happening.

Aoife is not the only woman who is attacked for being sexually active. Fiona sleeps with Emmet who initially becomes repulsed when he realizes that he is not her first sexual partner: "She's an animal to him. He revulses. Slag. His hands stop. Curl into themselves. Worse, he turns away from her…He was powerful. He's annoyed. He was not her first, clearly, far from it."[331] These lines are made more powerful by the fact that Fiona and Emmet say them together in unison. This joint dialogue transforms the lines to be Fiona narrating Emmet's reaction with great despair while Emmet simultaneously verbalizing his innermost private thoughts.

Love, sex, and violence also merge together in disturbing ways in the play. Fiona equates sex with romantic stories of love that will allow her and Emmet to escape the trauma and misery of Belfast.

> Fiona		Jack and Rose
> Baby and Patrick Swayze
> Shrek and Princess Fiona
> Emmet and Fiona, y'know?
> Stories. Escape. The 'Troubles'- myths and legends as real as Finn MacCool, the tooth fairy. I've been searchin.[332]

Fiona has been searching for her own great love story that will transport her away from the realities of her depressing life in Belfast- an absentee father/philanderer and a dead-end job as a checkout girl at the local supermarket. Despite her desire to escape, Fiona feels that her genetic fate will be trap her in a cycle of misery,

[331] *Lagan,* 38-39.
[332] *Lagan,* 41.

abuse, and violence. She reflects that at the "bottom of everything is cruelty…being Terry's daughter taught me this. Can't hate Terry totally, fucker that he's been, cos I am him, in different skin. It's in me."[333] Interestingly, Sinead in *Pumpgirl* also remarks that she is genetically predisposed to being with abusive men. Both Sinead and Fiona thus see their lives as being controlled by a Northern fatalism, unable to be changed by personal action.[334] Terry also beats his daughter, and Fiona's body is covered in scars from where she cuts herself. She only knows paternal and familial affection as violence, something that she replicates on herself in punishment. For Fiona, sex and love are translated into an escapist fairytale. In contrast, Aoife's sexual escapades have entrapped her in an unwanted and illegitimate pregnancy.

Likewise, youths' understanding of sex and sexuality seems to have become perverted in this new Belfast. Tracey, who is eight, has been exposed to sexuality explicit and violent films and knows more about "sexting" (sexually explicit text messages), than someone of her age should. Similarly, her brother, Phil, who is desperately in love with Aoife, is so frustrated and bored by his life that he tells his love interest, "wish something, y'know, would just like, happen, to me…like being raped, or something…"[335] Philip is so desperate to be seen, to feel important, to have attention paid to him that he naively and immaturely insinuates that a violent sexual attack would at least give him sympathy from his

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[333] *Lagan,* 41.
[334] Interestingly, pessimism and a fatalistic sense of doom are strong characteristics of Troubles cinema. In contrast, films made post-Belfast Agreement tend to be characterized by a sense of optimism and the belief that individuals can enact significant change. This appears to the opposite trend that we find in Northern theatre written by women which exhibits greater optimism in Troubles plays versus the doom and pessimism exhibited in recent peace process plays.
[335]*Lagan,* 49.

family and community. Between sexting, desiring rape, and becoming pregnant at seventeen, young people in Belfast are disconnected with the realities and consequences of sex, a theme that is also at the heart of *Perve*.

Lagan is, in part, a play about a lost generation of damaged young people: Emmet has lost his mother (Joan) and brother (Ryan); Aoife is pregnant at seventeen; Fiona self-harms and is beaten by her father. Ian, who has escaped to England, is the only young person with a full life. He has ambitions to be a great writer and has the ability to look at Northern life and culture with the fresh eyes of someone who has been away. Although Ian has his own demons to contend with, he is arguably the most emotionally and psychologically healthy of the group. And while this is a generation who has come of age during peacetime, the lingering effects of the past seem to have damaged young people and stunted their emotional and psychological growth.

The complex tension between the past and the future that is central to many recent women's plays including *Lagan* is captured again beautifully at the end with a very simple exchange between Ian who left Belfast for a better life and Aoife who stayed behind. Ian left the country so he could have more opportunities, greater freedoms (perhaps sexual in nature), pursue his dream of becoming a writer, and escape the traps of the North. He views his pregnant sister as someone without much future and asks her, "How could you stay here?" Aoife who has stayed because she believes she has a duty to fight for a better Northern Ireland sees her brother as abandoning his home, his country, and his family. She

simply replies, "How could you leave?"[336] These deceptively simple questions are profoundly loaded with complex issues and assumptions about the past and future of the North: Is the new North capable of escaping its past history, healing its people, and moving on to a more positive future? Can young people forge better lives, with greater educational and job opportunities in the North or is escape to London/Dublin still the only option for the young? Do citizens have an obligation to stay and improve the country or should the best and brightest continue to seek their fortunes elsewhere? Is the North doomed to repeat its past or can the future be better? These questions are so complex because, as Duncan Morrow explains, the trauma of the Troubles is shared both on an individual level as well as on a societal level: "forgiveness [is] so burning in Northern Ireland…[because] so many of the injuries are understood as the grief not only of individuals but of whole communities…The decision to forgive…becomes of importance to everyone- because without it the political stability of the whole system is endangered."[337] Thus, this personal exchange between brother and sister and their ability to potentially bridge this difficult divide become symbolic of the larger struggle that the country as a whole is addressing. If individuals can work out these issues, Gregg perhaps suggests, there is hope for the future of the North.

The end of *Lagan* is optimistic yet ambiguous about whether the future will be bright. Ian decides to stay in Belfast although it is unclear for how long, and Anne makes a small step towards reconnecting with her daughter post-abortion. The play concludes with a small, ordinary moment of mother and

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[336]*Lagan,* 54.
[337] Duncan Morrow, "Forgiveness and Reconciliation," *Democratic Dialogue,* Conflict Archive on the Internet, http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/dd/report13/report13a.htm.

daughter sitting together outside in the sun. Their tentative exchange of small talk marks a possible reconnection for them and the hope that they will be able to move beyond the trauma of the abortion to focus on a positive future for Aoife. Gregg notes, "I wanted to land on a note of ambivalence and hope…of possible redemption or direction in choices. And I felt those two characters [the mother and daughter] were particularly representative of people I know, of Belfast and Northern Ireland, and that issue [of abortion] is one that we don't talk about and is a hot topic."[338] This last image of mother and daughter in the sun, quietly sharing each other's company, is the final moment of the play and suggests the divide between generations may be able to be bridged or at least negotiated without the breakdown of the family structure. There is hope and possible healing for this family, and there is also a renewed, if tentative, commitment to the North and to building their futures in Belfast in a positive way.

In Root Theatre and Oval House's fall 2011 production of *Lagan*, four actors played all the roles, switching from character to character simply through a change in voice and physicality. The production was very fast-paced, forcing the audience to focus and listen to the extremely wordy monologues while picking out the plot hidden within the dense speeches. Gregg says that she wanted the audience to feel rather than think. She did not mind if they missed some of the dialogue because of the rapid pace; instead, she wanted them to experience an emotional impact. However, critics found this choice to be very challenging for the audience. While *The Telegraph* praised Gregg, calling her a playwright "with

[338] Gregg, Interview with Fiona Coffey, May 27, 2012.

a fiercely distinctive voice"[339] and praised the poetic stream of conscious style of writing, critic Daisey Bowie-Sell also complained that the fast pace of the complex and lyrical dialogue made it "hard to keep up with who these people are and who it is they refer to. The pace of the dialogue doesn't stop and in avoiding silences, Gregg leaves the audience behind." [340] In addition, the British *Guardian* highlighted the theme of being stuck in the past when it described *Lagan:* "Set in post-Troubles Belfast, a town 'pock-marked with stale fairytales.' it conjures a place where ghosts still lurk in the shopping centres that were once blown to smithereens, and attitudes towards sex and sexuality are stuck in the 1950s."[341] The review went on to praise the play, remarking that the "snaking structure is clever as the glancing connections between the characters are stealthily revealed, and there is no doubt that Gregg can really write, as she proved in *Perve*, even if she does sometimes allow the writing and characters to get bogged down in self-conscious poetry." [342]

Just as Abbie Spallen's critical recognition abroad allowed her new opportunities at home, Gregg's recent success with the Abbey Theatre and Oval House has brought her work to the attention of Northern theatres. Tinderbox recently commissioned a new play, *Huzzies,* about the formation of a rock band, which premiered at the 2012 Queens Festival in Belfast. The play integrated original music by Katie Richardson and mixed the experience of theatrical performance with that of a seeing a live rock concert in an attempt to lure

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[339] Bowie-Sell, "Stacey Gregg's new play *Lagan* at the Oval House…," November 10, 2011.
[340] Bowie-Sell, "Stacey Gregg's new play *Lagan* at the Oval House…," November 10, 2011.
[341] Lyn Gardner, "Review: Theatre: Lagan Oval House, London 3/5," *The Guardian*, November 2, 2011, 48.
[342] Gardner, "Review: Theatre: Lagan Oval House, London 3/5," November 2, 2011, pg. 48.

audience from Belfast's strong music scene into theatre. The newly rebuilt MAC space commissioned a short opera entitled *Jackie's Taxi,* which Gregg co-wrote with composer Ed Bennett. Like *Lagan* and *Shibboleth*, the operetta focused on how Belfast has changed during the peace process, and it premiered along with four other short operas produced by Northern Ireland Opera in July 2012. That same year, Gregg wrote *Override*, commissioned for the Watford Palace Theatre, located on the outskirts of London. Foreign theatres have been increasingly supportive of her work. England's National Theatre also commissioned a new play called *I'm Spilling My Heart Out Here* for 2013 as part of their New Connections Festival which pairs emerging playwrights with youth theatre groups and performs new works all over the country. In addition to its premiere at the Abbey, *Perve* was performed at the Cúirt Festival in Galway in 2012, Montreal's Licerne Theatre in 2012, and Brisbane's Centenery Theatre Group in 2013. *Perve* has been so successful in being produced abroad in part because of its timely subject matter and its generic setting. Although *Perve* is a departure from Gregg's usual style of writing, it has been her most widely produced play. Also, quite significantly, both *Perve* and *Lagan* have been published by Nick Hern Books, ensuring their wider distribution, integration into academic study, and further productions outside of Ireland and the UK. Just as the publication of Spallen's *Pumpgirl* and *Strandline* was significant in disseminating her work abroad, this has also helped Gregg's name achieve greater recognition.

Failure to recognize its playwrights (especially women) until they have proved themselves in larger venues like London or Dublin is an issue that the

North has been struggling with for years. Gregg explains this pattern as a symptom of a highly cautious society that is careful not to stage overtly political or controversial work. Two hard-hitting and extremely relevant plays, *Ismeme* and *Shibboleath,* were rejected by Irish theatres, and *Lagan* was staged in London because it was too controversial for the North. Gregg argues this conservatism has a potentially damaging effect on Northern theatre. Playwrights, hoping to get staged in Belfast, may tend to self-edit, not be as forthright or honest as they want to be, or may avoid hot-button issues that they know will prevent their play from being produced. In addition, funding policies and avoidance of controversial political issues may stifle the natural growth of Northern theatre both in form and subject matter. This means that the smaller, more experimental theatre companies and those dedicated to newer work (which are also those who are greatly underfunded compared to institutions like the Lyric) are charged with supporting newer, challenging voices but rarely have the funding to do so. This, according to Gregg, also has affected women's writing in particular. Gregg characterizes women's writing in the North as direct, outspoken, and politically controversial which has arguably prevented it from being produced more often. The forthright nature of women's writing and their willingness to tackle controversial subjects has also been cited by Abbie Spallen as a reason why she was shut out of Northern theatre at the beginning of her career. The need for artistic and political freedom is, for both Gregg and Spallen, a significant reason why they left the North. In London, both have been able to write in an uncensored and unedited

style for theatres that are not afraid of the issues they want to address nor the form and style they wish to use.

Chapter Six: Rosemary Jenkinson and Loyalist Belfast

Another important contributor to Northern Irish drama is Rosemary Jenkinson, a playwright and short story writer from east Belfast. Jenkinson's work encompasses many of the themes that other women such as Spallen and Gregg are incorporating into their work today: gendered violence, youth in peril, class struggles, disillusionment with the peace process, and the effects of lingering Troubles violence. However, Jenkinson's plays tend to focus on the male, working-class Protestant experience. Her work is often darkly comedic and violent and is characterized by a gritty and uncompromising look at Belfast's social ills. Many of Jenkinson's plays are set in her hometown of loyalist east Belfast, and she specializes in young, disaffected men who banter in a witty, fast-paced, working-class Belfast dialect. In much of her work, Jenkinson critiques contemporary Belfast culture, arguing like Gregg, that the peace process has left behind a marginalized underclass of poor Protestants; without steady jobs or a clear sectarian mission to give structure and meaning to their lives, these young men are floundering, contributing to a post-Troubles Belfast that is increasingly characterized by drugs, alcohol, crime, and violence.

