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Staging a Shared Future: Performance and the Search for Inclusive Narratives in the “New” Belfast

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**Staging a Shared Future: Performance and the Search for Inclusive
Narratives in the “New” Belfast**

by

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Dedication

For my family: Jack, Susan, and Jonathan Owicki. With gratitude and love for all of their support.

And in loving memory of Brian Franklin, who is greatly missed.

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Staging a Shared Future: Performance and the Search for Inclusive Narratives in the “New” Belfast

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2013

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Staging a Shared Future argues that theatre provides vital insight into the construction and use of narratives in the Northern Ireland since the 1998 Good Friday Agreement (GFA). This document signaled the end of thirty years of violent conflict between Protestants and Catholics, but could not heal the distrust that remained. Thus, one of the goals of the ongoing peace process has been to replace old sectarian narratives emphasizing differences and grievances between the communities with newer narratives emphasizing similarity and shared purpose. I examine nine plays staged in Belfast since the GFA that have endorsed and interrogated these new narratives of progress and argue that theatre, as an inherently communal event, provides an excellent opportunity for residents of the state to collectively imagine what a “shared society” actually means. I conduct close readings of complete productions including script, direction, acting choices, venue, and marketing. I also compare these performances to other forms of public discourse including television, government policy documents, radio, and fiction.

Chapter one provides an overview of Northern Irish theatre and public discourse; each subsequent chapter explores the ways theatre has tackled one particular issue facing the construction of a “shared future” narrative. Chapter two focuses on productions that

staged meetings between Catholics and Protestants. *The Wedding Community Play Project* (1999), *Two Roads West* (2009), and *National Anthem* (2010) offered different visions of what it would take for these historical enemies to consider themselves equal partners in the state. Chapter three looks at the state's general discomfort with public discussions of Troubles-related traumas. *Convictions* (2000), *The Chronicles of Long Kesh* (2009), and *The Sign of the Whale* (2010) all advocated for ways of addressing trauma that did not depend on competitive grief or hierarchies of victims. Chapter four concentrates on representations of those who have been marginalized within Northern Ireland. *To Be Sure* (2007), *This is What We Sang* (2009), and *God's Country* (2010) all pointed to the need for Northern Ireland to think broadly about ideas of "belonging" and to create a more inclusive "shared future." Throughout, I argue that theatre will play an essential role in negotiating the continuing tensions within Northern Ireland.

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Illustration 1: Map of the Island of Ireland. From OpenStreetMap.com, © OpenStreetMap contributors, CC-BY-SA

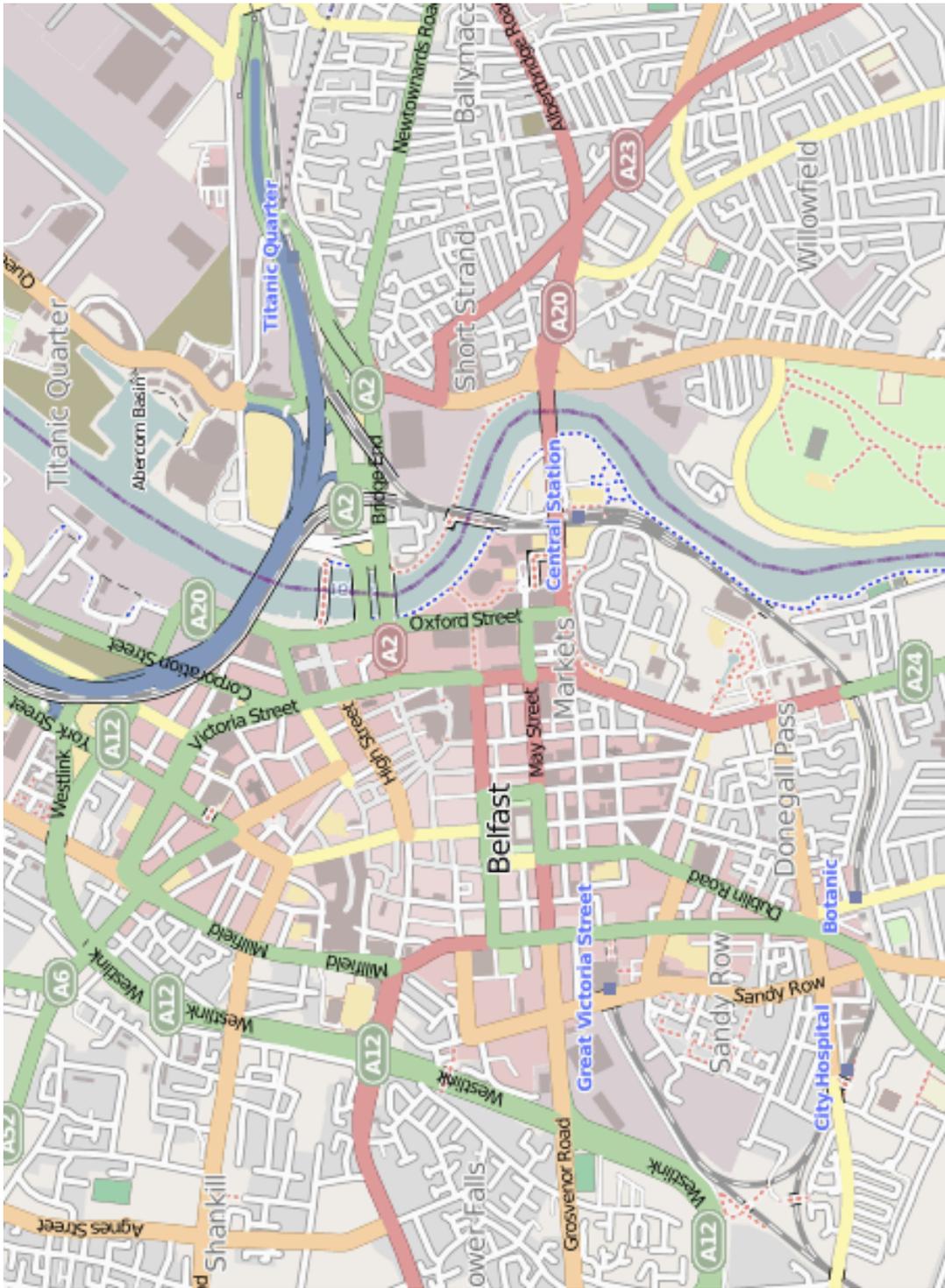


Illustration 2: Map of Central Belfast. From OpenStreetMap.com, © OpenStreetMap contributors, CC-BY-SA

Chapter One

Introduction and Overview

“So much of what the theatre is trying to wrestle with in the North is whether to try and disregard the heritage of violence and say we are now in a new dispensation, or whether to try and acknowledge that the surface narrative of the peace process has hidden an awful lot of unresolved tensions and difficulties”

-- David Grant, former Artistic Director of the Lyric Theatre¹

“Come to Ireland. We’ve no terrorists at all. They’re all playwrights now.”

-- Comedian Dara O’Briain²

On June 27, 2012, a historic event took place in the lobby of the Lyric Theatre, Belfast; Queen Elizabeth II and Northern Irish Deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness shook hands. To an observer not familiar with Northern Ireland, the event might have seemed unremarkable; the Queen was in Belfast as part of her Diamond Jubilee celebration, and McGuinness was one of several politicians forming a line to bid her farewell following an event at the theatre. The surrounding context made it an extraordinary news event, however. In the days before the handshake, commentators speculated endlessly on the exact form it would take, what (if anything) would be said, and whether it would even happen. The event and public reactions to it highlight the successes and failures of the Northern Irish peace process, as well as the key role public performance has played in the state.

¹ Quoted in Crawley.

² *Dara O’Briain: Live at the Theatre Royal* (2006).

McGuinness and the Queen are both symbolic, polarizing figures within Northern Ireland. McGuinness has been a prominent republican (one who wants Northern Ireland to be joined with the Republic of Ireland) since at least 1970, but his exact involvement with paramilitary activities has been disputed. In 1973 he was imprisoned for transporting explosives; he proudly proclaimed his membership in the Irish Republican Army (IRA) at his trial. He claims to have left the IRA in 1974, but many with inside knowledge dispute this. In particular, most commentators believe that he was a member of the Army Council, the IRA's governing body, in the 1980s and 1990s. Beginning in the late 1990s, however, he took part in the peace process that would end the paramilitary violence in which he had previously engaged. In the discussions that led to the Good Friday Agreement (GFA, also known as the Belfast Agreement),³ he acted as the chief negotiator for Sinn Féin, the political party associated with the IRA. He was elected as a Member of Parliament (MP) in 1997, although he followed the long-standing Sinn Féin policy of refusing to take his seat in the UK Parliament at Westminster, at least nominally because to do so he would have needed to swear an oath of allegiance to the Queen. In 2007, when the devolved Northern Irish Assembly was established at Stormont, he became the Deputy First Minister. In spite of the title, in practice this made him a co-equal governor with the First Minister (first Ian Paisley, and then Peter Robinson, both members of the Democratic Unionist Party). McGuinness's public persona is steeped in both his former violent activities and his later movement towards building peace. Some in the state admire this transition, while others feel his past crimes have been wrongly forgotten or ignored. Yet another group decries his participation in the peace process, feeling that only his earlier violent actions were moral.

³ The document's formal and legal title is the "Belfast Agreement," but it is rarely referred to using this name. Throughout this document, I have elected to use the more popular "Good Friday Agreement."

The Queen offers, at least superficially, a more unchanging symbolism. Since her 1952 ascension as UK monarch and head of state, she has embodied British history and identity. She is treated with respect and deference, but has little actual power. Queen Elizabeth II in particular is known for being polite, proper, and largely apolitical. Her public persona gives little insight into her own personality or views; in many ways, she seems to serve as an ideal figurehead - someone who may be choreographed and used for symbolic purposes, but who is unlikely to rock the boat, at least in public (indeed, her son and the heir to the throne Prince Charles has frequently been criticized for voicing his opinions more freely, even on relatively “harmless” topics like architecture).⁴ Thus, in some ways she serves as a blank slate on to which everyone can project their own opinions about Britain and the concept of monarchy.

Most people in the North greeted the handshake with approval. While several expressed annoyance at the media circus it had become, they felt that it was the right choice (if long overdue) for both participants. Those who did object, however, demonstrated the lingering tensions that kept such a meeting from happening for so long. For some Catholic republicans, even a number of those who had supported the peace and the GFA that enabled it, this was a step too far in acknowledging and capitulating to the British monarchy. In contrast, many Protestant unionists framed their objection to the event in terms of concern for the Queen. They implied that she would be somehow defiled by meeting with the former terrorist, and that she had been forced into the

⁴ In September 2012, BBC Correspondent Frank Gardner caused a minor outrage by revealing that the Queen had, at one point, expressed concern about the presence of radical Islamist cleric Abu Hamza in London. This was hardly a controversial view, but it was considered a major breach of etiquette to publicly reveal any of the Queen’s political opinions.

meeting (although, given the Queen's silence about politics, this was almost entirely a speculation).⁵

Thus, the handshake between the two leaders was fraught with symbolism and anxiety. Seeing these two former enemies (although the Queen played only a symbolic role in the conflict) join hands demonstrated the political change allowed by the ongoing peace process.⁶ The event would have been unthinkable even several years after the end of the violence had brought supposed normality to the state. It was choreographed to emphasize this sense of "business as usual" – the public part of the event was quite banal. Video coverage shows an entirely unremarkable receiving line – McGuinness is second in a line of at least five, and neither his behavior nor the Queen's appears to be different from any of the other hand shakes (which include other prominent politicians like Peter Robinson and Republic of Ireland President Michael D. Higgins).⁷

While a great deal of publicity was given to the handshake, little attention was paid to its venue. The Lyric Players were founded in 1951, but the building in which the handshake took place only opened in 2011. The space, which cost £18 million, is a modern, glossy building with bright gathering spaces and a bar and coffee shop open throughout the day. It is in many ways emblematic of how Northern Ireland and particularly Belfast have reinvented themselves in the wake of the Troubles. By holding

⁵ Many also speculated that the Queen would have a personal reason not to meet McGuinness – in 1979 her cousin Lord Mountbatten had been killed in an IRA bombing.