Jenkinson left the North in 1986 for university in England and returned in 2002 out of nostalgia for her country and because she felt disconnected from her roots. She spent much of the 1980s and all of the 1990s in England and thus was not greatly influenced by theatre being produced in the North during this time. This continues the pattern of female playwrights who feel little connection to the North's theatrical past. However, being away from the North for sixteen years

gave Jenkinson a fresh perspective and renewed interest in her country when she returned: "When you've been away, you see Belfast so much clearer, what it is now; all that makes it more vibrant. When you are deprived of your home city, you romanticize it. And I still think I romanticize it."[343] Perhaps due to her long absence during her young adult life, she has not experienced the same sense of alienation from the Northern culture as Spallen and Gregg. Instead, Jenkinson, who spent much of her adult life in London, felt disconnected from British culture, and it was only when she returned to the North that she felt a deep sense of belonging.

Jenkinson had been writing short stories for years; however, she had not worked in theatre until Tinderbox did a short workshop of her first play called *Chocolate Madonna* in 2002. Lynn Parker of the Dublin-based theatre company, Rough Magic, saw the workshop and invited her to participate in their "Seeds II Project" in 2004. Jenkinson was subsequently commissioned by the company to write a play; *The Bonefire* was the result of this effort. The play was produced in 2006 at the Dublin Theatre Festival where it won the Stewart Parker BBC Radio Award. Jenkinson attributes Lynn Parker's connection with the North[344] as being instrumental in starting her career: "Lynn Parker, her being a Northern Irish female- therefore she was interested in getting those voices out. There was a definite connection there that helped me, and she understood it. Otherwise, I would never have been produced in Dublin."[345] Since then, Jenkinson's plays have been produced in the North by companies such as Ransom (*The Winners*,

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[343] Rosemary Jenkinson, Phone Interview with Fiona Coffey, May 31, 2012.
[344] Lynn Parker was born in Belfast and is the niece of Northern playwright Stewart Parker.
[345] Jenkinson, Phone Interview with Fiona Coffey, May 31, 2012.

2008), Tinderbox (*Bruised,* 2008; collaboration), and the Lyric (*White Star of the North*, 2012). However, the majority of her work has premiered and been produced abroad in London, New York, and Washington DC.

Like Spallen and Gregg, Jenkinson has generally found foreign theatre companies to be "a lot more receptive and a heck of a lot more respectful towards the writer. I think it's harder here [in the North] for some reason to get plays on. Of course, in Northern Ireland, we have the least amount of funding in the UK and a lot less than down south in the Republic. I think it's really problematic here…the opportunities here are not great."[346] Jenkinson also feels that many of the theatres in the North regularly produce new writing by men more regularly than they produce works by women. Like Spallen and Gregg, Jenkinson has been frustrated by the trend of Northern theatres ignoring their own playwrights while foreign theatres embrace Irish work: "It is just so ironic that I've had more plays produced in the United States than in Ireland. And my first play was produced in Dublin, so I didn't start [in the North]…You didn't feel any [support in the North]." [347] American theatre companies have been the strongest and most consistent supporters of Jenkinson's plays. The Washington DC-based Keegan Theatre Company produced *Stella Morgan* in 2010, *Basra Boy* in 2011 and *Cuchullain* in 2012. *Solas Nua*, also in DC, produced *Johnny Meister and the Stitch* in 2010. In addition, *The Lemon Tree* was performed by Origin Theatre Company in the New York-based 1st Irish Festival in 2009.

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[346] Jenkinson, Phone Interview with Fiona Coffey, May 31, 2012.
[347] Jenkinson, Phone Interview with Fiona Coffey, May 31, 2012.

Jenkinson first started to be produced in the North when she participated in collaborative and development opportunities at local theatres. Like Stacey Gregg, she helped write *Bruised* for Tinderbox in 2008 and was also part of Paines Plough's "Come to Where I'm From" project in 2010 for which playwrights wrote and performed monologues about their hometowns. In addition, in 2011, she wrote a one-act play that was performed in conjunction with three other female playwrights (Marina Carr, Nicola McCartney, and Morna Regan) for Kabosh's poverty project entitled *1 in 5*.

Like Gregg, Jenkinson has found that collaborative writing projects have limited benefits for their participants. She argues that more women than men are asked to participate in these projects because women are expected to share and collaborate more than men. All the women interviewed for this research said that it is far more challenging to create a collaborative piece than writing on one's own, and all would have preferred the opportunity to stage their own, personal works. With commissioned, collective writing pieces, theatres tend to put together a group of women who may not know each other, creating an artificial and forced creative environment where people of conflicting writing styles and aesthetics are forced to compromise their own writing to "work well" with the group. Jenkinson commented, "With women, you tend to get the joint-plays. Theatres are trying to look like they are encouraging women playwrights but what you end up being able to write is a quarter of a play rather than a full play."[348] Jenkinson also points out that a writer's individual voice and creativity will rarely be heard in these projects: "You are never going to stand out because everyone submerges under

[348] Jenkinson, Phone Interview with Fiona Coffey, May 31, 2012.

everyone else."[349] Women are thus expected to adapt their voices and "work well with others" whereas men continue to receive individual space and time to stage their own unique voices. Jenkinson argues that theatres "are trying to look like they are supporting women's writing but its not really helping. It would probably be better to give one single play to one woman."[350] Women's participation in joint projects may have other unforeseen consequences as well. Critics and publishers tend to respond more positively to single-authored plays. Collaborative works also tend to engender mediocre reviews (or no reviews at all), and few are ever published.

Like many of her peers, Jenkinson does not consider herself a feminist, explaining that the word feels outdated to her: "I don't really think it fits in with modern society. It sort of seems old fashioned. It's a dinosaur thing…although I suppose I am feminist in that I know things are bad for women still, particularly in theatre. But I also can't get swamped in that and sucked into negativity. I can only do what I can."[351] While other playwrights complained about often having their work judged in the ghettoized subcategory of "women's writing," Jenkinson has not encountered this frustration in part, she theorizes, because the majority of her work is dominated by male characters and overtly masculine language: "I think if you are a woman writing about women, you are more judged on your work…because I write about men, I don't think I get it as bad."[352] Jenkinson relates, however, to being part of a subcategory of "women writers," saying it is

[349] Jenkinson, Phone Interview with Fiona Coffey, May 31, 2012.
[350] Jenkinson, Phone Interview with Fiona Coffey, May 31, 2012.
[351] Jenkinson, Phone Interview with Fiona Coffey, May 31, 2012.
[352] Jenkinson, Phone Interview with Fiona Coffey, May 31, 2012.

"like being an ethnic minority…There are enough women playwrights that they should not be treated as [a special category] but we still are."[353]

The Bonefire

The Bonefire is not only Jenkinson's first full-length play but it is also, perhaps, her most violent and dark work to date. The play takes place in the working-class Annadale Embankment, a loyalist stronghold within the predominantly nationalist south Belfast. The community has gathered to celebrate the coming annual July 12th parades where loyalists process through Catholic enclaves. The July 12th parades celebrate the Battle of the Boyne in 1690 when the Protestant king, William of Orange, defeated the Catholic King, James II, and ended up taking over the English throne. Today, these infamous parades are a public display of Protestant claim on Northern territory and are a symbol of a continued and staunch loyalist commitment to remaining connected to the United Kingdom. The processions are notorious for inciting riots, protests, and violence; marching season (April through August) continues to be one of the most violent and dangerous times in the North.

The Bonefire is set directly in the middle of this highly volatile and inflammatory time of year. Adult Protestant siblings, Tommy and LeAnne, live in the Annadale Embankment and are preparing for a celebratory bonfire. Their festivities are interrupted when two secret IRA members, Jane and Davey, infiltrate the Annadale community by pretending to be loyalists. Jane and Davey intend to set off a bomb in retribution for the loyalist parades. Tommy discovers

[353] Jenkinson, Phone Interview with Fiona Coffey, May 31, 2012.

the plot but LeAnne, who has fallen in love with Davey, convinces the IRA man to switch allegiances to the loyalist Ulster Defense Association (UDA) in order to save himself from imminent death. Davey defects from the IRA and kills his former comrade, Jane, in order to prove his new loyalty to the UDA. LeAnne ends up stabbing her brother who dies, and the play ends with Davey, a newly minted UDA member, moving in with LeAnne and setting up a new life. The very dark humor of the play combined with the casualness and ease with which Davey switches loyalties from republicanism to loyalism undermines the fanaticism of paramilitary culture and emphasizes the apparent hollowness of sectarian ideology in the North.[354]

Tommy and LeAnne, part of a Protestant minority within a largely Catholic neighborhood, spend their days entrenched, on the offensive, and aggressively defining their Protestantism as anything that is the opposite of Catholicism. For example, Tommy flies an Israeli flag over his house after seeing a Catholic family raise a Palestinian flag. Northern Catholics have long embraced the parallel of the Israelis "occupation" of Palestinian land as being similar to the continued English "colonization" of Irish land in the North. However, Tommy does not seem to understand these complex historical and political parallels but only hosts his own Israeli flag as a symbol of defining himself as resolutely "not Catholic." Tommy lives in a world consumed by reacting to republican threats,

[354] Loyalism as a hollow or superficial ideology is a theme that has been explored by other Northern playwrights as well. Marie Jones' *A Night in November* (1994) follows the story of a unionist man who is transformed from a loyalist bigot to a compassionate believer in Ireland. *Caught Red Handed* by Tim Loane (2002) is about a Catholic farmer who impersonates the leader of a loyalist political party. *A Night in November* and *Caught Red Handed* both posit a united Ireland as the main alternative to continued loyalist violence. These plays, along with others, continue a tradition of positioning loyalism as something which needs to be discarded or softened in order for the North to have a lasting peace.

both real and imagined. When Davey visits Tommy's home while bleeding, Tommy insinuates that Catholics attacked Davey. The mundane truth is that a Protestant neighbor cut Davey by accident. However, Tommy finds that it is much more exciting to fulfill expectations of sectarian violence, thus reinforcing and perpetuating the narrative of sectarian division that the community still clings to for its identity. Making up sensational stories about sectarian clashes in order to gain respect within the community immediately positions the sectarian conflict as a potentially false and hollow concept within the play. Throughout *The Bonefire*, Jenkinson posits the conflict as a largely self-perpetuated and empty set of false and imagined beliefs while tempering this controversial position by showing the very real, gritty, and gruesome violence that continually stems from the factional war.

The hollowness and absurdity of the conflict is shown again later in the play when Tommy circulates a rumor that Davey (who is pretending to be a UDA member) killed a rival Loyalist Volunteer Force (LVF) member. Supposedly, the LVF member gunned down a snowman that Davey had built with his nieces and nephews, and thus Davey killed the man. Such a bizarre and sensationalistic reason for killing someone, especially within one's own Protestant community, reveals the emptiness to the ideology behind the conflict. Indeed, Tommy and Davey, who are loyal to the UDA, continually fight the UVF even though both paramilitary groups are on the same side. The absurdity and senselessness of the conflict is further shown through Tommy's repeated desire to be injured in paramilitary clashes in order to collect financial companion by government funds

set up for victims of the conflict. A primary reason for Tommy's involvement in the UDA is thus not out of a deep desire to defend Protestant territory and culture or to maintain the union between Britain and the North; instead, it is financially motivated.

Loyalty and sense of purpose within the sectarian conflict is again undermined by Jenkinson when, at the end of the play, Davey casually switches from IRA to UDA membership. Davey officially defects from the IRA, joins the UDA, and proves commitment to his newest affiliation by shooting his former IRA colleague, Jane, in the head at point-blank range. By showing that Davey's loyalty is one of convenience, Jenkinson suggests that sectarian affiliation is often arbitrary and lacks a strong belief system. Instead, the conflict has become an exciting, violent adventure that young men and women use to fill their otherwise meaningless lives with purpose and mission.

Devotion to the loyalist cause is further undermined in the play through the character of LeAnne. She reveals, bizarrely, that she almost joined the Catholic Women's league because they liked her baked goods. Furthermore, because she is smitten with Davey, LeAnne and Tommy are both willing to overlook the fact that Davey was an IRA member who planned to blow them up. Through these characters, Jenkinson shows how the ideology and history behind the conflict has become hollow rhetoric.

Senseless devotion to the conflict seems to go back generations, and the fight has broken down the family structure. Tommy and LeAnne's father was in the UVF. He took his own life but tried to make it look like the IRA killed him in

order to spare his family the embarrassment. While it would be a source of loyalist sacrifice to have a father that was killed by the IRA, to have a father who took his own life would be a source of shame. This pattern of re-classifying self-inflicted or accidental violence as sectarian clashes suggests that the violence between the two communities is often self-imposed and self-perpetuated. Jenkinson also suggests that this pattern has fundamentally broken down the family structure in the Protestant community. Not only did Tommy and LeAnne's father commit suicide, but their mother also killed herself by putting her head in an oven. Tommy now takes after his parents, attempting suicide several times a year. When Davey apologizes for getting blood on the floor after accidently being cut by a neighborhood boy, LeAnne responds, "Never worry your head about it. Tommy's spilt loads of his own, cutting his wrist and that."[355]

These darkly comedic references to suicide throughout the play, however, also address a disturbing increase in suicide that the North has recently experienced. Counterintuitively, the suicide rate in the North has doubled since the signing of the Belfast Agreement in 1998. The group most affected by this trend is made up of those who were children during the worst years of the Troubles, roughly 1969-1978. Researchers have attributed the increase in suicide to social and psychological factors including "the growth in social isolation, poor mental health arising from the experience of conflict, and the greater political

[355] Rosemary Jenkinson, *The Bonefire*, Kindle Edition (London: Methuen Drama, 2006), 15. Hereafter abbreviated as *Bonefire* and page number.

stability of the past decade."[356] Mike Tomlinson of Queens University has argued, “The transition to peace means that cultures of externalized aggression are no longer socially approved or politically acceptable. Violence and aggression have become more internalized instead.”[357] Like Abbey Spallen who shows how Troubles violence is disturbingly ingrained within the peace process North, Jenkinson emphasizes this same argument in many of her plays. In *The Bonefire,* she shows how the violence of the Troubles has become internalized in several different ways: through the legacy of suicide in Tommy’s family, through the sexual violence that is perpetrated on the women and children by the men in that same community, and through the internal war between the UVF and the UDA. Rather than fighting against the Catholics, the Protestant community has turned their aggression and fear internally on themselves.