⁶ The Queen had already engaged in a similar symbolic display in the Republic of Ireland. At the invitation of then Irish President Mary McAleese, she visited the Republic in May 2011. This was the first visit of a British Monarch to what is now the Republic since 1911. As part of this visit, the Queen spoke (briefly) in Irish and laid a wreath at the Garden of Remembrance, which memorializes those who died in the cause of Irish freedom. Both of these actions had extreme symbolic value, as they depicted the British monarch (at least partially) recognizing the legitimacy of a war against the British state. McGuinness actually declined to take part in this event, and many noted that his decision to engage in the 2012 handshake at the Lyric was a reversal of this position.

⁷ "Queen and Martin McGuinness shake hands in Northern Ireland," <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-18612560>>

the meeting here, the organizers emphasized forward progress and suggested that Belfast was now taking its place in a modern, cosmopolitan world. This newness also meant that the space was largely free from sectarian or traumatic overtones. The symbolism of the meeting was already fraught, and many observers had reservations about it happening at all. If it had taken place in a spot tied to one community or another, it seems likely that there would have been massive outcry. Similarly, the audience at the Lyric is primarily middle class, and this group was relatively insulated from the direct effects of the Troubles. This might have added a further buffer, allowing spectators to distance themselves from some of the raw emotions of the Troubles.⁸

This handshake thus offered a performative embodiment of the optimism of the peace process but was also imbued with the problems that still face the state. As sociologists Colin Coulter and Michael Murray observe in the introduction to their 2008 anthology of articles on post-GFA Northern Ireland, the “official” narrative of the peace process views it as “an era marked overwhelmingly by progress.”⁹ At the same time, like the peace process, the handshake sought to cover over rather than solve many lingering problems. Coulter and Murray caution: “Although a great deal of progress has admittedly been made in Northern Ireland, closer examination reveals a sequence of troubling trends.”¹⁰ These include the continued segregation of Protestants and Catholics as well as the rise in non-lethal “punishment beatings” administered by former paramilitaries and designed to correct deviant behavior (such as drug-dealing and cross-

⁸ This desire for distance and emphasis on looking forward might also explain why the specific event at which the handshake took place was largely ignored by the press; these important figures met at a ceremony celebrating the roles the arts had played in easing the tensions between the two communities. It seems that this should have offered an opportunity for journalists to underscore the act of putting aside past animosities and working together. Yet most articles did not mention the event at all, and those that did failed to name it or give any details.

⁹ Coulter and Murray 14.

¹⁰ Coulter and Murray 14.

community dating). In addition, since the publication of the anthology, Northern Ireland has seen a dramatic increase in terrorist activities by so-called “dissident republicans,” those who do not believe the IRA should have agreed to the GFA and ended its campaign of violence. As Coulter and Murray suggest, there is much to be optimistic about in Northern Ireland, but the state still faces many challenges. Even if it does not slide back into violence (as many fear it may), the state must work hard to redefine itself as an inclusive place and find a balance between building a “shared future” and remembering the victims of the Troubles.

This dissertation explores the intersection between performance and the politics of peace that the handshake between Queen Elizabeth II and Martin McGuinness exemplified. I read nine plays staged in Belfast since the GFA against the efforts within the state to create a so-called “shared society.” I explore these plays in the context of the work that has been done in the public sphere to transform the narratives about Northern Ireland’s past and future from emphasizing division to emphasizing unity. Theatre, as a communal event, provides an excellent opportunity for this work to be done. At the same time, many of the plays in this dissertation are, like Coulter and Murray, suspicious of processes that try to enforce this shared identity without dealing with the state’s remaining problems.

This chapter provides an overview of the issues facing post-GFA Northern Ireland and the role the theatre has played in the state. I begin by offering a description of Northern Ireland’s “two communities,” particularly focusing on the different terms used to describe them and the political and paramilitary organizations that have represented them. I then offer a brief political history of the state, focusing on the peace process and its legacies. Next, I discuss the role performance has played in Northern Ireland, arguing that theatrical and non-theatrical performances both reflect and reinforce these narratives.

The next section focuses on the role narratives play in shaping residents' understandings of their relationship to each other and to the state. I divide this into three parts: the narratives of division that in part provoked the Troubles, the narratives of unity that seek to bring the communities together, and personal narratives that reflect individuals' different experiences with violence and sectarianism. I make particular note of the ways these narratives have been reflected in theatre created during both the Troubles and the peace process. After outlining my methodology for this dissertation, I conclude with an overview of the chapters in the dissertation.

IDENTIFYING AND NAMING THE "TWO SIDES"¹¹

Northern Ireland is generally assumed to be made up of two distinct communities; there are several ways of referring to each, and every term has its own nuance. Outside of Northern Ireland, the terms "Catholic" and "Protestant" are used most frequently. These are somewhat misleading, however, since they imply that religion is at the root of the conflict. As Patrick Grant, among others, argues, the disagreement is not over the truth of any particular religious belief or dogma. "Nobody is much concerned to shed blood over theological disagreements or arguments about church organization, and so on." Instead, he argues that the most useful way to view the conflict in Northern Ireland is "as an ethnic conflict zone wherein religion is the chief marker of ethnic identity."¹² Scholars tend to refer to the conflict as "ethno-national," "ethno-political," or some variation on this theme.¹³ Thus, the terms "Catholic" and "Protestant" generally describe the subject's community of origin rather than their personal religious beliefs.

¹¹ Table 1 provides an overview of the information from this section in the form of a chart, and Appendix 1 offers a glossary of key terms and abbreviations.

¹² Grant 71.

¹³ Sociologist Claire Mitchell argues that these scholars have been too quick to dismiss the role of religion in the conflict. Although she acknowledges the many non-religious factors that affect it, she suggests that

The two communities can also be referred to by their political beliefs. Most Catholics identify as Irish and believe that Northern Ireland should be part of the Republic of Ireland. Those who hold these beliefs (including a small number of Protestants) are called nationalists. In contrast, most Protestants identify as British and believe Northern Ireland should remain a part of the United Kingdom. Those who hold these beliefs are called unionists; it is far more rare for a Catholic to identify as a unionist than for a Protestant to identify as a nationalist. Although they technically have different meanings, these religious and political terms are frequently used interchangeably. Thus, when someone is referred to as “a nationalist,” this can reflect either her actual political views or the political views one would expect her to have given her community of origin. In this project, I generally use the religious term to reflect to the subject’s community of origin and the political term to reflect her political opinions, but in many cases the line between these two aspects of identity is blurred or irrelevant.

Each of these political groups contains a small, more radical element: for Protestants/unionists, these are called “loyalists” and for Catholics/nationalists they are called “republicans.” The people who identify with these labels are more likely to be working class, and more likely to have participated in paramilitary activities during the Troubles. Although many republicans and loyalists never engaged in violence, nearly everyone who did would have identified with these smaller, more radical groups. As such, these sections of the two communities received a majority of attention throughout the Troubles. In this dissertation, I am careful only to use the terms “loyalist” and “republican” when referring to these more politically-extreme groups.

religious identity shapes the two communities and thus the conflict in that “Ethnicity and cultural identity would have different meanings without their religious dimensions” (7).

Religious Term	Catholic	Protestant
National Identity	Irish	British
Believe Northern Ireland Should be Part of...	The Republic of Ireland	The United Kingdom
Political Term	Nationalist	Unionist
Radical Segment	Republican	Loyalist
Largest Political Party	Sinn Féin	Democratic Unionist Party
Other Political Parties	Social Democrat and Labour	Ulster Unionist Party, Progressive Unionist Party, Traditional Unionist Voice
Primary Paramilitary Groups	Irish Republican Army (including splinter groups)	Ulster Volunteer Force, Ulster Defense Association

Table 1: Aspects of the Two Communities

These different groups are represented by a number of political parties; one of the many asymmetrical aspects of life after the Troubles is that republicans hold considerably more political power than loyalists. The largest Catholic/nationalist party is Sinn Féin, which, as I outlined above, arose from the IRA and thus has an explicit republican identification. The second largest Catholic/nationalist party is the Social Democrat and Labor Party (SDLP), whose voters are primarily non-republican nationalists (there is no particular term for this group, but they may be referred to as “moderate nationalists” or some variation). In contrast, the two largest Protestant/unionist parties are at least nominally not loyalist. Representatives of Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) are more likely to come from the middle classes, and although they do not wish to alienate loyalist voters, they also do not seek to identify too strongly with them (the SDLP plays a similar role for nationalists). The Progressive Unionist Party (PUP) has a working class, loyalist identity and is aligned with the paramilitary Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF). While the DUP and the UUP are generally socially conservative, the PUP tends to embrace more leftist policies. Therefore, the PUP is in

some ways analogous to Sinn Féin, but it enjoys a much smaller mandate and is generally not considered a significant political force. The Traditional Unionist Voice (TUV) is another small unionist party, but it is more socially conservative than either the DUP or the UUP. Members of the TUV tend to reject any cooperation with nationalists and to believe that the DUP and UUP have compromised their integrity by working with Sinn Féin.

A POLITICAL HISTORY OF NORTHERN IRELAND

Northern Ireland was made a state in 1922 with the partition of the island of Ireland. Twenty-six of the island's thirty-two counties became the Irish Free State (now the Republic of Ireland); the remaining six became Northern Ireland. While the Irish Free State came into existence as an independent member of the Commonwealth (and would later sever all ties with Britain), Northern Ireland remained a part of the United Kingdom. Partition was a compromise reached after a stalemate between the citizens of Ireland who wanted independence and those who did not. In the late nineteenth century, movements for home rule or full independence were gaining popularity (particularly in the southern provinces), and becoming increasingly violent. In response, Northern unionists threatened to take up arms and fight the British if the government gave in to the demands of nationalists (in my conclusion I discuss the centenary celebration of the Ulster Covenant, the most famous of these threats). Partition was an attempt to satisfy both factions, but the boundaries drawn ensured that many nationalists would be included in the North. For example, had individual counties been allowed to decide whether or not to stay in the union, it seems clear that Fermanagh and Tyrone would have joined the

Irish Free State. They were not offered this opportunity, however, and their majority-nationalist populations remained part of Northern Ireland and the UK.

Both before and after partition Protestant unionists, descendants of English and Scottish farmers who had moved to the North during the Plantation of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, held most of the economic and political power within the state. In particular, Belfast had become an important industrial center, with major linen and shipbuilding companies owned by Protestants. In order to maintain this power following partition, and to keep Northern Ireland part of the UK, unionists instituted policies that discriminated against Catholics in housing, education, voting, policing, and employment. In the 1960s, largely inspired by the Civil Rights movement in the United States, Catholics began to organize protests against these policies. While these effected some change, they were frequently met by violence from the state. The most notable occurrence was Bloody Sunday (January 30, 1972), when the British army killed fourteen unarmed protesters at a civil rights march.¹⁴

This violent climate led many citizens of Northern Ireland to abandon democratic processes and peaceful protest. Bloody Sunday and events like it spurred many Catholics to join the IRA, which in the years following partition had waged a few ineffectual campaigns to unify the island. The violent actions of these groups in turn caused many Protestants to join paramilitary forces to “defend” their own side. The period known as “the Troubles” began in 1969, and during these years more than 3,600 died. Republican paramilitaries were responsible for 57.8% of these deaths, loyalist paramilitaries were responsible for 29.9%, and the security forces were responsible for 9.9%.¹⁵ Although

¹⁴ It was not until the release of the Saville Report on June 15, 2010, that the British government conceded that those killed had been unarmed. On this day, Prime Minister David Cameron issued an apology to the families of the victims and their larger communities.

¹⁵ *Lost Lives* 1561.

republicans were responsible for a majority of the deaths, the Catholic community suffered the most – Catholic civilians made up the largest group of victims with 1,259 deaths.¹⁶ A majority of those involved, both as victims and perpetrators, were members of the working class.

While efforts to secure a peace (including covert negotiations between paramilitaries and the British government) had been ongoing throughout the Troubles, they began to be truly successful in the 1990s when the British government openly agreed to talk with representatives of the paramilitary organizations (particularly the republicans). This culminated in the signing of the GFA in 1998, which included input from most of the key players in the conflict: republican paramilitaries (through their political party, Sinn Féin), unionist politicians, and both the British and Irish governments.¹⁷ Once drafted, the GFA was passed as a referendum by the populations of both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. Although, as stated above, many tensions still remain within the state, the GFA was largely successful in fostering an uneasy cooperation between most members of the two communities. Thus, the GFA has triggered many changes in the ways the people of Northern Ireland understand their relationship to each other and the state.

The fact that the GFA needed to be passed by a majority of the people in Northern Ireland (rather than simply by representatives of the government and paramilitary organizations) demonstrates the widespread nature of the tensions that had prolonged the fighting. Even though only a relatively small fraction of the population actually took up arms in the struggle, many more felt sympathy for the paramilitaries on “their side.” In

¹⁶ *Lost Lives* 1555.

¹⁷ Loyalist paramilitaries did not take a direct role in these talks, at least partially because they lacked significant political representation.

particular, the IRA owed its lengthy career to the community support it received. It mirrored this support by claiming to be acting as a representative of the wider Catholic community. Although loyalist paramilitaries enjoyed less widespread support, they did have significant strongholds in working class areas that generally felt ignored by unionist politicians. As a result, those working towards peace did not only have to placate a small number of terrorists – they had to find a way to address a series of seemingly intractable issues in a way that would be acceptable to a divided community.

The GFA demanded significant compromises from both sides; it did much to address Republicans' civil rights complaints, as did the 2007 St Andrews Agreement that created a devolved government in Belfast. These documents include provisions to ensure that both communities would be represented in government. The GFA dissolved the primarily-Protestant police force, the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), and replaced it with the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI). This new force sought to address the sectarianism that had plagued its predecessor and had an explicit mission of recruiting from and serving both communities equally. The GFA also included a section on human rights, which affirmed the rights of people “to freedom from sectarian harassment” and “to equal opportunity in all social and economic activity, regardless of class, creed, disability, gender or ethnicity.”¹⁸ The issue of national sovereignty, commonly known as the “constitutional question,” was more difficult to compromise on, since the two communities' desired outcomes were mutually exclusive. The document declared that Northern Ireland would remain a part of the UK until a majority of its citizens voted to become part of Ireland. In exchange for this promise, Republicans agreed to abandon violence and attempt to bring about this change through democratic measures. The GFA

¹⁸ “Good Friday Agreement” 20.

also made provisions for citizens of Northern Ireland to individually identify as either British or Irish.

THEATRE AND PERFORMANCE IN CONTEMPORARY NORTHERN IRELAND

These tensions between the two communities are vividly reflected in the theatre created in Northern Ireland since the GFA. Theatre scholar Mark Phelan emphasizes the close connections that have existed between Irish theatre and Irish political history since at least the end of the nineteenth century:

As historians of Irish theatre have long known, there is no better way to investigate modern Ireland's political history than to study its popular theatre. If you want to understand how cultural nationalism laid the foundations for political independence, look up the extraordinary efflorescence of drama produced during the Irish Revival. What motivated the 1916 revolutionaries? Read the plays of Countess Markiewicz, Thomas McDonagh, Patrick Pearse and James Connolly.¹⁹

Phelan continues his list of popular playwrights, noting the insight they provide into the tensions that have faced both parts of Ireland from the twentieth century to the present. He argues that this connection is particularly evident in the theatre created in Northern Ireland during the Troubles and their aftermath. Theatre in the North tends to be deeply intertwined with politics – even plays which appear to focus primarily on non-political topics (such as family relationships) rarely ignore the complicated and conflicted society that surrounds their characters. Similarly, since most characters are explicitly or implicitly associated with one sectarian community, audiences use their own assumptions and experiences to imagine the larger world of the play.

Audiences' understandings of plays are frequently shaped by their experiences as performers and spectators outside of the theatre. Some of these performances are clearly marked as such, while others are more subtle parts of everyday life. Parades, for

¹⁹ Phelan 25.

example, play an important role in expressing and reaffirming sectarian identity, particularly within the unionist community. Each summer, during the so-called “Marching Season” bands and members of the Loyal Orange Order and similar organizations hold more than two thousand marches throughout the state. The Orange Order was founded in 1796, with the express purpose of protecting both the union with Britain and the Protestant faith. In the state’s early years, the controlling class of the government generally came from the Orange Order. The many parades (the largest of which take place on the twelfth of July) have historically offered a way to reiterate and reinforce the power held by Orangemen and more generally Protestants within the state. In these parades, men (and very occasionally women) from the Order march in straight lines, maintaining a solemn and dignified facial expression. They are very neatly dressed in black suits and bowler hats, with white gloves. The only color comes from the orange sashes they wear around their shoulders. In all, their performance is designed to reinforce ideas of Protestant respectability as well as their ownership of the state (Illustration 3).²⁰

Unsurprisingly, then, these parades have been a site of frequent conflict in Northern Ireland, particularly when routes pass through areas assumed to be Catholic. It is common for such parades through contentious areas to be followed by several nights of rioting. This was the case as recently as August 2012, when seven police officers were hospitalized in the unrest following a parade that had broken an official ruling and played music while marching past a Catholic church that had previously been a site of tension. The importance placed on these parades by both sides (as a performance of either identity or oppression) demonstrates both the centrality of performance in Northern Ireland and the sophisticated methods for creating and reading the performances that the citizens have

²⁰ For more analysis of these events, see Dominic Bryan’s *Orange Parades: The Politics of Ritual, Tradition, and Control* (2000).

created. They also show the importance of space to these performances – the parades mean very different things when they travel through Protestant and Catholic areas.²¹

This practice of reading performance is also common in daily life. In his analysis of his anthropological work in a Northern town he has given the pseudonym Ballybogoin, William Kelleher outlines a process he calls “telling.” Here, residents attempt to both perform their identities and to read the identity of others through verbal and physical cues. “Telling requires the reading and typifying of bodies through a visual imaginary, and it marks others as strangers or friends, as victims and possible aggressors, or as coreligionists and possible colleagues and defenders.”²² Kelleher proceeds to list many of the more and less obvious ways people may attempt to identify each other, ranging from asking which school they attended to making assumptions based on clothing or even attractiveness. These assumptions are frequently incorrect, but the key point is that the people of Northern Ireland are used to attempting to read sectarian identities on the bodies of strangers and expect to have the same process done to them.

Language is one of the key ways people perform their sectarian identity; this is particularly evident in the naming of places. The most obvious is the city of Derry/Londonderry; nationalists will nearly always use the former name, while unionists will nearly always use the latter. Those who wish to remain neutral will use both (as I did) or more casually refer to it as “stroke city” to emphasize the conflicting names. Thus, a person’s political leanings can generally be identified based on their choice of

²¹ Beginning in 2009, the Orange Order attempted to rebrand the Belfast parades as “Orangefest,” which they hoped would give the occasion a more lighthearted, cross-community appeal. These attempts seem to have been largely unsuccessful. “Orangefest” was seen as a superficial rebranding by a majority in both communities. When I attended the parades in 2010, the pre-event publicity made considerable use of this new name, but I could see little evidence of any rebranding or reinterpretation within the parade itself. Although they have not fully abandoned “Orangefest,” the Orange Order appears to have backed off of this branding in 2011 and 2012.

²² Kelleher 34.

name (with the “neutral” option also giving important information). This can sometimes become fairly ridiculous. For example, in an August 2011 conversation on the *Talkback* radio program about an article published in the *Derry Journal*, DUP MLA Jim Wells insisted on referring to the paper as the “*Londonderry Journal*,” in spite of being corrected several times. In this case, a need to perform his sectarian identity seemed to trump any desire to accurately identify the publication.²³

The use of language by the different communities is not static, however. For example, actor Vincent Higgins observed to me that a nationalist of his generation would rarely if ever use the phrase “Northern Ireland,” which implies that the state is a meaningful entity. He would generally say “the North of Ireland” or “the six counties” to emphasize the artificial division of the island of Ireland. However, he noted that this distinction is much less important to younger nationalists, who are likely to use the phrase “Northern Ireland” without reference to the political implications of the term identified by their elders (the use of these two systems of naming becomes important in the final moments of *National Anthem*, discussed in the next chapter).²⁴ Thus, as the rules of these performances change, the people of Northern Ireland have also changed their interpretive models.

Audiences bring these experiences to their readings of theatrical performances, and it is important to remember that artists also bring them to the creation of plays. Belfast’s theatre artists are not somehow “apart” from the conflict, commenting on it objectively. While many performances do offer thoughtful critiques of the sectarian

²³ *Best of Talkback Podcast*, August 3, 2011.

²⁴ This observation was prompted by my casual use of the term “Northern Ireland,” which drew my attention to the ways that I might be read by people in Northern Ireland. While to a certain extent my choices would have been brushed aside since I was a foreigner, I suspect that people paid attention to my behavior in order to determine the side with which I sympathized or identified with.

narratives I discuss later in this introduction, many others reinforce them. For example Tom Maguire emphasizes the role theatre has taken in crafting and reiterating the idea that the North is fundamentally a place of violent conflict. He writes: “The theatre has played its part in generating and repeating” the images of “bonfires and street riots” that for many years defined Northern Ireland in the international imagination.²⁵ While theatre can and at times does play a transformative role in the peace process, it is always part of the same systems of discourse that run throughout the state.

Similarly, theatre artists do not offer a representative sample of the population of Northern Ireland. Eva Urban notes: “A close look at theatre companies in Northern Ireland, especially in the last twenty or thirty years, rather suggests that most of them foster moderately Nationalist tendencies, or are oriented towards humanist, socialist and liberalist thought. In Protestant working-class areas, participation in theatre projects has been significantly lower than in Catholic areas.”²⁶ It is common for theatre artists from Protestant background to largely conform to this political identity, distancing themselves from unionist politics even if they do not fully embrace nationalism (as the discussion of Marie Jones in the next chapter illustrates). There are playwrights who write from a specifically unionist perspective, such as Gary Mitchell and more recently David Ireland, but they are in the minority. Thus, theatre should not be treated as a “true” or “objective” window into life in Northern Ireland; while it may be appealing to think of artists as visionaries who transcend the specifics of their time and place, this is decidedly not the case.

Finally, to understand theatre in Belfast, it is essential to understand the overall “theatre scene” in the city. The productions I discuss all arise from the material

²⁵ Maguire 2.

²⁶ Urban 30.

conditions that shape production in the city. The Lyric theatre is the city's only resident producing company; Belfast's many other, smaller companies perform in other venues around the city. The largest of these is the Grand Opera House (Illustration 4), which frequently hosts concerts and tours of large West End musicals. It also houses locally produced and created shows, although generally only once they have made a big enough impact (through either the artists' reputations or previous productions) to ensure significant ticket sales. The Grand Opera House also has a more intimate studio theatre, the "Baby Grand," in which a number of smaller shows are performed. Audiences at the Grand Opera House are more likely to be working class than audiences at the Lyric, which, as discussed above, traditionally attracts middle-class audiences who are regular-theatre goers.

Other venues include the large Waterfront Hall; the smaller and more community-oriented Crescent Arts Center; and the new MAC, which opened in April 2012 and hopes to provide a gathering space for those interested in the arts as well as a venue for performances and exhibits. As this dissertation demonstrates, there is also a large amount of site-specific theatre (plays performed in non-theatrical venues that reflect their content). The Kabosh theatre company is solely dedicated to such work, but several other companies have occasionally produced site-specific shows. Although performances in all these venues happen year-round, they are most prevalent in the second half of October during the Ulster Bank Belfast Festival at Queens. During these two weeks, the city's venues host a number of international and local artists, and many of the plays discussed in this project were first staged at the Festival.