Suicide and internal community violence feature prominently in contemporary Northern writing. Lucy Caldwell’s *Leaves* (2007) is about the recovery of a young girl after she tries to kill herself; in Spallen’s *Pumpgirl* and *Strandline*, the Catholic community has turned violence inwards on its own women; Jaki McCarrick’s *Leopoldville* (2010) is about a group of young men who torture and kill the local tavern owner; and Lisa McGee’s *Girls and Dolls* (2006) follows two young girls who lure a neighbor’s young child to her death. This focus on intra-community violence is in stark contrast to Troubles plays, which always showed violence as coming from an outside enemy source. As Tomlinson

[356] “Suicide Rates Soar After Peace Deal,” *Belfast Telegraph,* July 26, 2012, http://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/local-national/northern-ireland/suicide-rates-soar-after-peace-deal-16189296.html.
[357] “Suicide Rates Soar After Peace Deal,” *Belfast Telegraph,* July 26, 2012.

notes, external aggression is no longer socially acceptable in the peace process North, and it appears as though anger, frustration, and fear has thus been internalized within the individual Catholic and Protestant communities.

Tomlinson has also researched the recent increase in alcohol consumption and illegal/prescription drug use. He argues that Northerners use drugs and alcohol in order to cope with the trauma of the past: "We seem to have adjusted to peace by means of mass medication with anti-depressants, alcohol and non-prescription drugs, the consumption of which has risen dramatically in the period of peace."[358] In her characteristically sardonic manner, Jenkinson addresses this issue in *The Bonefire* when Jane argues that the nation's reliance on drugs has dulled the peoples' innate desire to riot and kill: "Know what your trouble is, Davey, it's you on the drugs. Drugs aren't natural. Sure, don't they suppress your desire to kill Prods? Keeping our youngsters up at all-night raves when they should be out rioting at the Short Strand?"[359] Here, Jenkinson mocks the stereotype (long held by many in both England and the Republic of Ireland) that Northerners are innately violent and naturally inclined toward conflict. Jane argues that the post-Troubles nation is now drugged up with anti-depressant and anti-anxiety medication which has dulled their innate desire for violence. This also controversially suggests that the lull in the fighting in a post-Troubles North may be due to a nation using drugs and alcohol to dull their senses rather than a real historical move towards peace.

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[358] "Suicide Rates Soar After Peace Deal," *Belfast Telegraph,* July 26, 2012.
[359] *Bonefire*, 44-45.

However, Jenkinson is careful to propose as well as discredit all sides of the atavistic Irish stereotype, never allowing the audience to sit comfortably with either idea. The stereotype of Northerners as innately violent is mocked towards the end of the play when Davey reveals he is an IRA double agent. Defending her love, LeAnne tells her brother, "He's not all bad, Tommy. It's his background."[360] Here, LeAnne suggests that it was Tommy's environment and upbringing during the Troubles that made him violent and fickle, not his innate character. However, Tommy replies, "Don't give me that old excuse. Like, am I a product of my environment? Is it a lifestyle choice? Have I watched too many movies?"[361] LeAnne replies coldly, "No, you're just a mad f**king bastard."[362] In this exchange, LeAnne argues that Tommy is simply a born sociopath whereas Davey may be a product of the sectarian conflict. Whereas the JustUs Theatre Company wanted to demonstrate the environmental and historical reasons that drove otherwise peaceful Catholics to extreme violence, Jenkinson controversially suggests that some in the North might have an innate propensity towards conflict. This reference to Tommy as a "mad bastard" also calls to mind Martin McDonagh's *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* (2001) in which "Mad Padraic" is a psychotic killer who feels no remorse at torturing or killing those who get in his way, including his own family. This parallel is further reinforced when it is revealed at the end of the play that Tommy planned and participated in a gang rape of his sister. Like McDonagh's "Mad Padraic" who intends to murder his

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[360] *Bonefire*, 65.
[361] *Bonefire*, 66.
[362] *Bonefire*, 66.

father without hesitation, Tommy rapes his sister with his fellow UDA members and feels no remorse.

There are further parallels between Jenkinson's writing and that of Martin McDonagh. Like McDonagh who shocked audiences with his flippant jokes about Bloody Sunday and IRA violence in *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*, Jenkinson uses dark, controversial humor to satirize some of the most venerated figures and events of the Troubles. When Davey complains that he always has to work for the IRA and never gets to have any fun, Jenkinson uses a famous quotation from hunger striker, Bobby Sands, in an irreverently mocking fashion:

> Davey: Why is it we never get to have fun?
> Jane: Didn't Bobby Sands say, 'Our revenge will be the laughter of our children.'
> Davey: I don't see why it has to skip a generation.[363]

Sand's famous speech is often quoted as a symbol of Catholic strength and perseverance in the face of Protestant oppression. Here, Jenkinson transforms the quotation to a casual, comedic complaint. Later in the play, Jenkinson references the mid-nineteenth-century famine (a traumatic time in Irish history during which up to one third of the Irish population died or emigrated) as a casual descriptor for Jane's slender figure. When LeAnne and Tommy find out that Jane is an IRA member, the siblings reflect that they should have realized that she was Catholic based on her appearance.

> LeAnne: …Should have knew she was Catholic, the big bap of ginger hair on her. The shape of her down the street.
> Tommy: She's a great shape on her too.
> LeAnne: Cavorting around like an Irish Famine victim.[364]

[363] *Bonefire*, 46.
[364] *Bonefire*, 65.

Here, Jenkinson uses a tragic period in Irish history and jokingly compares Jane's slender figure to that of an Irish famine victim.

The excessive and darkly comedic violence at the end of the play further recalls a McDonagh aesthetic. Tommy is stabbed by LeAnne (out of revenge for the gang rape) but survives. While he is being carried off to the hospital, bloody and injured, UDA member, Warren, shoots Tommy in the kneecap just so he can say he carried out his orders. Warren was sent to punish Tommy for being late in repaying money he borrowed from the UDA. While Warren only meant to injure him, the gunshot combined with the knife wound ends up killing Tommy. The excessive and gratuitous nature of the violence is comical along with its unintended consequences, which surprise and befuddle LeAnne, Davey, and Warren.

Like Spallen and Gregg, Jenkinson repeatedly exposes how the sectarian conflict has broken down healthy family bonds and subjected women and children to sexual assault. Sex in the play is continually linked with violence, and, like Clodagh in Spallen's *Strandline*, Jenkinson positions women as both the perpetrators and victims of that violence. For example, the play suggests that LeAnne may have raped Davey while he was passed out from drinking. Tommy accuses LeAnne, "He was forced! Yes! You forced him, ya stupid hoor!"[365] LeAnne's sexuality is also constantly under attack in the play; men are simultaneously attracted and repelled by her soft, flabby, overweight body.

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[365] *Bonefire*, 27.

Warren, lobs the most vicious attack on LeAnne, telling her brother Tommy, "If Hitler were alive today, he'd sterilize her. Fucked-up genes. Interbred."[366]

Sex and sectarian violence again intermingle when, at the end of the play, Davey hands Tommy a gun and tells him to shoot Jane in the head to prove his loyalty to the UDA. When Davey blanches at the demand, Tommy responds, "I know, it's mad. I thought I'd be pumping one into her myself tonight, but not like this." [367] The gun is thus likened to the penis and shooting a woman in the head is compared to having sex with her. Ancient misogynistic superstitions about women are also conjured during the play. When the neighborhood gathers to burn IRA member, Jane, on the bonfire, there is speculation that women take longer to burn than men because they are made up of water: "Watery bastards they are, crying and peeing all the time. Leaking out of both ends they do."[368]

Catholic women's sexuality is also singled out as a prize for Protestant men. Tommy had an affair with a Catholic woman and may have had an illegitimate child with her. Catholic women, according to Tommy, like the danger of sleeping with a Protestant; they like to be "colonized" and "conquered," just as the English colonized Ireland. These lines invoke traditional images of Ireland as a fertile and proud woman who is raped and conquered by the masculine Britain. Tommy is shunned for sleeping with a Catholic woman because, although he has no relationship with his child, he has done a disservice to the community by increasing the population of the Catholic resistance. UDA member, Warren,

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[366] *Bonefire*, 60.
[367] *Bonefire*, 76.
[368] *Bonefire*, 74.

berates Tommy "for breeding baby Taigs[369] over in Carryduff to come and burn us out."[370]

The extent that the sectarian conflict and paramilitary culture has destroyed the community and distorted the relationship between sex and violence is demonstrated most directly when Tommy tells Jane:

> Not many people know this but the UDA does have its good side. For instance, there are no rapes round here. No pedophiles or nothing. Although, in saying that, the children are that sexually advanced, you don't need to abuse them behind closed doors. Or in a hedge. They'd force it on you themselves given half a chance.[371]

Tommy's contention that there are no rapes, of course, directly contradicts what both he and the UDA did to his sister years before. For some reason, Tommy does not view the group's assault on his sister as rape. In addition, Tommy insinuates that children in the community are viewed as sexually mature and aggressive, forcing sexual relationships upon unsuspecting adults. The community thus accepts adult/child sexual relationships as perfectly normal. Indeed, later in the play, Warren freely admits that he prefers to have sex with fourteen and fifteen-year-olds and those who are "under the age of consent."[372]

LeAnne's gang rape by her brother and the UDA is the most shocking of the assaults on women's bodies. When Tommy declares at the end of the play that his sister enjoyed the rape ("she groaned at all the right bits"[373]), LeAnne stabs him, casually declaring, "It's all right, I'll cry later."[374] This is a portrait of a

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[369] *Taig* is derogatory slang for Irish Catholics and is used primarily in the North.
[370] *Bonefire*, 63.
[371] *Bonefire*, 34.
[372] *Bonefire*, 81.
[373] *Bonefire*, 82.
[374] *Bonefire*, 82.

deeply disturbed family, which uses physical and sexual violence casually and routinely in their everyday lives, suggesting that they have become desensitized to the sectarian violence they have consistently lived with. The gang rape of LeAnne, on July 11th, several years previous, also suggests that the UDA's excitement over anticipating the July 12th marches spilled over into the misplaced violence of raping their own women. This idea that fervor over anticipated sectarian clashes often spills over and becomes internalized within individual communities is demonstrated again later in the play when LeAnne recounts a story about the last July 12th when a brother ran his sister over with his car and then beat her to death with a flagpole. LeAnne says that the police attributed to the murder "to him being in a pure lather from the thrill of the day."[375]

Despite Martin McDonagh's *The Lieutenant of Inishmore,* which debuted in Ireland in 2003 as part of the Dublin Theatre Festival, Dublin seemed to be entirely unprepared for the dark, violent humor of *The Bonefire*. The poster for Rough Magic's production was described by one scathing critic as "depicting a glittering Red Hand of Ulster guarding a diva's crotch."[376] Dublin critics complained that the violent humor was too shocking and that Jenkinson's depiction of loyalist culture was too disturbing to view humorously. John McKeown of London's *Daily Mail* wrote:

> [Implausible events] unfold to the point of riotous nightmare, made more horrible by the knowledge that these annual drug-fuelled bacchanals are actually still celebrated. The most disturbing point is when Tommy and Warren mock Jane, who is face down on the pavement, business-suit torn and spattered with blood, having been gang-raped. Under such a barrage,

[375] *Bonefire*, 37.
[376] Helen Meany, "Heroes: On stage and off: *The Bonefire*," *The Irish Times,* October 2, 2006, 12.

> any deeper import the play has is wiped out. We can't feel anything for the characters as, particularly in the case of LeAnne…[377]

Jenkinson's use of humor to critique loyalist culture sat uncomfortably with many critics who repeatedly expressed revulsion at the violent images on stage that were supposed to be darkly humorous. Karen Fricker wrote in the *Guardian*:

> We've seen this kind of material before in many a Gary Mitchell thriller. The twist here is that Jenkinson's play is meant to be a comedy, but how it was ever supposed to work on stage is hard to fathom. The internal life of the loyalist community is still so unknown as to be exotic to many Irish people, yet Jenkinson assumes a complicit audience who can laugh with wry recognition at people who are described as pig-ignorant, incestuous, lawless rapists.[378]

As Fricker notes, loyalist culture is rarely shown on the Irish stage with Gary Mitchell as the primary theatrical scribe of unionist life. Perhaps because Dublin critics and audiences so rarely see loyalism dramatized, witnessing such brutal and psychopathic depictions of an alien culture was both shocking and unnerving. Audiences may have felt it was politically incorrect for them to laugh at that (already marginalized) community's expense. Helen Meaney of the *Irish Times* also expressed discomfort, arguing the play falls flat because all the characters are entirely unredeemable:

> In fairness, [Jenkinson] is satirizing a brand of loyalist that is already dangerously close to self-send-up…But in the indiscriminate satire, where republicans are dutifully presented as no less debased, we find no firm moral, political or social position. Oddly, the comedy suffers in this apparent vacuum of purpose, acquiring an hysterical edge, while plot details become more grotesque and distended…In the absence of sympathy, psychological insight or a spark of hope, we are asked to snicker at these increasingly surreal characters.[379]

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[377] John McKeown, "A Good Spark but no Flames in this Belfast Drama," *Daily Mail*, Irish Edition, October 6, 2006, 56.
[378] Karen Fricker, "Theatre Review: *The Bonefire,*" *The Guardian*, October 4, 2006, 34.
[379] Meany, "Heroes: On stage and Off," Oct 2, 2006, 12.