NARRATIVES IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Narratives play a key role in how people understand themselves, their relationships to others, and particularly their history. Hayden White stresses that even “well-written” histories create narratives in order to convey their arguments, “the contents of which are as much *invented* as *found*.”²⁷ This is particularly evident in Northern Ireland, which is full of competing narratives about the state’s past, its current status, its future, and the inherent identity of its people. The people of the North have constructed these narratives to explain who they are, where they come from, and where they are going. This section outlines some of the specific narratives that have been deployed during the Troubles and the peace process and explores the effects they have had on the lived experiences of the people of Northern Ireland. It also explores the ways these narratives have been deployed in theatre created both before and after the GFA.

Narratives of Division and Sectarianism: the “Two-Communities” Model

As I discussed earlier, Northern Ireland has traditionally been viewed as separated into two communities: Catholic nationalists and Protestant unionists. This is illustrated by an old and oft-repeated joke: two men (always men) are speaking. The first asks the second about his religion. “I’m Jewish,” the second man replies (he might also be Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, or nearly any non-Christian religion). The first man pauses for a moment and then asks: “Yes, but are you a Protestant Jew or a Catholic Jew?” While this joke primarily pokes fun at the ways the conflict has limited the people of Northern Ireland’s views of humanity, it also points out that these identity categories offer information beyond religious belief. As I noted earlier, there is a strong political aspect to the division between the two communities, and this is arguably more important than

²⁷ White 82, emphasis in original.

the difference in religious dogma. Thus, when the first man asks the second whether he is “a Protestant Jew or a Catholic Jew,” the intended question may well be the far more reasonable: “Are you a unionist or a nationalist?” Still, the joke reinforces the narrative that has shaped Northern Ireland since its inception: that the two communities are fundamentally different, and that sectarian affiliation represents the most significant difference between the people of Northern Ireland.

It is important to keep in mind that this two-communities model is both an artificial construction and vitally important to the ways people in Northern Ireland understand their relationships to each other and to the state. The two-communities model assumes a cohesion and uniformity of belief within a given community, but this is frequently not the case. For example, the celebrated Northern playwright Marie Jones comes from the Protestant community, but considers herself a nationalist (we will see in the next chapter how this disconnect from expected beliefs caused friction when she worked on *The Wedding Community Play Project*). Similarly, the model excludes those who are not members of the two communities (I discuss such groups and individuals in more detail in the fourth chapter). Since the two communities are constructed around ethnicity more than religion, immigrants (whether Christian or not) generally cannot be a part of them. To acknowledge these nuances, Máiréad Nic Craith, a professor of European Studies at the University of Ulster, proposes that communities should be understood through a “relational model [that] focuses on the fluid nature and ever-shifting contexts of relations between groups.”²⁸ This approach sidelines identity and defines community through whom it excludes and includes. It also allows for more

²⁸ *Culture and Identity Politics in Northern Ireland* 13.

nuanced notions of community membership, as it does not require subjects to be either “Catholic” or “not Catholic.”

In spite of these caveats, however, the two-communities model holds immense sway in nearly every facet of life in Northern Ireland. Rebutting Robbie McVeigh’s claim that the two communities model was primarily imposed by the British government as a way of occluding its own role in the conflict (a claim frequently raised by those republicans who believe a united Ireland would benefit Protestants as well as Catholics), sociologist Dominic Bryan argues:

The idea of ‘community’ seems to be everywhere in Northern Ireland. It is central to the political discourse of all the political parties and local activists, it is common parlance in much government policy and legislation and it is continually quoted by those demanding peace and reconciliation. ‘Community’ and ‘community development’ is almost universally seen as a good thing and the problem is perceived as a difficulty in the relationship between the communities. In the politics of the north of Ireland, ‘community’ is usually closely allied to ‘identity,’ ‘tradition’ and ‘culture’, which together help to provide, apparently, the building blocks of ‘community’. As such, attacks upon tradition are perceived as attacks upon the community and the community’s need to become more aware of its ‘culture’ to insure continuity. ²⁹

As Bryan demonstrates, the divisions between the two communities, as experienced by their members, are far from superficial. For most people in Northern Ireland, membership in their ethno-religious community is at the center of their sense of personal identity. Therefore, any criticism of the behaviors of the traditions is taken as a personal attack (particularly by unionists).

The divisions between the two communities have traditionally been reinforced by the different narratives of Northern Irish history to which each community adheres. In the Protestant unionist narrative, the Protestant people of the North are constantly under threat from outside forces that want to strip away both their Britishness and their own

²⁹ “The Politics of Community” 605.

culture. This siege mentality has made them fearful of losing any political power to Catholic nationalists. This worldview explains (but does not justify) their feelings that they will lose everything if they give up even a small amount of their power or identity. In contrast, the Catholic nationalist narrative assumes that the island of Ireland is a colonized country that has yet to throw off its colonizers fully.³⁰ In this view, Protestant unionists are interlopers and agents of the colonizer without true roots in the country. Nationalists view the history of Ireland and Great Britain as one of oppression, and believe that the North can only be happy when its ties with the United Kingdom are severed. This view assumes that, at some point in the past, Ireland was a nation in a meaningful sense and that it must be returned to this condition. This is epitomized in the popular nationalist folksong “A Nation Once Again” – the fact that the island of Ireland cannot truly be said to have ever been one nation does not diminish the power of this narrative. In these narratives, each community casts itself as heroes and underdogs struggling against powerful forces. This worldview shapes many people’s understanding of the causes of the Troubles, the relative guilt of those involved in the violence, the events of the peace process, and the ideal future of Northern Ireland.

The ideological segregation of the two-communities model manifests itself in a number of tangible ways. Although the GFA put an end to the majority of sectarian violence in Northern Ireland, it could not erase the deeply-seated tensions between the two groups. The historical distrust shared by Protestants and Catholics remained, and that distrust has continued to manifest itself through extreme segregation, particularly for members of the working class. Catholics have generally lived together, attended schools together, married each other, and worked together. The same has been true of

³⁰ Many scholars have debated the accuracy and utility of describing Ireland as “post-colonial.” For an overview of these debates, see Stephen Howe’s *Ireland and Empire: Colonial Legacies in Irish History and Culture* (2000).

Protestants. This is particularly striking in Belfast, where the neighborhoods are especially small and tightly packed. In other parts of the state, whole sections of a town would generally be understood as belonging to one community. In parts of Belfast, however, the neighborhoods bear more resemblance to a patchwork quilt – the community affiliation changes from street to street, and in a short walk one can travel through several different religiously segregated neighborhoods. A resident of the city would be unlikely to make such a journey, however; the segregation of space extends to the streets and sidewalks, and “outsiders” have historically risked intimidation and even violence if they walked through the wrong area.³¹

These divisions demonstrate different narratives about the use and identity of space in Northern Ireland. In *Watching the Door: Cheating Death in 1970s Belfast* (2008), his memoir of his time as a journalist in the early years of the Troubles, Kevin Myers writes:

Belfast is a lie. It is unreal. The consensual agreement that shapes and cements other urban communities is absent from this city. At best, people agree not to disagree, matter and anti-matter mingling and yet declining to eliminate one another; at worst, they agree to disagree, with all the predictably deplorable consequences you do not need to come to these pages to learn about. But they do not define themselves or their city in a common language, with common feelings and common meanings.³²

As Meyers demonstrates, the least disastrous relationships between the two communities have occurred when both have agreed to live parallel, separate lives. When these narratives of space have overlapped, significant conflict and violence have occurred. Thus, it is perhaps not surprising that many feel the need to continually reinforce their own narratives of the spaces with which they identify. This is carried out through the

³¹ For a more detailed examination of the causes and effects of segregation in Belfast, see Peter Shirlow’s “Belfast: A Segregated City” (2008).

³² Myers 26.

policing of access to space, as discussed above (in particular, the Orange Order's marches and the protests against them, which highlight similar disagreements over ownership of space).

Narratives of sectarian identity are frequently literally written onto the streets: murals in sectarian neighborhoods across the state depict prominent moments in the communities' histories as well as their determination to fight for their identity. For example, these murals frequently depict paramilitary figures; either generic masked gunmen who act as a warning for those who "don't belong" (Illustration 5) or specific terrorists who are depicted as protectors of their community (Illustration 6). These murals give great insight into the communities that create them. Bill Rolston argues: "Through these cultural artifacts [both communities] articulate their political hopes and fears, their view of their own identity, their hopes of their past and future, and the political obstacles which they see facing them currently or in the future."³³ These more elaborate depictions of identity are bolstered by markings of nationalism: the flying of the Irish Tricolour or the British Union Flag is common, and residents frequently paint curbstones in the colors of these flags.

These narratives of division remained largely unchallenged by theatre during the Troubles. Plays tended to focus on the experiences or identities of only one community; even when the characters included both Catholics and Protestants, it was rare for playwrights to make them equally sympathetic or give them equal narrative weight. For the most part, these plays did not explicitly argue for narratives of division; they merely took these differences as givens, treating them as natural and inevitable. These plays frequently still offered thoughtful critiques of life in Northern Ireland, but they did so by

³³ "Visions or Nightmares? Murals and Imagining the Future in Northern Ireland" 118.

speaking from and for only one community. Although the peace process has increased the number of plays that seek to address both communities, it is still common for scripts to focus on the experiences of only one. These plays are relatively absent within this dissertation. The only exceptions are *To Be Sure* (which focuses on a republican family) and *God's Country* (which focuses on a unionist family); both of these are discussed in chapter four, in the context of at least some of their characters marginalization within the “new” Northern Ireland. The scarcity of such plays within this dissertation does not mean that important work is not being done along these lines. Indeed, an expanded version of this project might fruitfully explore the ways plays featuring only one community have depicted its struggles to redefine its own identity within the shared society.

Narratives of Unity and Progress: Moving into a “Shared Future”

One of the key projects of the peace process has been to replace these narratives of division with new narratives that emphasize a process of coming together. As Coulter and Murray observe: “At the heart of official discourse has been the contention that the people of Northern Ireland have turned their backs on their historical differences and are moving inexorably towards a brighter future.”³⁴ Not only will this future be free from the violence of past decades, but it will also be free from the subtler sectarian divisions and prejudices that led to the Troubles. This is the heart of the desire for a “shared society,” a concept that imagines Northern Ireland as an undivided state to which both communities (and, although they are frequently overlooked, those who belong to neither) can feel equal allegiance.

³⁴ Coulter and Murray 18-19.

In many ways, this aspect of the peace process is an attempt to create an “imagined community” as theorized by Benedict Anderson. Anderson treats nations (and therefore nationalism) as artificial constructs maintained primarily through collective acts of imagination. Although most members of a nation do not know each other, they believe that they share traits with each other that are not shared by those outside the nation. Anderson emphasizes the significance of members of a nation believing they are a community: “[R]egardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings.”³⁵ One of the ongoing problems in Northern Ireland is that its people manifestly do not share this sense of camaraderie; they are two imagined communities rather than one (indeed, they have clearly demonstrated that they are willing to kill and die for these ideas). Thus, one of the tools for creating a truly stable society is to invent or create a shared identity for the people of Northern Ireland that will become more important than their sectarian identities.³⁶

This narrative of unity is enshrined in the many government documents that have come out of the peace process. These texts link the act of coming together with ideas of progress and forward movement. For example, the first line of the GFA reads: “We, the participants in the multi-party negotiations, believe that the agreement we have negotiated offers a truly historic opportunity for a new beginning.”³⁷ This sentence

³⁵ Anderson 7.

³⁶ Although it is beyond the scope of this dissertation, the work done by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger in *The Invention of Tradition* could be very fruitfully applied to this process of “rediscovering” a shared history in the state.

³⁷ “Good Friday Agreement” 2.

emphasizes both the wide range of voices that contributed to the Agreement and their shared goal of starting afresh. Similarly, “The Report of the Consultative Group for the Past,” which was tasked with suggesting ways of dealing traumatic legacies of the Troubles, argues: “The past should be dealt with in a manner which enables society to become more defined by its desire for true and lasting reconciliation rather than by division and mistrust, seeking to promote a shared and reconciled future for all.”³⁸ In both cases, the language used is forward-looking, acknowledging a painful and complicated past but emphasizing movement away from it.

The language used to describe this imagined future is necessarily utopian. It also frequently has mythic and religious overtones. As sociologist John D. Brewer argues: “Peace unavoidably encourages the re-enchantment of our vocabulary by references to healing, reconciliation, forgiveness, redemption, hope, ‘truth’, restoration, love and the like.”³⁹ This is perhaps most obvious in “A Shared Future: Policy and Strategic Framework for Good Relations in Northern Ireland,” a report released by the Office of First Minister and Deputy First Minister in March 2005. Although this document did not introduce the term “shared future,” it was an important step in making this concept the primary goal of the peace process. The document states that the peace process’s primary goal should be:

[T]o establish, over time, a shared society defined by a culture of tolerance: a normal, civic society, in which all individuals are considered as equals, where differences are resolved through dialogue in the public sphere and where all individuals are treated impartially. A society where there is equity, respect for diversity and recognition of our interdependence.⁴⁰

³⁸ “Report of the Consultative Group for the Past” 23. I discuss this document and its reception in more detail in chapter 3.

³⁹ Brewer 2-3.

⁴⁰ “A Shared Future” 10.

The document also sets this shared future in opposition to the two-communities model: “Separate but equal is not an option. Parallel living and the provision of parallel services are unsustainable both morally and economically.”⁴¹ As has been the case with many Northern Irish reports, little actual policy has been crafted in the wake of this document. Still, it is important in that it lays out the goals of a shared society even if the mechanisms for creating it remain unclear.

This reworking of narratives has also extended to narratives of space in Belfast. As Peter Shirlow observes, “Belfast, the city in which it was often difficult to find a centrally located restaurant open at night, is now portrayed [in international media] as a small metropolitan site that has shaken itself free from the dire old world of the bomber and a far from sophisticated past that lacked deeply commodified ‘lifestyles.’”⁴² Although individual neighborhoods generally maintain their sectarian identity, many are working to become less insular or hostile to “outsiders.” Some have revisited the sectarian murals I mentioned in the previous section. Although many explicitly violent and aggressive murals remain, others have been transformed into more “cheerful” images of the community (Illustration 7). It is hoped that these murals, which depict non-contentious subjects and events, can serve as markers of community identity in a more multi-cultural, live-and-let-live kind of way.

Even more strikingly, there have been increasing efforts to create and revitalize “neutral” public spaces, particularly around the Belfast City Centre. During the Troubles, security concerns meant that anyone entering this area would be searched (and they were frequently searched again upon entering a large store) and the centre would be entirely closed off at night. This is certainly not the case now – the city center is bustling with a

⁴¹ “A Shared Future” 15.

⁴² “Belfast: A Segregated City” 73.

variety of shops, restaurants, and hotels, and the city has transformed other areas, such as the Titanic Quarter and the Cathedral Quarter, into thriving cultural and commercial districts catering to both locals and tourists. The efforts to make these areas more welcoming are designed to create non-sectarian spaces for residents and visitors alike.⁴³

It is also important to note, however, that the mechanisms of the peace process have frequently reinforced the two-communities model even while theoretically working to unseat it. The GFA treats the people of Northern Ireland as two separate groups negotiating with each other rather than one community seeking to overcome internal divisions. For example, Dominic Bryan and Gillian McIntosh observe: “The very concept of ‘parity of esteem’ [a central term in the GFA] seems to suggest some sort of balancing act for the representation of the two ethno-political groups” rather than some kind of shared identity.⁴⁴ The St Andrews Agreement also emphasizes these divisions. Its procedure for selecting the First Minister and Deputy First Minister assumes that every party will primarily identify with a sectarian group (or, in the words of the document “political designation”). Under the rules of this agreement, the First Minister is selected by “the largest political party of the largest political designation” while the Deputy First Minister is selected by “the largest political party of the second largest political designation.”⁴⁵ Thus, it would be impossible for the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to both be unionists (or nationalists). While this enforced coalition between

⁴³ Although it is not a central theme in this dissertation, it is worth noting the role the languages of commerce and capitalism have played in these narratives of unity. Most of these “neutral” public spaces are commercial. In the early years of the peace process, one of the strong arguments in favor of moving forward was that the people of Northern Ireland would receive a “peace dividend;” in other words, there would be a financial motivation for peace. More recently, when tensions erupt into violence, commentators within the state frequently wonder what potential tourists will think of Northern Ireland; they use this as an argument against violence when speaking to representatives from the groups involved. At their most cynical, these arguments suggest that the appearance of peace is more important than actual peace, and that a loss of tourist revenue would be the worst result of a return to violence.

⁴⁴ Bryan and McIntosh 130.

⁴⁵ “St Andrews Agreement” 7.

parties with very different political ambitions preserves the stability of the peace process, it also reinforces the idea that sectarianism is the defining trait of Northern Irish politics. On a purely practical note, the strong ideological differences between the two leading parties also frequently lead to political gridlock, making many in the state believe Stormont to be fundamentally ineffectual.

Similarly, the GFA postponed rather than erased the conflict over the constitutional question. It required both nationalists and unionists to agree on a democratic solution rather than deciding the issue itself. This meant that (at least theoretically), those republicans who voted for the GFA agreed to give up violence, but not the ultimate goal of uniting Northern Ireland with the Republic. Although unionists appeared to have gotten what they wanted (Northern Ireland would stay part of the UK for the moment), the GFA required them to acknowledge the legitimacy of nationalists' goals, and also to endorse the idea that Northern Ireland would become a part of the Republic if nationalists became the majority.⁴⁶ The document was certainly crafted to be as appealing as possible to both sides, and to give leaders an opportunity to spin it as “a win.” As Rolston observes:

Nationalists/republicans and unionists/loyalists could each use [the GFA] to support a claim of victory and to support claims such as ‘the unionist veto is broken’ and ‘the union is safe.’ Both narratives were equally tenable within its carefully crafted wording. As a result, the issue of truth – that is, an acknowledgement of a set of narratives about the past, and perhaps even the emergence of a common narrative – was studiously avoided in the negotiations that led to the Agreement.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ This initially seemed likely, since Catholics are assumed to have higher birth rates than Protestants. Anecdotal evidence (provided, for example, on radio call-in programs) suggests, however, that the recent financial crisis may swayed at least a few nationalists to supporting the union with Britain at least temporarily, as the UK's economy has remained stronger than the Republic's.

⁴⁷ “Dealing with the Past” 654.

Thus, rather than fostering a unified narrative, the GFA in many ways became the subject of two opposing sectarian narratives. This is particularly evident in the case of nationalists; as Coulter and Murray observe:

[T]he upper echelons of Sinn Féin have sought consistently to cast the agreement as a process rather than an outcome. It is argued that the new political arrangements – and in particular the North/South bodies established under the deal – have a latent ‘dynamic’ that will gradually and inevitably nudge the six counties into a united Ireland. While this ‘inevitability thesis’ is on balance a matter of pure political fantasy, that has not prevented it from becoming a comforting mantra regularly rehearsed by the Sinn Féin leadership.⁴⁸

The concept of the “shared future” has been unable to reconcile these two opposing views about Northern Ireland’s inherent national status. As a result, many have tried to remove discussion of the subject from public discourse in locations or spheres that are nominally cross-community; there is an overall feeling that little can be gained from this discussion.

Theatre has also wrestled with these narratives of unity; it is extremely rare for plays about Northern Ireland to attempt to imagine a version of the state where sectarian differences no longer matter. As the plays I discuss in the next chapter particularly demonstrate, it is far more common for productions to depict the process of moving towards these narratives of unity. In these plays, the shared future is something the characters hope for, not something they have already achieved. As the continued presence of the two-community model within the structures of the state suggests, the people (including the artists) of Northern Ireland do not seem to be at a point where ignoring these divisions would be useful. The presence of these plays does represent some progress, however; while plays about the process of uniting Catholics and Protestants were occasionally staged during the Troubles, they have become much more

⁴⁸ Coulter and Murray 5.

prevalent since the GFA. This suggests at least some movement towards acceptance of the desirability of narratives of unity.

Personal Narratives: Storytelling and Individual Experiences

The sectarian and unity narratives I have described rely on the assumption that the experiences of all within the group in question (whether it be Protestants, Catholics, or the people of Northern Ireland as a whole) have been and will continue to be roughly the same. These narratives claim to speak on behalf of the entire group, differentiating that group's experience from the experiences of others. This can provoke problems even for those who strongly identify with one of the two communities (which, I have previously outlined, many do not); each individual will have a different experience of the Troubles. Some will have been direct victims of violence (at the hands of paramilitaries or state forces), while some will have been family or close friends of victims. Still more will have only experienced the violence peripherally, but still have been shaped by living in a state where direct contact with violence was a daily possibility. Others will have been the perpetrators of this violence, which does not preclude them from also having been victims of it. Some will have experienced intense sectarianism, while others will have been relatively insulated from it. These diverse experiences cannot be contained adequately by either sectarian or progress narratives (although both may make an effort to incorporate them). As a result, one of the tools of the peace process has been an emphasis on storytelling so that each person's unique narrative can be heard.

In "Telling Stories, facing truths: memory, justice and post-conflict transition," their chapter for Murray and Coulter's anthology, Patricia Lundy and Mark McGovern explore the connections between storytelling and calls for some kind of truth recovery process in Northern Ireland (I discuss the implications of such a process in more detail in

chapter three). They identify three primary imperatives behind most truth recovery processes: the therapeutic, the archival, and the judicial, and argue that storytelling ideally fulfills the first two of these three. Those who advocate for storytelling to be a key part of the peace process make the argument

That there is some need for victims and wider Northern Ireland society to ‘come to terms’ with the past, and that ‘storytelling’ may offer a suitable and safe ‘cathartic’ opportunity. Placing personal experiences of the past ‘on record’, developing an enriched shared narrative of the conflict as a result, and using that process as an occasion for ‘healing’, emerge as key to the logic of such approaches to post-conflict truth recovery.⁴⁹

In other words, storytelling allows both the speaker to heal by processing her story and the wider community to attain a fuller picture of the conflict by hearing these individual stories. These fulfill, respectively, the therapeutic and archival goals of truth recovery that Lundy and McGovern identify. It is also significant that the judicial imperative is generally not a part of these storytelling processes; storytelling for the most part takes place outside of government processes, and there is no assumption that the stories told will directly inform any political action. In Northern Ireland, this may be an advantage; there is no need to weigh conflicting stories against each other to decide who has been the “most” victimized (chapter three explores such conflicts in more detail).

There is a strong relationship between trauma and narratives. According to Cathy Caruth, one of the defining characteristics of trauma is its resistance to being incorporated into a narrative. She argues that trauma is “not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual’s past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature – the way it was precisely not known in the first instance – returns to haunt the survivor later on.”⁵⁰ Thus, the belief that storytelling can have therapeutic benefits is understandable.

⁴⁹ Lundy and McGovern 37.

⁵⁰ Caruth 4.

In the process of storytelling, those who are traumatized must, by definition, incorporate their experiences into some form of narrative. Even beyond the interpersonal benefits - the entire community benefits from hearing these stories and the person telling them benefits from being heard – the storyteller’s pain is ideally lessened simply because they gain an understanding of the traumatic events within the larger context of their life story.