Meaney ended her review by reducing the play's humor to simply being poor taste: "But it is a hollow and ultimately despairing response to the political and sectarian symbol of the 11th night bonfire: a hacking laughter that is all but indistinguishable from gagging on its acrid fumes."[380]

Understandably, there were many elements to the play that upset audiences and reviewers: the negative portrayal of loyalist culture, the casual gang rape of LeAnne, and the irreverent references to important historic events and people in Irish history. While McDonagh had initially received a mixed critical reception in Ireland, this eventually grew into begrudging admiration for his work. Jenkinson, however, perhaps because she is Northern and/or a woman, seems to have been punished for writing such a play, and, indeed, scathing critical attacks of *The Bonefire* have prevented her from writing as inflammatory and controversial depictions of loyalist life in subsequent plays. Jenkinson believes the harsh criticism was, in part, due to the Republic's prejudice against Northern theatre. In addition, she argues that southern audiences do not react well to representations of sectarianism, especially loyalist culture, which remain largely unexamined. Whereas McDonagh's work was criticized but respected, Jenkinson believes her play was dismissed due to lingering prejudices that southerners have towards the North:

> Dubliners do not like Northern stuff. There is an innate prejudice. You are already going up against that….that's why the west of Ireland, *the Lieutenant of Inishmore* is grand; [because the Irish say,] 'That's part of us.' [Northerners] are not part of the [Republic]…It means we get a lot worse reviews…[381]

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[380] Meany, "Heroes: On stage and Off," Oct 2, 2006, 12.
[381] Jenkinson, Phone Interview with Fiona Coffey, May 31, 2012.

Furthermore, Jenkinson views Northern theatre as much more direct and political than theatre of the Republic, which often makes critics uncomfortable: "We write a lot more directly and head-on than someone from the south in general. They are more conservative…Northerners are rougher and more in your face than southern people."[382] This translates, Jenkinson argues, into Northern theatre being grittier and blunter than its southern counterpart. She also sees critics' dismissal of *The Bonefire* as being the product of a prejudicial theatre community that requires playwrights to achieve legitimacy abroad before being welcomed in Ireland: "With reviewers and critics and the theatre scene [in the North], they admire you if you come from London with success…they don't trust themselves to think you're good. It needs to be independently verified by a bigger theatre scene before they accept you up here."[383] This trend, of course, has been similarly identified by Spallen and Gregg within their own careers.

In contrast to *The Bonefire*, Jenkinson's later monologue plays, *Johnny Meister and the Stitch* (2008), *Basra Boy* (2011), and *Cuchullain* (2012) focus entirely on young, urban working-class males and is more typical of her current work. *Johnny Meister* was produced by Belfast's Jigsaw Theatre Company in 2008 and toured to the Edinburgh and Dublin Fringe Festivals before being produced by Solas Nua in Washington DC in 2010. The drama is a two-person monologue play which examines a post-Troubles Belfast where working-class youths are still trapped in poverty, violence, and crime.

[382] Jenkinson, Phone Interview with Fiona Coffey, May 31, 2012.
[383] Jenkinson, Phone Interview with Fiona Coffey, May 31, 2012.

Johnny Meister and Davy Stitch are east Belfast, track-suit-wearing, teen thugs who relate the darkly humorous and sometimes violent tale of what has led to the breakdown in their friendship. Johnny abuses drugs and alcohol, sleeps around, and starts fights for fun. His family consists of a single mother who is a drug addict, self-harms, and seems to be unconcerned with her son's well-being or daily whereabouts. Johnny's daily boredom, lack of direction, and underlying anger at his low social position is expressed in deep and sometime violent frustration that involves binge drinking and random beatings of pedestrians. Stitch is slightly older and more mature than Johnny. While Johnny's speech is earthly, crude, emotive, and reactive, Stitch has a few surprisingly philosophical and reflective moments, musing on the larger social conditions that have allowed Johnny and himself to become a marginalized section of society. Stitch believes that the Protestant/Catholic divide has created conditions that favor the Catholic working classes. The media bias towards promoting Catholic interests and stories has denied the Protestant working class a public voice; as a result, there is little attention or sympathy for the plight of urban Protestant poor. Unlike Johnny who uses his anger at the injustices of his life as an excuse for self-destructive behavior, Stitch attempts to improve himself by moving into a welfare apartment and staying on the medication he has been prescribed to control his violent outbursts. Johnny and Stitch used to be good friends but now find themselves in a violent faceoff due to an unfortunate earlier incident in a pool hall where Johnny made fun of Stitch and then punched him, causing Stitch to lose face in front of some women. Stitch is now intent on killing Johnny for disrespecting him,

highlighting how ideas such as respect, honor, and pride take on massive import when individuals have been denied stability, structure, family, or jobs.

Like, *Johnny Meister, Basra Boy* is a monologue play which follows two, working-class, east Belfast teens: Speedy and Stig. Like Johnny and Stitch, these two friends have fallen prey to drugs, violence, and crime due to boredom and lack of jobs. Their parents again are absent figures, and Speedy's mother is more concerned with her revolving set of boyfriends than her son. Stig and Speedy are members of the East Sons of Ulster flute band, and it is the only authority they recognize and the only institution that gives them purpose and structure in their lives. The infamous Protestant marching band tradition has historically been vilified for its propensity to march through Catholic enclaves in order to purposefully engender violence and protests. However, the flute band is positioned in the play as the only form of positive structure that Speedy and Stig have. Jenkinson controversially suggests that in the absence of other positive government or societal structures (such as education, jobs, or social services), the marching bands give purpose and pride to a group of young men. Without the band, Speedy and Stig have no sense of direction or identity and no way to fill their time except through crime, drugs, sex, and alcohol.

While remnants of the Troubles linger in the North affecting the lives of these young men, another distant war rumbles in the background of the play. When Stig leaves the marching band and joins the British military stationed in Iraq, the low-grade, localized war that is still being fought in the North is contrasted against the large-scale destruction of war affecting the entire Middle

East. The title of the play comes from the town of Basra in southern Iraq where Stig is stationed, and comparisons to the war in Iraq versus the war in the North are sprinkled throughout the play.

The wars in Iraq/Afghanistan and the lingering war in Belfast begin to merge towards the end of the play. During a parade celebrating the return of Northern soldiers from Iraq, Speedy is badly beaten by another member of the flute band. While Speedy is pummeled in Belfast, sounds from the war in Afghanistan (helicopters, call to prayers, armored vehicles, dogs barking, explosions) intermix with the sounds of the parade and the beating. The play flashes to Stig in Afghanistan who has lost his leg in an explosion at the exact same moment that Speedy is beaten within an inch of his life thousands of miles away in Belfast. Although both young men chose very different paths, both end up physically and emotionally wounded by a war that is raging in different parts of the world. Speedy, himself, does not understand why the cycles of violence in the North continue: "Thought to meself, how can cities as beautiful as this give birth to bombers. And it's not our fault. From the playground to the battlefield. The marchin, the diggin, from the Somme to the bomb to the Troubles, we been reared for the slaughter for centuries."[384] Speedy reflects that violence is so inbred and reflexive in the people of the North that it has become a natural part of their existence; it is part of their history, their legacy, and their duty to their ancestors to continue the fight. Speedy's understanding of the sectarian conflict as an inevitable and natural cycle is a commonly held view in the North and has been

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[384] Rosemary Jenkinson, *Basra Boy*, unpublished manuscript, 27. Hereafter abreviated as *Basra Boy* and page number.

identified by Seamus Heaney and other scholars as one of the most difficult obstacles to resolving sectarian divisions.

The play then cuts to several months later with Speedy fully recovered from the beating. He is now a dole office (welfare) clerk, having given up drugs and alcohol. Stig has returned home from the war; however, he has been emotionally and psychologically damaged and stays indoors. The play ends with a plea from Speedy, beseeching his old friend to rejoin the world. In a reversal of his previous ideology that Northern violence is inevitable and inbred over generations, Speedy promises Stig that he does not need to fall back into the old patterns of sectarian warfare:

> The blood is up, it's never gonna go and I don't want it to go, I want to live with it and we're not the sons of Ulster, Stig, we never were, and all we have to defend is ourselves, we are free of it now, the Boyne is dead, it's just me and you.
> The blood is up.
> The blood is up with love, that's all.
> The blinds fly open.[385]

Speedy tells Stig that they bear no responsibility to the imagined besieged state of Ulster. They can doff off the responsibility of hundreds of years of history, including the infamous Battle of the Boyne. Speedy tries to convince Stig that they are only responsible for themselves now; they are free of the history that has shackled and forced them to repeat cycles of sectarian violence and the ensuing poverty that it inevitably brings.

Although most of the play is uniformly pessimistic about the options and future for its young people, the play surprisingly ends on a uniquely positive note with the image of Stig opening the blinds of his window in response to his

[385] *Basra Boy*, 28.

friend's pleas. Although, as Speedy says, the violence will never fully cease, he and Stig are independent, autonomous individuals who are not slaves to cycles of warfare. As Stig opens his window, it is perhaps a sign that he is ready to reenter the world and create for himself a more positive future. *Basra Boy* played at the west Belfast festival, Féile an Phobail, in August 2012, demonstrating the diversity of competing viewpoints that the historically nationalist festival now includes regularly in its lineup.

Jenkinson's monologue for Paines Plough's "Come to Where I'm From" series is perhaps her most direct critique of post-Troubles Belfast. The monologue is sarcastic, sharp, and witty, painting a bleak picture of a city that has failed to make much progress socially or economically now fifteen years into the peace process. Jenkinson acerbically sums up the North as "the land of poets, scholars and petrol bombers,"[386] suggesting that "[a]ll tourists really come for is the *Titanic* and the Troubles – that's all we're really famed for, people dying en masse."[387] Jenkinson presents current-day Belfast as a community struggling to move forward, mired in social and political ills such as poverty, crime, violence, racism, rampant unemployment, and drugs that have been born from decades of sectarian warfare.

In one of the most pessimistic parts of the monologue, Jenkinson posits that the current day peace is a temporary respite in a society locked in an endless cycle of conflict: "And let's face it, we all know this peace is just a wee rest. Another ten years down the line, they'll all be digging up their weapons with

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[386] Rosemary Jenkinson, "Come to Where I'm From," unpublished script written for *Paines Plough* in 2010.
[387] "Come to Where I'm From," 2010.

JCB's, scrabbling out in the yard for their handguns."[388] One of the main problems that Jenkinson identifies is the country's desperate desire to move on from the Troubles at the expense of proper self-reflection and healing. She says, "This is the period after war, the period of collective amnesia and blindness. We've become a nation of holocaust-deniers, we can't even look at ourselves."[389] For Jenkinson, this refusal to examine the past, this obsession with moving forward, and this denial of past traumas and injustices have created a stunted society: one that repeats entrenched historical cycles without self-reflection. Despite Jenkinson's unrelenting and unflinching examination of current-day Belfast, she ends her monologue clarifying her love-hate relationship with the city. She explains, "I'm slagging off Belfast because that's what we do. It's all part of an inverted covert subversive love we have for ourselves. Pretend to hate what you love, it's all part of our dual-nationality, dual-personality bipolarism, our two tribes locked in a loving embrace to the death."[390] Like her plays, Jenkinson's monologue is unapologetic, harsh, darkly humorous, and includes very unpopular and uncomfortable portrayals of the city and its people. However, she often tempers her dark views of the North with her deep affection for its people and culture and includes moments of optimism as she often does in much of her dramatic work.

Although Jenkinson's plays are set in a supposedly *post*-Troubles Belfast, the landscape that she describes resembles the height of the conflict. Like Gregg and Spallen, she argues that Troubles violence and continuing sectarian prejudice

[388] "Come to Where I'm From," 2010.
[389] "Come to Where I'm From," 2010.
[390] "Come to Where I'm From," 2010.

remain central and damaging aspects of Northern society. Also like her female contemporaries, pessimism towards the peace process and distrust of politicians are central to her work. In *The Bonefire,* the only reference to the peace process or progress on repairing cross-community relations is a sarcastic reference when LeAnne picks up Jane's extremely heavy briefcase and says sardonically, "What's she got in here? The peace process?"[391] This description of peace and reconciliation as heavy, unwieldy, and burdensome is illustrative of how Jenkinson positions peace in each of her plays. The fact that the peace process is also hidden, locked away in a private suitcase suggests that the process remains the secretive workings of politicians and that the average citizens feel removed from it. Like Gregg and Spallen, Jenkinson suggests that the peace process is being worked out in private by an elite rather than on the ground with everyday citizens. In addition, drugs, alcohol, lack of education and jobs are shown to be destructive influences repeatedly in Jenkinson's work as they are in the plays of Spallen and Gregg. The physically present but emotionally absent/sexually promiscuous mother also reoccurs in Jenkinson's plays. Fathers, on the other hand, are rarely seen and are often not even mentioned as though their absence is to be expected or implicitly accepted while the mothers' neglect is seen to be a more egregious infraction.[392]

Despite her focus on Protestant, working–class men, Jenkinson addresses many of the same themes as her female contemporaries: the breakdown of the family structure, sexual violence towards women, and the presence of a lingering

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[391] *Bonefire*, 31.