Many organizations and programs have sought to make space for storytelling in post-Troubles Northern Ireland. The most prominent is “Healing Through Remembering,” which was founded in 2001 as “an extensive cross-community organisation made up of a range of members holding different political perspectives working on a common goal of how to deal with the legacy of the past as it relates to the conflict in and about Northern Ireland.”⁵¹ Among many other projects, Healing Through Remembering organizes conversational groups in which individuals can share their own stories and listen to the stories of other who may have had vastly different experiences of the Troubles. In addition to victims, many former combatants have become involved in the project (including Laurence McKeown, whose play *Two Roads West* I discuss in the next chapter). Similarly, in 1999 BBC Radio Ulster created an oral history project designed to record people’s recollections of the Troubles. Each day for the entire year the BBC broadcast one person’s memory anonymously; this meant that the first recordings would have been aired approximately seven months after the ratification of the GFA. The clips were short (one to two minutes) and covered a variety of subjects including sectarianism, personal loss, and the general fear that arose from living through such a violent period.⁵² As with Healing Through Remembering, this project allowed

⁵¹ www.healingthroughremembering.info

⁵² These were released in 2008 as a compilation titled *Legacy: A collection of personal testimonies from people affected by the Troubles in Northern Ireland*, which consisted of both sound recordings and

people to both share their stories of living through the Troubles and learn from the stories of others.

Theatre also offers a place for this storytelling to take place, although surprisingly little “documentary” theatre has come out of the state. The most famous piece of verbatim theatre about the Troubles is Richard Norton-Taylor’s *Bloody Sunday: Scenes from the Saville Inquiry* (2005), which staged the testimony given in the tribunal into the events of Bloody Sunday. Although this play was performed in Northern Ireland, it did not originate there; it was created by London’s Tricycle Theatre Company and was one of a number of “tribunal” plays done by the company. The Derry-based organization “Theatre of Witness” provides a home-grown example, but their work has received relatively little press. When it does, their plays are generally discussed as therapeutic or social justice processes rather than as pieces of theatre.⁵³

Instead, the personal narratives deployed by Northern Irish theatre tend to be those of fictional characters. Many playwrights still feel that they must reflect “real people’s” individual experiences, however. In several of the plays discussed in this dissertation (including *The Wedding Community Play*, *The Chronicles of Long Kesh*, and *This is What We Sang*), interviews and conversations with specific groups and individuals played essential roles in the playwrights’ early processes. These personal stories were then given (occasionally almost verbatim) to fictional characters. Much of the theatre in Northern Ireland either explicitly or implicitly represents itself as reflecting the true experiences of real people, but it rarely claims to speak on behalf of an entire group.

transcripts of the broadcasts. This turned the ephemeral broadcasts into a publicly-available tangible archive and was how I became aware of the project.

⁵³ Other examples of documentary theatre in Belfast are *Sleep Eat Party*, written by Damian Gorman and produced by Tinderbox Theatre in 2009 and *Titanic (Scenes from the British Wreck Commissioner’s Inquiry)*, written by Owen McCafferty and produced by the MAC as part of the Titanic Centenary festivities in 2012. Neither of these plays focuses on the histories or legacies of the conflict, however.

Similarly, one of the highest praises from many audience members is that a play somehow captured their own personal experiences. I saw this personally when I was taking a taxi from the Belfast International Airport to the dorms at Queens University in July 2010. When I mentioned to my driver Jim that I was in the city to study Belfast theatre, he became very excited and told me I should look into Martin Lynch's *A History of the Troubles (According to My Da)*, which had premiered in 2005 and been revived several times since. Jim told me that he wasn't a regular theatre-goer, but that he had seen Lynch's play three times because he felt it told his story. As the title suggests, the play tells the history of the Troubles through the experiences of a fictional Catholic man. In spite of the fact that Lynch had given his main character Gerry a specific back story and experiences which would not have been universal (such as imprisonment following a raid on a bar immediately after he had been rejected by the IRA), Jim identified strongly with the character and seemed to find a deep affirmation from the process of seeing the play.⁵⁴

Finally, it is important to note that both sectarian narratives and narratives of unity tend to be highly gendered, and that this also impacts the treatment of personal narratives on and offstage. As many of the plays I discuss in this dissertation demonstrate, there is a pervasive assumption that the story of the Troubles is primarily a story of men – male combatants, male politicians, and (mostly) male victims. When female victims are discussed, they are generally used to emphasize the senseless nature of the violence; the dead and injured women are assumed to be apolitical and innocent (in reality, women took part in all aspects of the conflict). During the Troubles, the particular concerns of women were sidelined, and women were generally seen as peripheral to the issues that

⁵⁴ I assume Jim was a nationalist, because he welcomed me to Belfast in Irish, a language strongly associated with this community.

were regarded as important. One of the few ways for women to have a publically visible role in the conflict was by deploying their role as mothers (often implicitly of sons).⁵⁵ It is perhaps not surprising, then, that the story of the peace process is also told in these gendered terms; if the Troubles was a story of men, its resolution must be as well. This is not absolute – many female politicians have gained prominence, and the stories of women are increasingly present in the public sphere. Although gender is not the primary focus of this dissertation, I do seek to highlight the ways it has shaped narratives of the state and their presentation onstage.⁵⁶

METHODOLOGY

Staging a Shared Future examines the ways specific productions have interacted with the narratives of the Northern Irish peace process, primarily focusing on the point of view of Northern Irish audiences. The focus on audiences means that I am primarily concerned with the performances themselves, not the processes that created them (although in some cases, particularly *The Wedding Community Play Project* discussed in the next chapter, these processes were well-publicized in advance and as such became a part of the audience's understandings of the play). Following Marvin Carlson, among others, I take as a given that audiences use their previous history and experiences to interpret every play they witness. In *The Haunted Stage: Theatre as Memory Machine* (2005), Carlson emphasizes the ways elements of a production (such as text, venue, and

⁵⁵ The most obvious example is the organization Women for Peace (which later became the more gender-neutral "Community for Peace People"), whose founders Betty Williams and Mairead Corrigan won a Nobel Peace Prize in 1977. This organization did incredible work in furthering the peace process, but it is important to note that the rhetoric they used to gain prominence at the beginning of their movement relied on the construction of mothers as inherently nurturing and apolitical.

⁵⁶ For more on women in post-GFA Northern Ireland see Carmel Roulston's "Engendering Devolution" (2006) and Fidelma Ashe's "Gender and ethno-nationalist politics in Northern Ireland" (2008). For more on representations of women during the Troubles, see Megan Sullivan's *Women in Northern Ireland: Cultural Studies and Material Conditions* (1999) and Imelda Foley's *Girls in the Big Picture: Gender in Contemporary Ulster Theatre* (2003).

performers) are haunted by audience members' previous encounters. I expand on this, presuming that experiences in non-theatrical settings will also play an important role in defining each audience members' understanding of a performance.

The diversity of experiences arising partly from audience members different sectarian, class, gender, racial, and sexual identities will then lead to a variety of experiences at each performance. In my analysis of both plays and non-theatrical texts, I seek to emphasize the ways speakers address and imagine their audiences, but I recognize that individual audience members may not react as the speakers intended. I have found Michael Warners's writings on multiple publics useful in this endeavor. He suggests that every text creates its own public simply by addressing it and argues: "The existence of a public is contingent on its members' activity, however notional or compromised, and not on its members' categorical classification, objectively determined position in the social structure, or material existence."⁵⁷ In order to be a public, people need not agree with each other or share specific identity markers; they only need to engage in some form of shared discourse. This logic undergirds my readings of the audiences for plays and the many other cultural texts I analyze; the productions I examine called on shared experiences, but I emphasize that these experiences will not have had the same meaning or significance for each audience member.

The remaining methodology of this dissertation can be divided into three parts: selection and analysis of performances, analysis of public discourse in Northern Ireland, and the comparison of these two analyses. The plays were primarily selected based on their relevance to the themes guiding each chapter. Since I seek to analyze the productions as a whole, rather than simply the scripts, my own ability to access

⁵⁷ Warner 88.

production archives provided another important consideration. These archives might include recordings of the plays (particularly if I was unable to see them myself), reviews, production photographs, marketing materials, and interviews with the artists involved. This in part accounts for the prevalence of work from certain companies. Paula McFetridge, Artistic Director of Kabosh, and Hanna Slättne, Resident Dramaturg of Tinderbox, were particularly generous with their time and archives. Of the nine plays this dissertation examines, two are Kabosh plays (*Two Roads West* and *This is What We Sang*) and three are Tinderbox plays (*convictions*,⁵⁸ *Sign of the Whale*, and *God's Country*). These two companies produce some of the most exciting and dynamic work in the relatively small Belfast theatre scene, however, and as such I believe they would have been well represented in the dissertation even without these considerations.

I focus exclusively on performances in Belfast for several reasons. First, the city has a rich and diverse history of performance unmatched in Northern Ireland. Although valuable work has been done out of Derry by groups like Brian Friel and Stephen Rea's Field Day, most of the state's artistic innovation and large-scale theatrical production has occurred in Belfast.⁵⁹ As my earlier discussion of the city's theatre demonstrates, Belfast provides a large range of performances from which this dissertation may draw. More importantly, as Northern Ireland's capital and largest city, Belfast has its own particular character that differentiates it from the rest of the state. As I mentioned above, although neighborhoods remain largely segregated (as they do all over the state), they tend to be small and in close proximity to those of the opposite community. For example, the two most famously sectarian neighborhoods in the state – the Catholic Falls road and the

⁵⁸ The lack of capitalization is part of the title. For a reading of the significance of this decision see Harvie 53-4.

⁵⁹ Derry has been named the UK City of Culture for 2013, and the schedule of events includes many theatrical productions. This may contribute to the city becoming a more prominent theatrical city.

Protestant Shankill Road – are only a few minutes walk apart. The resulting large number of “interface areas” in Belfast ensures that members of the two communities will frequently come into contact with each other. This is not the case in other parts of the state, and as a result the residents of Belfast have different experiences of interacting with “the other side” than those elsewhere in the state. This dissertation examines the performances through their historical and physical contexts, and my focus on performances only in Belfast allows me to do so with greater specificity.

Furthermore, many of the plays that make up the “canon” of Northern Irish theatre have never had a major production in Northern Ireland. In other cases, there was a significant lag between the play’s premiere and its first production in the North, so that the historical context could have shifted considerably. Most scholars who write about Northern Irish theatre have not differentiated between plays performed in Britain, the Republic of Ireland, and Northern Ireland. In contrast, my dissertation focuses exclusively on performances in Belfast. Audiences in London or Dublin will understand plays about the Troubles very differently than those in Belfast; although these other cities saw some violence (particularly bombings), they were generally removed from both the political issues at the heart of the Troubles and the day-to-day reality of living in a divided state. While the audiences at the plays I discuss would not have been exclusively from Belfast or even Northern Ireland, the productions were primarily targeted at locals.

I read each of these plays as an entire production that arose from and reflected a specific historical and social context. I was able to attend live performances of three of the plays: *National Anthem*, *Chronicles of Long Kesh*, and *This is What We Sang*. Of the remaining six, I was able to access at least some video recordings for all but two: *Two Roads West* and *To Be Sure*. In all but these last two plays, the live viewings and video recordings provide my most important source of information. I use them to analyze the

choices made by the entire creative team, including director, designers, and actors. In many cases, they also gave insight into the responses of audiences.⁶⁰ I bolster these readings with references to published or unpublished scripts, marketing materials, reviews, other scholars' writings, and interviews with the artists involved. These interviews make up a relatively small portion of the analysis in *Staging a Shared Future*; I was in no way attempting to conduct an ethnography of artists' experiences or processes (although such a project would certainly be worthwhile). Since I approach each play from the point of view of the audience, the questions in these interviews generally centered on the logistics of the performances and audience reactions to them.

In analyzing each play, I identify how the production as a whole imagined the concept of a "shared future" and how it spoke to the themes of the chapter. In each case, I explore both the ways the production constructed the problems at hand and the ways it offered solutions (or refused to do so). For example, in my third chapter, "Danger in Silence, Danger in Speaking: Staging Contested Narratives of Trauma," I ask how each production addressed the traumatic legacies of the Troubles and what steps it imagined would be necessary for both the state and individuals to heal. Each production addressed different questions surrounding this issue. *Chronicles of Long Kesh*, for example, focused on the experiences and roles of the paramilitaries, arguing that we must find new ways of viewing them that do not rely on narratives of heroism or villainy. In contrast, paramilitaries were largely absent from *Sign of the Whale*, which instead rejected the ability of narratives to adequately encompass even one person's trauma. Although each reading draws heavily from the script, I also analyze the ways design and staging choices reinforced or offered nuance to these messages.

⁶⁰ This was not the case for the live viewing of *This is What We Sang*, which was conducted when Kabosh brought the play to the 2010 First Irish Festival in New York. As I note in my discussion of the play, New York audiences would have responded very differently than Belfast audiences.

I ask similar questions in my discussion of the public discourse of Northern Ireland. These analyses are based on scholarly writings on the state from a variety of disciplines as well as the many artifacts that make up this discourse. These include government documents, such as the GFA and the “Shared Future” document; public ceremonies; news reports and documentaries; films; and fiction. I particularly draw from public forums such as online discussions and call-in radio programs, in which “ordinary” people can express their opinions about the state. As with the plays, I look at each text’s assumed or explicitly stated narrative of the Troubles and peace process, as well as how it identifies the problems facing the state and any possible solutions to these problems. I am also mindful of the ways the genre and process of creation will shape each text. For example, the politicians creating the Good Friday Agreement needed to create a document that could be accepted by all sides and therefore were careful to use tactful and inclusive language. In contrast, a person posting anonymously on the internet will often feel angry and unaccountable, and structure their comment differently.

In bringing together my readings of performances and public discourse, I look for links on a number of levels: in the topics discussed, in the narratives invoked, and in the rhetorical tactics used. I compare the productions with particular events and debates to put them in a larger context and argue that the themes I discuss were important and on citizens’ minds long before they entered the theatre. I am also mindful of the historical specificity of each text. Much changed in the state in the eleven years between the earliest and latest productions I discuss (*The Wedding Community Play Project* in 1999 and *National Anthem* in 2010). Political structures rose and fell, as did people’s optimism about the state’s future. Dissident paramilitaries maintained a low profile between the Omagh bombing of 1998 and their murder of a police officer in 2009. Thus,

I am careful to explore the way each production fit into the public discourse of its particular moment.

Finally, it is important to note my own position as a researcher. Although I have studied Northern Irish history, culture, and discourse to a great extent, I will always bring the perspective of an outsider. In particular, I have made many trips to Belfast and frequently consume Northern Irish media, but I have never lived there and as such could not access many of the more ephemeral and subtle negotiations taking place in the state. My decision to compare the plays to public discourse in the state was largely born of this understanding; while I can not know how people truly feel about the peace process and the prospect of a “shared future,” I can analyze the ways they have discussed it in at least some public forums. As an outsider, however, I have the advantage of bringing a fresh eye to the study of the conflict – I am not a member of either community, and as such can move between them (both literally and empathetically) with relative ease.⁶¹

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

The three main chapters in this dissertation each examine the ways theatre has addressed a major theme in the narratives around the “shared society.” In each, I analyze three plays staged in Belfast since the GFA. I read these in the context of important events and political issues that address these same narratives. In each chapter, I introduce the issue as it affects Northern Irish society as a whole, and then move on to separate discussion of the three plays. Within each chapter, the productions are organized in

⁶¹ When I discuss this project in social settings, people frequently ask me about my own heritage (and particularly, whether I am Irish). As it happens, I have ancestors who were Catholic Irish and who were Ulster Protestants (I also have Polish, German, Swiss, English, and Scottish ancestors). These ancestors all immigrated to the United States many generations ago, and my family has not maintained any significant sense of Irish (or Scottish, German, Polish, etc) identity. As such, although my heritage is theoretically balanced between the two communities, I do not feel that it has had any significant impact on this project.

chronological order. Although I primarily examine each play separately, I also seek to make connections between their treatment of the themes of the chapter.

Chapter two, “Staging Reunions Between Orange and Green,” focuses on the most basic narratives of the shared society: the desire for an end to division between Catholics and Protestants. The productions in this chapter all staged some kind of meeting between representatives of the two communities. *The Wedding Community Play Project* (1999), *Two Roads West* (2009), and *National Anthem* (2010) all offered cautiously optimistic visions of a shared future. The three plays also emphasized, however, the amount of work that must be done by all sides before a truly integrated future can exist. *The Wedding Community Play Project*, a community theatre performance devised immediately following the GFA, staged a wedding between a Catholic man and a Protestant woman. The production used a site-specific structure in which audiences were bussed to real homes in a Protestant and a Catholic neighborhood to watch the families prepare for the event, then to a church for the ceremony and finally to a bar for the reception. Although it offered some caveats, the play was primarily optimistic about the union between the two families – not only could a cross-community couple fall in love, but they could be largely supported by families with their own histories of sectarianism and distrust. *Two Roads West* also used a site-specific structure, taking audiences and the two performers on a taxi tour of sectarian neighborhoods in West Belfast. It suggested that the best way for union between working-class communities is recognition of their shared histories of poverty. Finally, *National Anthem* imagined a celebration of Northern Ireland that would fuse the two communities’ symbols. As a Catholic poet and a Protestant musician worked to create a new national anthem for the state, they were forced to confront its many legacies of violence as well as the superficial nature of the project to which they were assigned.

Chapter three, “Danger in Silence, Danger in Speaking: Staging Contested Narratives of Trauma,” focuses more directly on victims of the violence in Northern Ireland. It explores the ways *convictions* (2000), *The Chronicles of Long Kesh* (2009), and *Sign of the Whale* (2010) attempted to make space for narratives of suffering that have been downplayed or ignored in the process of creating a shared society. As this chapter explores, those who speak publically about particular traumas are often advised to simply “move on” or challenged with atrocities committed by “their own side.” *Convictions* staged seven short plays by Northern playwrights in a decommissioned courthouse. In letting these plays stand side by side without striving to incorporate them into a single narrative, the production encouraged audiences to move away from the search for an easy explanation for the Troubles. Similarly, *The Chronicles of Long Kesh* asked audiences to view former paramilitary prisoners as neither heroes or villains, but as complicated people who had both suffered and caused suffering during the conflict. Finally, *Sign of the Whale* used magical realism, poetic dialogue, and a fragmented story line and design to point to the ways narrative fails to express the totality of human experiences of violence.

Chapter four, “Performing the Margins of the Shared Society,” moves away from the conflict between Protestants and Catholics and examines those who are excluded (or have chosen to exclude themselves) from the process of transforming the two-communities model into a more unified vision of the state. *To Be Sure: Or How To Count Your Chickens Before They Roost* (2007), *This is What we Sang* (2009), and *God’s Country* (2010) advocated for a more nuanced understanding of Northern Irish Identity and suggested that a shared future must embrace the state’s diversity rather than simply trying to heal divisions between Catholics and Protestants. *To Be Sure* was a dark farce focusing on one family of dissident republicans. Through a series of increasingly violent

and improbable interactions with “mainline” republicans, the play suggested that there is little to be gained from imagining a binary of “good republicans” and “bad republicans.” Staged in a Belfast synagogue, *This is What We Sang* traced the history of a Jewish family from their arrival in the city at the turn of the twentieth century to the present. In doing so, it suggested that religious and ethnic minorities have played an important role in the state’s history and must be included in its future. Finally, *God’s Country* displayed the interactions between a gay man who had left Northern Ireland for London and his unionist politician parents. In doing so, it offered an indictment of both communities’ treatment of sexual minorities and suggested that Northern Ireland has far to come before members of the GLBT community can be true members of the shared society. This chapter also draws attention to the continuing absence of people of color on the Northern Irish stage.

Finally, my conclusion looks forward to the decade of commemoration facing Northern Ireland. As the major events of the early twentieth century have their centenaries (including the signing of the Ulster Covenant, the Easter Rising, and partition), the state will be forced to deal with many divisive events. I look at the performances that took place around the centenary of the sailing of the Titanic in April 2012 to argue that theatre and performance can play a vital role in exploring the complicated histories of these events, which will test the narratives of unity at the heart of the peace process.



Illustration 3: Orange Order Marchers, Belfast, 2010. Photograph by the author.



Illustration 4: Grand Opera House, Belfast, 2011. Photograph by the author.



Illustration 5: Loyalist Mural, Shankill Road, 2009. Photograph by the author.



Illustration 6: Bobby Sands Mural, Falls Road, 2009. Photograph by the author.



Illustration 7: Mural on Northumberland Street, near a gate between the Falls and Shankill Roads, 2011. Photograph by the author

Chapter Two: Staging Reunions Between Orange and Green

“We need to establish over time a shared society defined by a culture of tolerance: a normal, civic society, in which all individuals are considered as equals, where violence is an illegitimate means to resolve differences, but where differences are resolved through dialogue in the public sphere and where all people are treated impartially.”

-- Paul Murphy, Secretary for State to Northern Ireland, Introduction to “A Shared Future” policy document¹

“There’s no gettin’ away from it. Protestants are different from us and your son’s marryin’ into them.”

-- Marie Jones and Martin Lynch, *The Wedding Community Play Project*²

The first “peace walls” in Northern Ireland were built at the outbreak of the Troubles in 1969 to keep Catholic and Protestant populations apart. Many more were constructed during and after the Troubles, and these structures are a striking visual reminder of the rifts in the state. Located at so-called “interface areas” where sectarian neighborhoods meet, these imposing cement and steel structures can be up to twenty-five feet tall, and often sport barbed wire at the top. During the Troubles, this height prevented residents from throwing stones and bombs into each other’s homes, but it also increased the literal and psychological separation between the neighborhoods. Sadly, the end of large-scale violence in the North did not signal the end of the peace walls. Indeed, more than one third of Belfast’s 99 walls were built following the IRA ceasefire in 1994.³ Many existing peace walls were also heightened during this period.⁴ Similarly, many

¹ “A Shared Future” 3.

² Jones and Lynch. “Todd Household” 4. The pagination in the script held in the Linen Hall library archives is inconsistent, but in general the numbering is restarted in each location (the Todd household, the Marshall household, the church, and the reception).

³ O’Hagan.

⁴ Coulter and Murray 16.

residents in interface areas have resisted calls to eliminate the walls. Whenever the topic is broached in public forums (for example, on call-in radio programs), the conversation seems to take the same route: residents hope that *someday* the walls will no longer be needed but also argue that their areas are not yet ready for such a change.

These discussions point to the subtler inter-community tensions that have become more and more evident since the end of the large-scale violence. Generally, residents are not afraid that the walls' removal will return them to the bombings and shootings of the Troubles. Instead, they fear smaller but still destructive manifestations of the conflicts between the communities: fights, vandalism, and similar anti-social activities that may occur if Catholics and Protestants have easier access to each other. Those who wish to retain the peace walls argue that, at least for the moment, a shared society is impractical; the best Northern Ireland can currently hope for is that Protestants and Catholics will manage to live side by side as distinct and separated communities. Thus, these walls act as physical manifestations of the narratives of division I discussed in my introduction. Although residents nominally endorse the rhetoric of the narratives of unity represented by the peace process, these goals still seem unrealistic within the lived experience of those residing near the interfaces.

The three productions discussed in this chapter argued against this continued reliance on narratives of division and imagined ways the two communities might meaningfully come together to create a truly shared society. By sharing stories and experiences, the characters in Martin Lynch and Marie Jones's *The Wedding Community Play Project* (1999), Laurence McKeown's *Two Roads West* (2009), and Colin Bateman's *National Anthem* (2010) found common ground and were able to regard each other with compassion and understanding. The productions did not minimize the difficulties that must be overcome to find such a connection, but they suggested that

communal experiences – such as those provided at the theatre – should play a central role in bringing the two communities closer together. The next chapter deals with the violent legacy of the Troubles, but it is important that these traumas were at most peripheral within the plays in this chapter. Although the violence certainly strengthened the enmity between the two communities, the characters in these plays generally did not have to overcome personal losses in order to find common ground.