[392] *White Star of the North* (2012) is Jenkinson's only play which features a well-meaning and present father-figure.

Troubles violence that continues to haunt and damage citizens of the North today. Jenkinson also suggests that sectarian ideology has become a hollow, ingrained, and reflexive condition in the North and that the peace process has left behind the same group of working-class citizens who were most marginalized during the Troubles. Furthermore, she identifies lack of support from domestic theatres, prejudice against Northern drama, and lack of opportunities for women playwrights as being the primary obstacles that have prevented women writers from gaining greater inclusion within the Irish dramatic canon. Despite how unpopular her work has been on the island, Jenkinson remains a vital presence within Irish theatre, giving voice to those who rarely have a presence on the theatrical or political stages in Ireland. In doing so, she continues an important tradition within women's playwriting of highlighting and thus empowering the silenced and hidden underclasses of the North.

Chapter Seven:

Feminist, Political, and Queer Activists in the North Today

Examination of the North's transition to peace continues in the writings of Patricia Downey and Shannon Yee whose works further demonstrate the diversity of women's writing in the North today. Downey is a playwright and the artistic director of Spanner in the Works. This feminist company tours disadvantaged communities and is committed to social change, making it arguably the most direct and obvious descendent of Charabanc and JustUs. Shannon Yee, brings a new level of diversity to the region. A bi-racial, queer immigrant, Yee writes from an outsider's perspective on the intersections between gender, race, ethnicity, culture, queer identity, and the sectarian conflict. An examination of the contributions each of these women has made to the theatrical space in the North further demonstrates the continuation of thematic trends in women's writing as well as the range of voices and experiences that women are exploring in the North today.

Patricia Downey and Spanner in the Works

In 1998, Patricia Downey co-founded Spanner in the Works (SITW) theatre company along with three other theatre practitioners from the North: Bridgeen Quinn, Alison Morrow, and Elizabeth Donnelly. The four women met while attending actor training at the Lyric Theatre in the early 1990s. Despite the inroads made by Charabanc during the 1980s, the Spanner in the Works women

all found that opportunities for training and professional experience in Northern theatre remained severely limited for women. They created the company in order to provide training to a broad range of individuals who are rarely exposed to theatre: rural and working-class communities, young people, the elderly as well as those with mental and physical disabilities. In addition to engaging with marginalized populations, their productions center around important social issues that the North is currently struggling with such as drug abuse, racism and sectarian prejudices, and violence towards women. Although the company is based in Belfast, it runs workshops and productions throughout the North and focuses on creating opportunities for rural and cross-community participation. The company is managed and produced by an all-female board, and Downey remains the primary force behind the company.

Spanner in the Works primarily produces two types of shows: plays written by Downey that tour with professional actors as well as devised works that are written and performed by amateurs participating in the company's workshops. Some of these workshops provide opportunities for community members to write and act; others involve the audience seeing one of the professional productions and then attending discussion sessions where the play is debated and related back to individuals' experiences. The power of theatre to help people explore difficult personal issues is a main tenant of the company, and all the productions address social issues affecting Irish communities such as Mephedrone use (*Popping Candy*, 2012), cyber bullying (*Bebo or not to Bebo*, 2008), domestic abuse (*Beat It*, 2010), mental illness (*Life Goes On,* 2009),

racism (*One Tribe,* 2010), and the intersections between class, gender, and the rural/urban divide (*Cuss the World,* 2004). Despite the wide range of issues, the company's primary focus is to engage women in the theatre.

While Spanner in the Works conducts workshops with men and boys, their primary focus remains supporting and enriching women's lives through the promotion of women's rights, education, and training in the theatre arts. In particular, the company targets working-class and rural women in order to develop the skills they need to succeed in creative or artistic enterprises. The hope is that exposure to theater along with the company's training programs will give these women new professional opportunities and will also help feed the growing theatre sector in the North. As part of this company mandate, SITW conducts workshops regularly for women's groups in Belfast and the countryside. One yearlong workshop trained women to become professional playwrights and actors. Reflecting their cross-border commitment, the program took place in County Cavan (located in the Republic, boarding the North). SITW mentored, trained, and placed the participants in jobs/internships at local theatre companies. Downey has seen direct results from the program: one homeless woman who participated now works as a theatre administrator. Referencing her work with women in disadvantaged areas, Downey has found that there "is loads of talent out there but their [economic] situations don't allow it to [develop]…"[393] She hopes that her company's workshops will add to the diversity of those engaging with theatre in the North, especially through the addition of more women.

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[393] Patricia Downey, In-person Interview with Fiona Coffey, Belfast, Northern Ireland, June 1, 2012.

Downey is very clear that she does not view the work of SITW as simply a way to engage with and socially empower those within the margins. Instead, she views her work as an important model of professional training and as a way to "home grow" new theatre practitioners, writers, and directors. Downey believes that SITW allows participants to gain "the confidence to allow them to get their own funding and to become employed" within the theatre sector.[394] By exposing new audiences to theatre, by engaging members of the rural communities in workshops and training sessions, and by helping women and others devise their own works, Downey sees this as directly translating into producing new professional theatre practitioners. She also sees the legacy of SITW as chipping away at the challenges that have historically prevented women and other marginalized groups from participating in the arts: "I am a working-class person and going into the arts was very elitist, and I was one of those women on the ground saying 'I want to do this.' So where it's taken me fifteen years to get here, maybe [for someone today] it only took them seven years."[395] She adds, "I really believe the arts can help socially, politically in this country."[396] The Training for Women Network publically recognized Downey's efforts in 2004 when they gave her an award for her arts work with women in the community.

In addition to her work in disadvantaged communities, Downey's commitment to creating more theatre opportunities for women is reflected in her professional-level productions. These productions use skilled actors and tour the island, starting in Belfast and then usually spending several weeks around the

[394] Downey, Interview with Fiona Coffey, June 1, 2012.
[395] Downey, Interview with Fiona Coffey, June 1, 2012.
[396] Downey, Interview with Fiona Coffey, June 1, 2012.

Northern countryside as well as the Republic. Downey writes these plays with primarily female casts in order to give Northern actresses more opportunities for professional work. For example, *Diablo* (2012), a play about human trafficking in Northern Ireland which Downey wrote for the Lyric, has four female and one male characters. In addition, her work engages many of the themes that are being expressed in other contemporary women's writing. *Cuss the World* (2004) examines the increase of drugs, rape, crime, and violence in communities that ceased to be patrolled by paramilitaries after the ceasefires of 1994/1997. Echoing many of the other plays analyzed in this study, the family structure in *Cuss the World* has also disintegrated, and youth have fallen into cycles of crime and violence: Peter is a drug dealer; David and Douglas have an abusive father; Amy's young sister is pregnant; and Anna gets stoned and steals cars.

Through its commitment to training and engaging women, its focus on touring socially relevant productions to disadvantaged areas, and its practice of engaging the community's stories in its devised works, Spanner in the Works is a continuation of Charabanc's legacy. Although, like her contemporaries, Downey personally does not see a direct connection between SITW and the companies of the early 1980s and 1990s, her desire to start an all-women's theatre troupe stemmed from a similar impulse to that of Charabanc: the lack of theatre work for women. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, Downey recalls that "…there were very few female actors getting employed. Every play at this point was like four male actors and one female."[397] Spanner in the Works was created to compensate for this lack of training and job opportunities for women. Another

[397] Downey, Interview with Fiona Coffey, June 1, 2012.

parallel to Charabanc is found in the cross-community nature of the company: the board of SITW as well as the actresses they employ are Protestant and Catholic, and their shows promote cross-community collaboration. The similarities between the two companies continue: Charabanc viewed itself as a working-class theatre as does Spanner in the Works; SITW travels throughout the island and performs in non-traditional theatre spaces such as schools, community centers, and youth clubs as did Charabanc; and SITW introduces theatre into rural and working-class areas, removing elitist connotations attached to theatre in the North. Furthermore, due to similar issues such as limited funding and the need for productions to tour easily, SITW has a sparse aesthetic with makeshift and barebones sets and limited costuming.

Another important similarity between the two companies is Downey's belief that theatre can be a vehicle for inserting women's voices into the political process in the North. The company was founded the same year as the Belfast Agreement was ratified, and its plays attempt to strengthen the peace process by addressing the social problems that exacerbate sectarian divisions. Downey felt that a women-led theatre company that engaged with the rural communities (often left out of peace-building efforts) could be an effective way of moving the peace process forward. Although Downey does not see a direct connection between Charabanc and current-day work of SITW, the company is clearly a continuation of historical practices by women theatre practitioners in the North.

As a community and education-based company, Spanner in the Works has had a wide impact within the island as a whole. *Popping Candy*, a play about drug

use, toured schools and community centers for four and ten-week intervals in 2011 and then again for a period of four months in 2012. *Cuss the World* toured on and off for four years from 2004-2007 and went to the Edinburgh and Brighton Fringe Festivals. During the 2006-2007 season, the company produced two professional, touring productions and conducted over two hundred community workshops throughout Northern Ireland. In 2010, Peace III Southern Partnership, an advocacy group for cross-community partnership, commissioned SITW to develop, *One Tribe*, about cultural diversity and racism. It was shown to more than 2,200 young people throughout Armagh, Banbridge, Craigavon, Louth, Newry, and Mourne.

Growing respect for Downey's work is also reflected in the choice of performance venue for her 2012 production of *Diablo.* In a departure from the typical community-based performance venues (schools/community centers), she premiered *Diablo* at the prestigious Lyric stage. Just as Spallen was the beneficiary of a newly restructured Lyric, SITW has also gained from the theatre's new mission. Following its 2011 renovation, the Lyric wanted to attract new audiences, especially working-class and young patrons. The theatre produced *Diablo* in order to tap into this new audience base. The Lyric hopes that Belfast communities will find the theatre less intimidating to approach after seeing SITW's shows produced there. For the production, Downey insisted that tickets were sold for only five pounds, allowing anyone access to their shows.[398] This pricing was an important reflection of the Lyric's desire to combat its image as an elitist institution that serves only the well educated and wealthy of Belfast.

[398] Regular Lyric productions sell for about £25 or approximately $40 per ticket.

Although there is no overt or conscious attempt to replicate the missions of Charabanc, JustUs or DubbelJoint, Spanner in the Works clearly is an important continuation of women's work in the 1980s and 1990s. Cross-border and cross-community touring which was so vital to Northern theatre thirty years ago remains underfunded and underrepresented on the island today. SITW's commitment to touring within communities who otherwise do not have access to theatre and its efforts to make theatre less exclusive reinforces the efforts of its predecessors. In addition, the company's focus on improving women's lives economically, socially, and politically remains one of its most important missions, reflecting back similar goals of the women in the 1980s and 1990s. By creating more and better opportunities for women theatre practitioners, providing a public platform for women's involvement in the peace process, and offering training and support to develop more women theater practitioners in the North, Spanner in the Works is a unique and vital contributor to contemporary Irish theatre today.

Shannon Yee

While Northern women have been a dominant force in shaping Irish theatre since the 1980s, many foreign women have also had a significant impact on the regeneration of theatre in Belfast in recent years. Given that the North has tended to be a closed and conservative culture, it is perhaps not surprising that some forms of innovation are going to come from foreigners and from Northerners who have worked abroad before returning home. One such immigrant is Hanna Slattne, dramaturg for the Tinderbox theatre. Originally from Sweden, she is the only fulltime, resident dramaturg on the island. She has brought

renewed attention to the importance of developing infrastructure to support new playwriting. In addition, Andrea Montgomery who is of Canadian descent[399] has brought new directing techniques and influences to the North. She is the artistic director of Terra Nova productions, which often collaborates with foreign theatre companies in order to introduce new dramatic techniques into Northern theatre. Montgomery's productions promote education, tolerance, and understanding of the multicultural influences on Northern society. The company has done unique productions such as the "Ulster Karma Sutra" project (2012) which was a comic, sexually explicit puppet show as well as "Eight to Create Multicultural Scripts" (2013). This last project brought together eight indigenous playwrights with eight community members of different ethnic or cultural backgrounds. Together they created eight one-act plays that were performed by eight ethnically diverse professional actors. Shannon Yee is yet another immigrant who has had a significant impact on the theatre sector in the North. A bi-racial, Chinese-American playwright, Yee has played a substantial role in promoting queer rights and activism in the North through the arts.

Yee received her B.A. in theatre at Smith College in Massachusetts[400] and trained at the National Theatre Institute at the Eugene O'Neill Theatre Center in Connecticut before moving to Belfast in 2004 to marry her partner, Grainne Close. Yee and Close were wed in the UK's first civil partnership ceremony. Although Northern Ireland was the last place in the United Kingdom to decriminalize homosexuality in 1982, it was also the site of the first civil

[399] Although she is of Canadian descent, Montgomery grew up in many countries including India (where she was born) and Thailand.
[400] Yee also received a Masters in creative writing at Queens University, Belfast.

partnership when Yee and Close were legally joined in 2005. A BBC television documentary[401] charted this journey, making Yee and Close well known within the Northern queer community.

When Yee moved to Ireland with her partner, they contemplated living in Dublin, Galway, and Belfast. Yee specifically chose Belfast because she felt that she could have a significant impact on the arts scene, which was experiencing a period of growth and development: "I felt something bubbling under the surface…from a creative point of view….It is a do-it yourself kind of atmosphere here. If there is something you would like to do, it is small enough, manageable enough that you can find people who love to be creative and do something."[402] Yee also found that Belfast had less cultural noise and competition to break through than Dublin or Galway, which had more developed theatre sectors. Easier access to government officials was another an important benefit of living in the small Belfast community. Yee's art often involves political issues (healthcare, disability issues, and queer activism), and she will often invite local politicians to her events in the hopes that her art might affect people on the policy-making level.

Yee has a complex status in the North. In one sense, she holds the greatest outsider status: she is bi-racial (Chinese-Caucasian), she is queer, she is American, and she has an acquired brain injury. In 2008, Yee contracted a rare brain infection that left her with mild impairments such as noise sensitivity and

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[401] This documentary was first aired on December 19, 2005 on BBC1.
[402] Shannon Yee, "Interview with Marie-Louise Muir about 'Hatch' and the Belfast Fringe Festival," *BBC Arts Extra,* October 2011, http://soundcloud.com/shAnneonyee/hatch-on-bbc-arts-extra-oct/s-mcgzZ.

the occasional inability to verbalize her thoughts. Just as many Northern women playwrights such as Gregg and Spallen have self-identified as outsiders, Yee finds her multiple minority identities to be an inspiration in her work:

> My multiple identities is something that feature a lot in my work- that concept of other. I always see myself as political, and the personal as political, and writing as my expression connected to that. I am a woman writer, I am an immigrant writer, I am a queer writer, I am a bi-racial writer. I am all of that and I am proud of that because it makes me who I am.[403]

For Spallen, Gregg, and Yee, their outsider status has allowed them to view Northern culture with a more critical eye. However, in contrast to many of the Northern women interviewed, Yee embraces the term feminism. Her relationship to feminism is radically different than Northern women's because it has been shaped by her status as an American who was educated at Smith College: a liberal arts college dedicated to educating women and advancing women's rights.

As a foreigner/immigrant, an ethnic minority, a proud and visible queer activist, and someone with recent brain trauma, she may epitomize in a single body a new range of diversity and change that has come to the North in the past fifteen years. While these multiple identities put her firmly outside of the status quo and on the margins of mainstream conservative Northern culture, they also have given her a freedom and neutrality in some situations. Yee's outsider status has allowed her to be seen as a neutral party who does not carry the history or prejudices of the sectarian conflict with her or the assumption that she is working with a specific agenda. In most other locations, Yee's identity would be highly politicized, but in the North, where everything is political, her status has

[403] Shannon Yee, In-person Interview with Fiona Coffey, Belfast, Northern Ireland, June 1, 2012.

paradoxically *de-politicized* her in certain important ways. As a result, Yee has been allowed intimate access to painful parts of Northern history that tend to be off-limits for people born in the country. Thus, to be a foreigner in the North has advantages and disadvantages: that person is not only excluded from ownership over particular histories, politics, and cultural traditions but she is also excluded from assumptions that she carries sectarian sympathies.

Yee has found it extremely useful in her artistic work to be seen as a neutral observer who does not carry the history of the sectarian conflict. In 2004 and 2005, she ran a program called "Creative I: Celebrating Our Diversity Through Arts" in Banbridge, Northern Ireland. This was a free, arts-based summer program for children from low-income and/or ethnic minority backgrounds as well as those with physical/learning disabilities. The participants were made up of Catholics, Protestants, and immigrant children. Yee believes she was hired for this project specifically because her foreign and bi-racial status allowed her to engage cross-community and ethnically diverse groups towards productive goals.

Her outsider status would help her again when she received funding from the Northern Arts Council in 2010 to create a theatre project entitled *Trouble*. Yee traveled around the North and collected the stories of queer rights advocates who were active during the Troubles. The play, which is still in development, charts how the first generation of Northern gay activists in the 1960s and 1970s fought for and achieved important milestones in the fight for equal rights. The achievements and infrastructure that this first generation achieved created a solid

foundation for a second generation of prominent activists during the early 1990s, which was the first time a cohesive queer community developed and chose to stay in the North rather than leave (most often for London). Yee hopes to chart the untold history of queer activism during the height of the Troubles. Yee describes the project as:

> A biographical, interview-based play that explores the experiences of a generation of individuals from the LGBT community that realized their sexuality while growing up during the Troubles in Northern Ireland. The play interweaves individuals' personal stories of cultural identity, sexuality and coming out, religion, feminism, sectarianism, racism, conversion therapy, paramilitaries, politics, the normalization of violence and the effects of the Troubles on the psyche with important historical moments including the Hunger Strikes, the rise of the social LGBT scene and activism, the IRA ceasefire and Good Friday Agreement, the murder of Darren Bradshaw in the Parliament Bar, and the police raids on gay men which led to the European Court case that decriminalized homosexuality in NI.[404]

Yee is the first person in the North to address the intersections between queer identity and the Troubles, and this is the first time a government-sponsored organization has funded such an effort. Yee is developing the piece with TheatreofplucK,[405] which is Northern Ireland's only LGBT-specific theatre company and the first publicly-funded queer theatre company in the North.

Although Northern Ireland has struggled with racism towards new immigrants, paradoxically, the fact that Yee looks and sounds different helped her gain the trust of the people she interviewed. While in everyday life some Northerners might hold prejudices against immigrants, when it comes to the Troubles, different rules apply. Yee feels that her status as an ostensibly neutral

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[404] Shannon Yee, "Gay& Troubled Synopsis," Shannon Yee Blog, July 22, 2011, http://shAnneonyee.wordpress.com/.
[405] TheatreofplucK is run by Niall Rea, who is primarily a set designer.

outsider and also as someone who has experienced being different all her life gave her the credibility to gain Arts Council funding and also to gain the trust of the men and women that she interviewed. In addition, her very visible and public status as the first couple to achieve legal civic partnership in the UK also allowed people to open up to her. Because Yee had taken a risk and publically told her story, some interviewees felt more comfortable doing so as well. In a culture that tends to talk in euphemisms and coded language or prefers silence altogether, the directness and honesty of those she interviewed is striking especially given the culture of secrecy and shame that has historically surrounded queer identity in the North. The following are excerpts from the interviews she conducted:

> *I remember during the interviews [after the raids], [the police] were asking me sort of banal questions about sexuality which I didn't want to discuss, but outside you could hear all the bombs going off, y'know, Belfast was erupting with bombs on this bright summer's day… detectives asking me what you did and what you would like to do and who your friends were. It just seemed so bizarre—Belfast was being blitzed and they had so much time to spend on homosexuality.*
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> *A helicopter dropped off all these soldiers, there was a soldier standing there with this rifle and he was the most beautiful man I had ever seen.*
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> ***
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> *I was going out with boys just for the look of it. It was tedious mostly.*
>
> ***
>
> *I thought, 'Well, if I don't like girls, then I must be a priest!*
>
> ***
>
> *I always think gay men are essentially monarchists and lesbians are more republican. Gay men are metropolitan and women are more localized in many ways.*

Inspired by the docudrama style of Anna Deavere Smith and Eve Ensler, Yee hopes to capture the voices of individual experiences and blend them together into an effective theatrical performance of monologues performed by one or two

actors. She intends the show to tour internationally and, as a result, needs to keep the cast down to one or two performers for financial reasons. These interviews will be edited and shaped into individual monologues and performed as a series of complementary and contrasting viewpoints and experiences while retracing the history of queer activism in the North. Yee hopes to capture the complex and highly personal negotiation of individuals' sexual identity during the North's most tumultuous and violent period of history.

Yee's working title was originally *Gay and Troubled* but then changed the title to simply *Trouble* with the "o" in the title being drawn as a pink triangle with a vertical line next to it, turning the universal symbol for gay pride also into the universal symbol for the rewind button. The rewind button is about returning to the past and uncovering a history that has been ignored and suppressed. Yee sees the project as an important documentation of a history that up until now has not been heard and has not been taught to the current generation of young men and women who are growing up with the privileges of the queer activists who came before. Yee states,

> You get to this generation of young people today who are proudly walking down the street hand in hand which is amazing but they have no idea who Jeff Dudgeon is.[406] That is what I find tragic and that is part of the reason why I am doing this. You have this new generation who fortunately has no idea what it was like to grow up during the Troubles…But when it comes to the privileges they have…there is a certain amount of education that needs to be conveyed.[407]

[406] In 1981, Jeffrey Dudgeon successfully petitioned the courts to decriminalize homosexual relationships in Northern Ireland. Homosexuality was legalized in the North in 1982, eleven years before the Republic of Ireland.
[407] Yee, Interview with Fiona Coffey, June 1, 2012.

Trouble is not Yee's first foray into pushing the visibility of queer identity beyond the comfortable boundaries of Northern culture. She was instrumental in the vision and creation of Outburst, a queer arts festival. She co-founded and co-produced the event in 2007 and 2008. Starting in 2005, Yee began developing relationships with Cara-Friend, an LGBT support organization, and Lesbian Line, a counseling service and advocacy group. These relationships were integral to founding Outburst and receiving government funding for the festival. Niall Gillespie, Patrick Sanders, Michele Devlin, and Ruth McCarthy were among the original founders of the festival along with Yee. The now annual festival is Ireland's only multi-disciplinary, ten-day arts festival. According to Ruth McCarthy, the current festival director, the word *queer* was used purposefully to convey a broader and more inclusive identity rather than evoking the stereotypes of camp that the word *gay* can sometimes conjure up.[408] The queer community also tends to include anyone outside of heteronormative traditions and thus can include heterosexuals who reject essentialist notions of gender and sexuality.

For Yee and the other founders, Outburst was yet another expression of embracing and enriching one's outsider status. Ruth McCarthy states, "Growing up and feeling different in all sorts of ways really informs your view on the world and how you express yourself culturally. Often it's that outsider perspective in whatever form that can critically cast an eye on society. And we always try and capture that essence in the programme."[409] The annual festival showcases theatre, dance, film, visual art, music, storytelling and readings, stand-up comedy,

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[408]Joe Nawaz, "Outburst Queer Arts Festival 2011," *Culture Northern Ireland*, November 3, 2011, http://www.culturenorthernireland.org/article.aspx?art_id=4545.
[409] Nawaz, "Outburst Queer Arts Festival 2011."

academic lectures, and writing and performing workshops. The festival advertises publically in the city and has done a lot to raise the profile of the queer community in Belfast. In 2011, Outburst received public funding from the Arts Council of Northern Ireland for the first time, solidifying its presence as a high quality and established arts festival and also ensuring its financial stability for a few more years.

Through *Trouble* and Outburst alone, Yee has had a significant impact on the public space of Belfast, promoting an open, proud, and positive image of the queer community through the arts. In New York City, where Yee lived for many years, there is a strong queer community that has a long history of promoting gay rights through the arts. This history of using arts and culture to promote queer activism which Yee brought with her to the North arguably may have allowed Outburst to come to fruition years before a large-scale public queer event would have launched in Belfast in a more organic fashion. Yee says, "Nobody given the climate here, especially then [in 2005 when I first started working on the project], would have said, yeah, this is the time for [a queer arts festival]… It was the first event [in the North] that said the word *queer* in it, and it was the only multi-disciplinary arts festival on the whole island."[410] In addition, it was Yee's unique idea to record the history of queer activism during the Troubles and her subsequent proposal to the Arts Council that allowed the project, *Trouble*, to get off the ground.

This generates several important questions about the nature of Northern culture and the arts and the role that immigrants have played in diversifying and

[410] Yee, Interview with Fiona Coffey, June 1, 2012.

pushing its boundaries. Has Yee's presence been a crucial factor in developing two major artistic projects associated with queer identity and activism in the North? Would a native Northerner been able to embark on a project such as *Trouble* that is asking nationalists, unionists, republicans, and loyalists to share extremely private and intimate stories about the impact of the sectarian conflict on their sexual identity? Has Yee's status as a foreigner along with the models of queer arts activism that she brings from New York allowed a crucial opening up of space in the North to address queer identity that otherwise would not have been possible? And will Yee's contributions be significant enough to help change the conversation in the North and push a culture that historically has been more comfortable with silence to confront and recover this history of its people?[411]

Queer identity has not been the only theme in Yee's work to date, and, like other women writers in the North, she has tried to express the changes that the country is experiencing during the peace process. Her first play, *Hatch*, was produced in October 2011 by Skewiff Theatre Company. The satirical play addresses issues of territory and prejudice associated with the sectarian conflict. Yee developed the piece when she was a participant in the Creative Writers Network Mentoring Programme in 2007, again reinforcing the importance of mentorship and writing programs in developing new playwrights.

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[411] It is also important to note that other playwrights in addition to Yee have also begun to integrate positive images of gay and queer identity into their work. Spanner in the Works' production of *Well Behaved Women Rarely Make History* has a scene in which two women declare their romantic love for each other. Jaki McCarrick's *Belfast Girls* shows a lesbian relationship during the late 1800s between a Protestant and a Catholic. The Derry/Londonderry based company, Sole Purpose Productions, in conjunction with The Rainbow Project is producing *Pits and Perverts* as part of the Derry City of Culture 2013 celebrations. The play is about a young gay man who leaves Derry/Londonderry during the Troubles to live in London where he becomes politically active in the UK Miner's Strikes of the 1980s.

Hatch was performed at the Belfast Fringe Festival and Pick 'n' Mix Festival in 2011. The play, which is written in a Belfast vernacular, is a stylized piece that mixes realistic language with absurdist elements. Three female chickens sit in a field gossiping and reading read celebrity magazines. Farmer Hugh decides to conduct a social experiment that parallels Troubles issues of territory, borders, and segregated communities. He first takes away the fences and barriers that segregate and control the movement of the chickens. Then, he introduces a "non-native breed" of chicken into his collection of hens and invites the media to see whether the animals behave differently. As Farmer Hugh says, "This experiment is the first of its kind to examine the effects of the physical boundaries on the mental landscape."[412] The chickens do not take advantage of their new physical freedom and stay on the same bench throughout the play gossiping. They also shun the new hen, coming up with outrageous ideas about her foreign status. Farmer Hugh remarks about the experiment,

> After years and years of division, once boundaries are lifted, will they continue to behave in a limited fashion, regardless of changes in the physical environment?… Is there a point where they chemically cannot make the transition to a world without division? Perhaps it is only in the subsequent generations that we may see them expand their breeding horizons, and truly move to broader pastures.[413]

The play is a parable about whether communities can adapt and whether the divisions of the Troubles have become so reflexive and ingrained that they are unable to be broken, changed, or even recognized for what they are. The play ultimately questions whether the North is fundamentally capable of change and

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[412] Shannon Yee, *Hatch*, 2011.
[413] Shannon Yee, *Hatch*, 2011.

whether the peace process will allow the country to move beyond the psychology and ideology of sectarian conflict.

Yee has also produced an interdisciplinary performance piece based on the severe illness she contracted which left her with permanent brain trauma. In 2008, a sinus infection turned into a subdural empyema, a rare brain infection that required multiple operations and months in the intensive care unit. She turned this harrowing experience into a twelve-minute performance piece entitled *Recovery* which debuted at the 2012 summer Pick n' Mix Festival in Belfast. She designed the piece in conjunction with the Sonic Arts Research Centre at Queens University, which uses 3D sound-scaping technology. A side effect of the illness was extreme noise sensitivity, and Yee wanted to create a performance that would give her audience a sense of the aural experience that she had on a daily basis. Interwoven with the sound sensations, Yee created a fragmented narrative of her time and recovery in the hospital in an attempt to transport the audience literally inside her head. Audience members entered a room where they lay down on a hospital bed. Through earphones, each person listened to a series of sounds that took the listener on an aural experience of Yee's diagnosis of brain trauma and through the process of her recovery. Using a binaural recording technique, the performance used advanced 3D stereo sound to create a new genre of performance, which Yee calls a "choreography of sound and dramatic narrative;" *Recovery* is part art installation, part radio drama, and part visceral auditory experience.

A review from *Culture Northern Ireland* wrote, “It is a deeply affecting recreation of the process whereby Yee's brain was disassembled then put back together, ‘slightly askew’. A wrap-around soundscape, combined with drama, music and vivid word pictures, marks the first phase of an internal nightmare.”[414] It is significant to note that *Recovery* received funding from the Joint Sectorial Dramaturgy Fund[415] as well as the Arts and Disability Awards Arts Scheme. The former, pioneered by Hanna Slattne, allowed Yee to work closely with the dramaturg to develop the piece for Pick ‘n’ Mix. This also allowed her to further develop her relationship with Tinderbox, which may produce her work in the future. *Recovery* is also part of a larger developing trend in Belfast away from a literary, text-based theatre and toward performance that emphasizes visual and emotional tones. For example, Yee also works with Assault Events, a multidisciplinary arts performance group, which performs in South Yorkshire and Northern Ireland. She is currently working on an immersive and site-specific movement piece for this group, which is set in a dance club. Multiple scenes will be performed simultaneously in different sections of the club. Audience members will have the experience of being in a night club for the evening while slowly piecing together the narrative of play, creating an immersive theatre experience that again privileges sound.

While being in the North has helped Yee generate many innovative and creative art pieces, the relative homogeneity of the country has also restricted her

[414] Jane Coyle, “Theatre Review: Pick ‘n’ Mix Festival,” *Culture Northern Ireland,* June 11, 2012, http://www.culturenorthernireland.org/article/5019/theatre-review-pick-n-mix-festival.
[415] The Joint Sectorial Dramaturgy Fund gives funding to independent theatres in the North so they may develop new performance pieces.

ability to write more aggressively about the immigrant and ethnic minority experience in the North. The dearth of professional ethnic actors has prevented her and other playwrights from producing more plays that reflect the immigrant experience. Yee states,

> I can't get my work done here because there are no actors of color, ethnic minority actors who are local. I managed to get one piece up that was part of the Art of Regeneration Program for Young Audiences in 2007 and the important thing to me was that the Polish characters were played by Polish actors. The feedback from the young audiences was that seeing Polish actors was their favorite part.[416]

As an immigrant with multiple minority identities, Yee has proven to be vitally important in diversifying and regenerating a more inclusive arts sector in the North. Her earlier work in American theatre has allowed her to introduce Northern audiences to new subject matters and artistic forms. Along with other female immigrants like Slattne and Montgomery, Yee has played a significant role in strengthening and diversifying the contributions of women in Northern theatre.

[416] Yee, Interview with Fiona Coffey, June 1, 2012.

Conclusion

As Northern Ireland has transitioned from violence to peace over the past few decades, theatre has captured and reflected the political, social, and cultural changes that the country has experienced. Since the 1980s, theatre has played a particularly important role in documenting women's experiences and showing how women's social and political status has changed with the transition of the state.

In the 1980s, Charabanc broke from normative representations of women on stage to present complex, empowered, and vocal female characters. Their plays were inspired by feminist and socialist ideologies, and the company used the model of cross-community and cross-border touring as a way to bridge sectarian divisions and to infuse women's voices into the political process in the North. Their work was welcomed throughout the island, and they provided the foundations for a healthy independent theatre sector today. Charabanc's success allowed DubbelJoint to establish itself and continue the cross-border touring model while also expanding the form and subject matter of its work. DubbelJoint's support of the JustUs Community Theater Company allowed an additional group of politicized women to use the stage as a way to promote an alternative experience of the Troubles: that of nationalist women. Although JustUs' work was extremely controversial and sectarian, it had a large impact in the North and it inserted women's and nationalist voices into the ongoing peace process. The contributions of these companies were complemented by the success of Anne Devlin, Christina Reid, and Jennifer Johnston who had their work

produced at major theatres such as the Lyric. While women during this period still struggled to produce their plays and fund their writing, they received broad respect and acknowledgement for playing an important role in Irish theatre.

However, since the mid-1990s, women playwrights and theatre practitioners have suffered several setbacks. Not only does their work continue to be underfunded and under-produced, but they also have lost the recognition for their contributions which their predecessors enjoyed. Women's work today tends to be rejected by Northern theatres due to its highly political and controversial representations of violence, racism, and class/ sectarian prejudices. Furthermore, theatres in the Republic continue to marginalize Northern drama as less worthy of production. Northern women playwrights have found greater support for their work in England and the United States, and many have moved abroad in order to advance their careers.

As Rosemary Jenkinson said, women's work appears to have "a short shelf life" in the North, and women's contributions are often forgotten or not acknowledged at all. One reason for this may be found in Tom Maguire's assessment that women's accomplishments are often treated as exceptions to the rule rather than as evidence of real lasting change:

> [Scholar Loren Kruger] has argued against seeing the advancement of individual women within the existing institutions of theatre as a sign of liberation, since such institutions might 'absorb individual female success without in any way threatening the legitimacy of the masculinist and capitalist definitions of that success.' While the provision of roles for women on the stage and within the industry is important, she cautions also that the staging of dramatic texts by women can be accommodated as 'trademarks of a new commodity, 'plays by women.'[417]

[417] Maguire, *Making Theatre in Northern Ireland*, 102.

Thus, the staging of plays by Devlin, Reid, and others during the 1980s was arguably accommodated by the mainstream without threatening it. The community-based and devised works of Charabanc and JustUs, in particular, were arguably easier to celebrate since they did not threaten the mainstream professional theatre. The shows' low-operating costs and barebones aesthetics bore no resemblance to the productions put on by the Lyric or those imported from London. The more polished plays of Devlin, Reid, and Johnston, which were staged at the Lyric, were largely treated as anomalous exceptions to otherwise male-dominated seasons.

In addition to marginalizing women's accomplishment as isolated anomalies, knowledge of and appreciate for the foundations of women's theatre in the 1980s seems to have been lost. Despite a strong legacy of women theatre practitioners, few of the writers interviewed for this research felt a connection to the theatre of the 1980s and early 1990s or saw the foundations of women's theatre during this period as being influential in their own work. This suggests that there is a larger cultural dismissal of women's writing in the North that contemporary women themselves have unconsciously absorbed. In addition, women's discomfort with highlighting gender issues in their work and being classified as a "woman writer" has helped to perpetuate this cycle of marginalization.

In the Republic, women have helped to combat erroneous notions that there are few women playwrights by joining together and highlighting their work. In 1992 and 1993, Glass House Productions produced a two-part show called

"There Are No Irish Women Playwrights" which staged the neglected works of Lady Gregory[418] and Teresa Deevey along with plays by Marina Carr and others. More recently, during the 2010-2011 season, Aideen Howard, literary director for the Abbey Theatre, programmed four plays written by women and developed staged readings of four other women's works.[419] Before Howard arrived at the Abbey in 2006, only 17% of unsolicited submissions came from women; in 2012, women were submitting 40%.[420] Howard speculates that once women saw the Abbey producing more female playwrights, they were encouraged to submit their work. For years, Marina Carr was the only contemporary, internationally recognized woman playwright. Today, due to highlighting women's work as an important category, the status of several women writers from the Republic has risen dramatically including Stella Fehilly, Carmel Winter, Nancy Harris, Ursula Rani Sarma, and Elaine Murphy.

In contrast to these overt displays of embracing women's writing in the Republic, Northern theatres and playwrights alike continue to dismiss similar projects out of fear of calling attention to gender. As Tom McGuire writes, "Initiatives which have created opportunities for women in Northern Ireland's theatre, however, have often rejected an overt espousal of feminist politics and in many instances the participants have remained adamant that their work should not

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[418] The Abbey Theatre has notoriously neglected Lady Gregory's works while constantly restaging those of her male contemporaries such as Sygne, O'Casey, and others.
[419] Carmel Winters, Elaine Murphy, Stacey Gregg, and Caryl Churchill. Despite staging four women's works, it is important to note, that all the plays were produced on the Peacock Stage. The Peacock is the smaller, black box theatre which is significantly less prestigious than the main stage. The prevalence of women's work during the 2010-2011 was in stark contrast to the Abbey's centenary season (2004) which failed to stage a single female playwright on the main stage.
[420] Aideen Howard, Lecture given at the O'Connell House for the Notre Dame Irish Seminar 2012, Dublin Ireland, June 20, 2012.

be ghettoized as 'women's theatre.'"[421] Like the Republic has demonstrated, using a gendered lens to examine women's work does not have to be restrictive or marginalizing. In fact, highlighting women's contributions encourages other women to write and submit their work to theatres and helps to combat persistent notions that there are few women playwrights on the island. Emphasizing women's accomplishments is especially important in the North where a militarized masculinity has been the status quo and where the contributions of Brian Friel, Stewart Parker, Owen McCafferty, Gary Mitchell, and the Field Day Theatre Company dominate most discussions of Northern drama.

"Troubles fatigue" may offer an additional reason why there are fewer productions of women's work in the North. Shannon Yee speculates,

> Northern Irish theatre is the theatre of a minority experience- not many people have experienced the Troubles. Just like in the States we have had the African American minority experience, the GBLT minority experience, the women minority experience. And that seems to have a natural trajectory of the kinds of plays that get done, which is initially visibility. These were my experiences: validate [the minority experience] by being an audience and listening to them. Validate myself by having a space to tell my story. That seems to be the first chapter. Then there tends to be that post-period where people are sick of hearing of those stories. And [troubles fatigue] is what is happening here now. And that might explain why there weren't so many women playwrights.[422]

Yee posits that the initial desire to explore women's experiences of the conflict during the 1980s has been replaced with a broader societal disinterest in anything conflict-related. After spending decades fighting and negotiating, the North is exhausted to the point at which it is not interested in seeing old issues represented

[421] Maguire, *Making Theatre in Northern Ireland*, 102.
[422] Yee, Interview with Fiona Coffey, June 1, 2012.

in a new light. Instead, a wish to move forward has usurped any desire to analyze the past.

In addition to increased challenges in getting their work produced and recognized in the North, themes in women's writing have also changed significantly since the 1980s. While Devlin, Reid, Jones, and others showed emboldened, politicized women who found hope and support in their families and communities, today's plays are defined by female characters who are trapped in outdated gender roles and by broken families who are victims of a lingering violence. In these plays, the family unit has fragmented with neglectful and disinterested mothers; young people are lost in a haze of alcohol, sex, and drugs; children are in peril, suggesting that the future is bleak and uncertain; and sex is linked to violence, with women as both victims and perpetrators. In contrast to the strength that women found in female bonding during the 1980s, today's plays are marked by an alienation from other women and a general lack of support from the wider community. A deep cynicism about the peace process pervades much of this writing, characterizing the construction of peace as something that politicians do in private and which is disconnected from real people's lives. Women seem to be absorbing the brunt of lingering Troubles violence rather than combatting it, and a claustrophobic pessimism saturates much of women's writing today.

Cynicism is further demonstrated in women's writing through the power of history to impede progress. There is a widely held belief in the North that the country is being held hostage by a violent history (colonization, partition, civil rights abuses, the Troubles) that is preventing the country from transforming into

a “civilized” and modern society. Tom Maguire describes, “the assumption is that a pathological fixation with history is the cause of the current conflict, rooting the society firmly in the past.”[423] The notion that the past has retarded the North and continues to shape the present in powerful and destructive ways is expressed in the works of Spallen, Gregg, McGee, Caldwell, Jenkinson, and many other women writers. While Charabanc and JustUs exposed history in order to show their audiences the opportunity for change, today’s women are arguing that the conflict has a stranglehold over the North, preventing the country from growth and true peace.

In presenting these challenging images of the North, women’s writing contradicts narratives of the peace process that are being promoted by the government and media. In February 2007, Pam Brighton spoke of the extremely limited range of narratives that the Northern media portray about the conflict: “there are only two stories the BBC wants now…‘my life as a bomber’ or ‘Belfast is like everywhere else.’”[424] Opposing this trend, Tim Miles writes that the plays of Gary Mitchell present “a counter-narrative to the hegemonic movement towards peace and ‘normalization’ in Northern Ireland…” and “…resists what [Mitchell] calls ‘the peace process narrative,’ an ideological construct that presents peace in binary extremes of success or failure.”[425] Just as certain narratives were shaped, controlled, and privileged during the Troubles, the peace process has likewise developed its own restrictive versions of the truth that tend to

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[423] Maguire, *Making Theatre in Northern Ireland,* 61.
[424] Tim Miles, “Fighting the Peace: Counter-Narrative, Violence, and the Work of Gary Mitchell,” in *Performing Violence in Contemporary Ireland*, ed. Lisa Fitzpatrick (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2010), 71.
[425] Miles, “Fighting the Peace,” 66.

swing to simplistic extremes without reflecting the complicated nuances of transitional periods. Narratives that show Northern culture and the peace process in complex, ambiguous ways tend to receive less support.[426] As journalist Malachai O'Doherty wrote in 2003, "There is pressure to direct arts and community funding towards those who best represent the elements of the predominant political model."[427] This observation could help explain why women's theatre, which often interweaves storylines that counter normative representations of peace, have received less funding and fewer productions in the North.

A lack of provocative or overtly political theatre productions in recent years may also reflect a new conservatism that has come with peacetime. Few if any recent Northern plays have resulted in the same kind of controversy, calls for funding withdrawal, or heated debates that the edgy productions of the 1980s and 1990s inspired. During the fragile years of peace, culture and society may call for a more moderate approach from its citizens in order to maintain the delicate status-quo and not descend into chaos. War is the time for revolution and for challenging cultural norms; peace, on the other hand, is the time for collective support, fragile acceptance, and reinforcing mainstream standards, even to the detriment of those on the margins. The women interviewed for this research expressed frustration with this institutionalized conservatism in society and saw

[426] However, this is arguably different for Northern cinema which has recently released several films that show nuanced and ambiguous representations of the peace process such as *Omagh* (Pete Travis, 2004) and *Five Minutes of Heaven* (Oliver Hirschbiegel, 2009).
[427] Malachi O'Doherty, "A Bit of Nuisance," in *Re-imagining Belfast: a manifesto for the arts,* eds. Mark Carruthers. Stephen Douds, and Tim Loone (Belfast: *Cultural Resolution,* 2003), 75.

their plays as a challenge to this new norm, asking people to look beyond the new, peaceful North and see who remained in the margins deeply affected by sectarian divisions.

Despite these challenging themes and the setbacks that women currently face, there are many positive aspects in the development of women's playwriting in the North. Despite a lack of education about or connection to women's theatrical history, those strong legacies still greatly inform and promote women theatre practitioners today, even if it is rarely recognized. The independent theatre sector is growing with more women as directors, producers, and managers of theatre than ever before. Development workshops are supporting new writing, and the Northern Irish Theatre Association continues to advocate for the health, diversity, and vibrancy of the contemporary theatre sector.

Despite much pessimism, there is also a great deal of hope in women's writing. Stacey Gregg's *Lagan* ends with the family unit reunited, a mother and daughter reconnecting, and the absent son remaining in Belfast to forge a brighter future. Rosemary Jenkinson's play, *Basra Boy*, shows how the current generation can break free from the historical cycle of sectarian violence. Despite the sectarian violence they experience on their ocean voyage, the women in Jaki McCarrick's *Belfast Girls* disembark in Australia optimistically determined to forge a better and brighter life. In addition, women's contributions are adding a new level of diversity to Northern theatre by experimenting with new forms/genres, addressing taboo subjects, and bringing foreign influences to help innovate theatre and push cultural boundaries. Shannon Yee is one of the first

artists to address the intersection between sexual identity and the Troubles, combining two taboo subjects into a potentially powerful and explosive performance piece. Zoe Seaton's Big Telly theatre company recently has experimented with various forms of physical theatre, even staging an underwater production in community swimming pools.[428] Stacey Gregg continually pushes the traditional boundaries of dialogue-based Irish theatre to infuse visual and anti-illusionistic influences in her plays.

As these women look forward and innovate, moreover, there are important nods to the past. Patricia Downey is devoted to bringing socially relevant theatre into disadvantaged communities and to providing professional training in the theatre arts to women, a mission that Charabanc also shared. In addition, small strides in recognizing and supporting more women's work have occurred in just the past few years. In 2012, Spallen received the position of writer-in-residence at the Lyric; Stacey Gregg received several commissions from Northern theatres such as Tinderbox and Northern Irish Opera; and, the Lyric commissioned Rosemary Jenkinson to write a play, *White Star of the North*, for the *Titanic* centenary celebrations. An increase in development workshops, the proliferation of arts festivals, and a commitment to new arts infrastructure such as the new MAC space[429] and the newly renovated Lyric signal a fresh commitment to the arts that will surely benefit female theatre practitioners.

Although this research focused on the recent works of Abbie Spallen, Stacey Gregg, Rosemary Jenkinson, Patricia Downey, and Shannon Yee, there are

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[428] *The Little Mermaid*, 2005.
[429] The newly rebuilt MAC space (Metropolitan Arts Center) opened up in April 2012 and commissions new work as well as programs local and touring productions.

many other women who are contributing to the strength of the Northern theatre sector. **Bernie McGill** wrote the 2010 musical *The Haunting of Helena Blunden* for Big Telly, a musical ghost story that reveals dark secrets from the early twentieth century. **Brenda Murphy,** who co-wrote *Binlids, Forced Upon Us,* and *Working Class Heroes* for JustUs Theatre Company, is still writing, most recently with an international hit, *A Night with George* (2011). This one-woman comedy is about the experiences of a prisoner's wife whose husband has just been released and now intends to make up for lost time by exploring the world (and other women) rather than reconnecting at home. The production has toured the North and south of Ireland, the United Kingdom, and the United States. **Jaki McCarrick's** *The Mushroom Pickers* premiered at the Southwark Playhouse (London) in 2006 and in New York in 2009. Her play, *Leopoldville,* which was staged at the Tristan Bates Theatre in London in 2010, is based on a horrific true-life murder that was committed in her hometown of Dundalk by a group of young men in the early 1990s. Her latest work, *Belfast Girls* (2012), examines the history of forced deportation of poor women and unwed mothers to Australia during the potato famine. The play explores the sectarian prejudices of the late nineteenth century and also includes a lesbian relationship. **Lisa McGee**'s *Girls and Dolls* was produced at Tinderbox in 2006 and addresses how violence from the past can never be escaped and will continue to haunt and inform the present. **Lucy Caldwell**'s plays, *Guardians* (2009), *Leaves* (2007), *Notes to a Future Self* (2011), and the radio play *Girl from Mars* (2008), have been produced in Ireland and the UK. Her work addresses the lingering effects of the Troubles on young

people. **Morna Reagan**'s *Midden* (2001) and *The Housekeeper* (2012) were produced by Rough Magic Theatre Company. *Midden* is about a woman's difficult homecoming back to the North after fifteen years of making her fortune in Philadelphia. The play premiered at the Playhouse in Derry/Londonderry, a rare example of an established Northern theatre premiering a new work by a woman playwright. **Nicola McCartney**'s play, *The Millies*, was produced by Replay Productions in 2003, and her newest work, *Melmoth the Wanderer,* was produced by Big Telly in 2012. She has also written pieces for two collaborative projects: *1 in 5* (2011, Kabosh) and *Convictions* (2000, Tinderbox). Emerging playwright, **Vittoria Cafolla** has worked with Kabosh on *Raiders of the Lost Story Arc* (2011) and Skewiff Theatre Company on *The Waiting Room* (2010). She is also a member of Agent 160, a UK-wide theatre company comprised of women playwrights who produce their work in England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. Finally, the Field Day Theatre Company selected journalist and emerging playwright, **Clare Dwyer Hogg,** to premiere two of her plays as part of the Derry/Londonderry City of Culture 2013 celebrations. *Farewell* and *Thirty Dust* have the prestige of being the first plays produced by Field Day since the early 2000s.

Dozens more women are acting, directing, producing, and running the administrative duties within Irish theatres. **Carol Moore**, originally from Charabanc, is directing both film and theatre. **Eleanor Methven** also originally of Charabanc, is a successful actress working in both the North and south. **Paula McFettridge** is the artistic director of Kabosh, which is devoted to site-specific

theatre in the North. **Lynn Parker**, niece of Northern playwright Stewart Parker, is the artistic director of Rough Magic based in Dublin. Director and producer, **Rachel O'Riordan**, has produced several works with her company Ransom Productions, and she established the three-year *Write on the Edge* workshop, which developed emerging Northern playwrights.

It is also important to note that while this study focused primarily on theatre being produced in Belfast, there are several important theatres in other urban centers in the North: the Playhouse and the Millennium Forum in Derry/Londonderry, the Ardhowen theatre in Enniskillen, the Riverside Theatre in Coleraine, and the Burnavon Arts and Cultural Centre in Cookstown (Tyrone). Most of these theatres program a combination of touring productions as well as locally produced theatre, music, and dance performances. Arguably the most important regional producing theatre is Big Telly, based in Portstewart on the north Antrim coast. Artistic director, **Zoe Seaton**, directs and produces devised plays and experimental performances. Derry/Londonderry also has the professional theatre company Sole Purpose Productions, which is run by **Patricia Byrne**. Sole Purpose, in conjunction with the Rainbow Project- a gay advocacy group, is producing *Pits and Perverts* in the fall of 2013 as part of Derry/Londonderry's City of Culture celebrations. The play charts the experience of a young gay man in the 1980s who leaves Derry/Londonderry at the height of the Troubles for London where he becomes involved in the Coal Miner's Strike of 1984-85.

The diversity and amount of work being written, staged, acted, directed, and produced by women in the North today demonstrates a resurgence of women's voices and influence in the theatre. Overcoming a century-long tradition that theatre is a male-dominated field in Ireland, women in the North are emerging to lead and shape the future of Northern theatre. They are beginning to regain the recognition of the theatre sector in the south as well as the international community, proving that the advances that women made in the 1980s and 1990s (small and hard-won as they may have been) have been successful in establishing a growing and vibrant theatre sector in the North today. Although women remain underfunded and under-produced in many of the top theatres in the North, this trend is slowly shifting as women playwrights continue to write challenging roles for women and take on more producing, directing, and administrative duties.

Ultimately, all these developments reflect the start of a broader cultural revival in which the North is currently engaged. Abbie Spallen has commented, "I don't know whether it's because of the end of the Troubles or whatever, but there seems to be something really brewing up North, and I'm absolutely thrilled to be part of it."[430] The next few decades will hopefully continue to see a flourishing of theatre as well as continued financial and political support for the arts. Through its recent focus on arts and community festivals, the Northern government has signaled that arts and culture will be important tools through which the country will be able to transform its image and reputation within the island and abroad. Theatre is playing an increasingly important role in this renaissance, combatting the code of silence that has been inherent to the North and finding new ways of

[430] Arminta Wallace, "From the North Country," *Irish Times Magazine,* December 15, 2007, 20.

addressing past trauma, violence, injustices, and prejudices that have often been taboo subjects. In a society that has Troubles fatigue, theatre is engaging the past and showing how it informs the present-day peace process in a way that politics and government simply have not been successful in doing. Northerners, distrustful, fed-up, and skeptical of any political rhetoric associated with peace, may find more productive conversations within nontraditional arenas such as art and culture.

Successful cultural revivals, such as the one the North is currently engaged in, always include challenging of the status-quo, pushing of boundaries and assumptions, and innovating with new forms and subject matters. All this is happening in the North today with women at the lead. This cultural revival is subtle; it is happening in fits and starts; and it has been knocked back by the economic collapse, but it is still growing. The legacy of Charabanc and other women from the 1980s and 1990s continues to play a vital role in keeping the Northern theatre sector healthy and innovative as contemporary women practitioners lead the North into a new artistic renaissance.

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