The productions also demanded nuanced narratives of the two communities and pointed to the substantive differences between the “Catholic experience” and the “Protestant experience.” Before, during, and since the Troubles, these groups held different relationships to state power, paramilitary organizations, and public opinion (both locally and internationally). This, combined with the rhetoric of equality prevalent throughout the narratives of the peace process, has created many tensions around ideas of fairness and reciprocity. Those hoping to address the past must decide whether to acknowledge the different needs of the two communities and thereby risk further entrenching divisions or to treat the two communities as though they were the same and risk appearing irrelevant to the actual experiences of the people.

This tension over the meaning and implementation of concepts of equality was implicit to the three plays discussed in this chapter. Indeed, anxieties around “fair” representations of the unionist community threatened to derail *The Wedding Community Play Project*, which was written by professional playwrights following workshops with community theatre groups. McKeown’s and Bateman’s scripts addressed the different experiences of Catholics and Protestants, but these issues are the most evident in an examination of the circumstances surrounding *The Wedding Community Play Project*.

Perhaps to allay these anxieties of balance, each of these productions centered on a meeting as equals between representatives of the Catholic and Protestant communities.

In *The Wedding Community Play Project*, the event that prompted this convergence was a marriage between the children of a Protestant family and a Catholic family. In this site specific production, audiences were invited into real homes in sectarian neighborhoods and encouraged to note the similarities between the families' lifestyles and ambitions. Using a similar format, *Two Roads West* took audiences on a taxi tour through sectarian neighborhoods in West Belfast. While the Protestant driver described the similar histories of poverty in the two areas, a Catholic passenger reflected on her own experiences returning to Belfast after having lived for years in England. Finally, *National Anthem* imagined a glitzy celebration of a unified Northern Ireland, in which a Catholic poet and a Protestant musician tasked with writing a "neutral" national anthem drew attention to the lingering divisions in the state.

RELATIONS BETWEEN CATHOLICS AND PROTESTANTS IN THE "NEW" BELFAST

Although the peace process has done important work in reconciling Catholics and Protestants, the two continue to see themselves as separate groups with different needs and experiences. As I outlined in my introduction, the two-communities model continues to shape citizens' understandings of their relationships to the state and each other. For some people, this manifests as overt prejudice – they are quick to decry the moral inferiority of "the other side" and to blame them for the past and current problems of the state. For many others, however, this separation takes the more subtle form of a lack of interest in those from the other community. Although people in this latter category would generally claim not to dislike members of the other community, they also feel little to no kinship to them. To again invoke Benedict Anderson, they remain two imagined communities rather than one.

As I suggested in my introduction, these narratives of division are both underscored and strengthened by the many symbols the two communities use to mark themselves and their spaces. The most obvious of these is the flag. Loyalists display and feel allegiance to the British Union Jack, while republicans display and feel allegiance to the Irish Tricolour. Because the flags represent mutually exclusive visions for the future of Northern Ireland, the display is often understood as aggressive – it is meant to exclude people from “the other community.” To raise a tricolour in Northern Ireland is implicitly to declare “I reject the control of the British government and instead owe my allegiance to the Republic of Ireland,” and to raise a Union Jack is to declare the opposite. This remains a divisive issue – in December 2012, weeks of protests followed the Belfast City Council’s decision to fly the Union Jack on “designated” holidays instead of daily. On the night the vote was taken, angry unionist protestors broke into the grounds of the City Hall, and at least fifteen police officers were seriously injured. In the weeks that followed, members of the non-sectarian Alliance Party, which had voted with Sinn Féin and the SDLP to adopt the new schedule, received death threats. While all commentators had expected this vote to be divisive, most were surprised and taken aback by the levels of emotion it provoked.

Similarly, although on a smaller scale, a dispute around flags threatened the 2011 Downpatrick St Patrick’s day parade. The parade is intended to be for both communities, and as a compromise for years the St Patrick’s flag (a red cross on a white background) has been flown instead of the Tricolour. In 2011, however, a Sinn Féin councilor suggested that the Tricolour be used and many accused him of trying to stir up sectarian animosity. Others responded by claiming that unionist politicians were themselves trying to frighten their Protestant constituents in order to strengthen their own position.

The ongoing use of the St Patrick's flag at this parade points to an option many view as the only way to find non-contentious symbols for the people of Northern Ireland: setting aside Irish and British symbols and finding something neutral.⁵ In a way, this is not unlike the system of devolved government that finally saw Sinn Féin fully participating in the governing of the state. Although members of Sinn Féin were frequently elected to the British Parliament at Westminster, they never took their seats because they refused to take an oath of allegiance to the Queen. Since the Stormont Assembly is specifically for Northern Ireland rather than all Britain and requires no such oath, politicians who had abstained from Westminster felt that they could participate.⁶ It is hoped that new neutral symbols will, like the devolved assembly at Stormont, contribute to narratives of unity by emphasizing the common experiences of the people of Northern Ireland without reference to either Britain or Ireland. Although there is evidence of progress along these lines, symbols of nationality and sectarian affiliation remain prominent.

These psychological markers of division are mirrored in literal separation between the two communities. In addition to the segregation of living space discussed above and in my introduction, areas such as education also remain divided. Most Catholic parents send their children to Catholic schools (which receive significant funding from the state); this makes state-run schools de facto Protestant spaces. In October 2010, First Minister Peter Robinson referred to this as “a benign form of apartheid,” provoking outrage from

⁵ As Dominic Bryan and Gillian McIntosh outline, a different tactic was taken when designing the badges for the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), the new policing service created because of the Protestant nature of the Royal Ulster Constabulary. These badges included symbols from both communities (for example, a crown for unionists and a shamrock for Nationalists). Thus, according to then Secretary of State Peter Mandelson, the badge was “inclusive rather than neutral” (130).

⁶ Bryan and McIntosh also discuss the steps that were taken to “rebrand” the Stormont building so that it would not be seen as a symbol of the previous unionist governments. These included staging cultural events on its grounds (128-9).

many Catholics who felt he wanted to do away with the religious content of their children's education.⁷ Regardless of these fears, it does seem clear that this segregation of children has entrenched sectarian prejudices in younger generations – many children born after the GFA exhibit extreme (often reflexive) forms of sectarian prejudice. For example, in 2009 BBC Radio 4 (which broadcasts throughout the UK) aired *Foes Reunited*, a documentary highlighting ways this new generation has used social media to perpetrate sectarian harassment. Thus, it seems that narratives of division separating Protestants and Catholics will not simply go away with the passage of time, as many had hoped. Instead, those who want a shared society must actively work to replace them with narratives of unity.

THE WEDDING COMMUNITY PLAY PROJECT: BANISHING DIFFERENCE

On Friday and Saturday afternoons in November 1999, groups of Belfast residents were encouraged to become tourists in their own city. As audiences at *The Wedding Community Play Project*, they were bused from the Belfast city centre to two working-class neighborhoods in East Belfast – the Catholic Short Strand, and the Protestant Templemore Avenue. Their destination in each neighborhood was a “typical” family home, and the fictional justification for the visits was a marriage between Nicola Marshall and Damian Kelly, the young adult children of the families. As audiences crowded into these small homes, they watched the Protestant Marshalls and the Catholic Todds⁸ try to come to terms with their children's relationship and the changing face of a Belfast slowly emerging from decades of violence. After watching the preparations for the wedding, the audiences traveled to a church to watch the ceremony, and then to a

⁷ See, for example, BBC commentator Mark Devenport's blog entry on the reactions to Robinson's comments: http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/thereporters/markdevenport/2010/10/benign_apartheid.html

⁸ Damian's mother Margaret had remarried, hence the difference in last names.

reception to celebrate with the families and watch their often-strained interactions (Illustration 8).⁹ As the audience was bused between these locations, they were able to observe residents in the neighborhoods and to note the ways the peace walls inhibited direct travel between the two spaces.

The performance allowed audiences and actors to cross boundaries and imagine an undivided Belfast. It sought to counter sectarian distrust on three levels: the play's plot, the use of space, and the process of creating the performance. The event represented a collaboration between seven community theatre groups from across Belfast and included over fifty performers. In both the process and the performance, facilitators, writers, and performers worked to create a harmonious union of Catholics and Protestants that would dispel the discomfort many felt when interacting with a member of "the other community." The city the play depicted and hoped to address embraced peace and wanted a shared society, but was not always sure how to accomplish these goals. The project was ambitious and largely successful, but not without conflict. As we will see, the problems in the process point to the presumed need for symmetrical representations of the two communities, and particularly the Protestant community's anxieties about how they have been depicted by the theatre throughout Northern Ireland's history.

The play was staged the year after the GFA, when Northern Ireland was filled with a spirit of tentative optimism. While the document, which had been accepted by paramilitaries and ratified by the people of Northern Ireland, offered an unprecedented step forward, only time would tell if it would last. The paramilitaries had already engaged in one lengthy but ultimately broken ceasefire from 1994 to 1996, and no one could be sure that the peace following the GFA would not suffer the same fate. In

⁹ No full recording of this play exists, but excerpts are included in the documentary *Our Wedding Video*. My reading of the play in performance also draws from the unpublished script held at the Linen Hall Library in Belfast, newspaper reviews, and a conversation with Martin Lynch.

addition, the implementation of the GFA required members of both communities, even those who had never condoned violence, to make a number of concessions and sacrifices. Indeed, it was only on November 27, 1999 (coincidentally the final performance of *The Wedding Community Play Project*), that the Ulster Unionist Party agreed to sit with Sinn Féin on the executive committee of the devolved government. Until this concession, many commentators had feared that the impasse would lead to a breakdown of the overall peace process.

In addition, the Omagh bombing of August 15, 1998 (less than three months after the ratification of the GFA) reminded the citizens of Northern Ireland that all paramilitary groups did not feel bound by the decisions of their apparent leadership. This bombing, the single largest atrocity of the Troubles, was carried out by the Real IRA, which had split from the Provisional IRA the year before following disagreements about the decision to engage in negotiations with the British government. The attack killed 29 people and injured over 200 more. Although it was widely condemned (including by former IRA members and supporters including Gerry Adams¹⁰ and Martin McGuinness), the people of Northern Ireland were reminded that the fragile peace could easily be broken by a few holdouts.

This was the world out of which *The Wedding Community Play Project* sprung. As co-creator Jo Egan later put it: “I look back and think it was still a dangerous time. We didn’t even have an Assembly then. Perceived normality was still an aspiration. If nothing was happening, it was symbolic of confusion, not just an ordinary day. The air was full of potential energy and that was scary given what was in the immediate past.”¹¹

¹⁰ Adams claims to never have been a member of the IRA, but many witnesses dispute this. Most people within the state are at best skeptical of Adams’s claim.

¹¹ Quoted in Moriarty 18.

The play contrasted this fraught political climate with the “perceived normality” of a wedding, inviting audience members to watch the mundane preparations for the event while never allowing them to forget the truly radical nature of the cross-community pairing.

The process of creating *The Wedding Community Play Project* brought together participants separated by both ideology and geography and thereby hoped to offer a real-life model of the union depicted in the play. It incorporated seven already-existing community theatre groups, most of which drew predominantly or exclusively from one religious community. Although the script itself was written by noted playwrights Marie Jones (whose most famous play, *Stones in His Pockets*, was nominated for three Tony awards in 2001) and Martin Lynch, the conceptualization of the project was largely collaborative. Coordinators Jo Egan and Gerri Moriarty, who had both worked extensively in community theatre, facilitated a complicated and often contested process in which the participants told stories about their own experiences with cross-community relationships, improvised scenes on the subject, and offered feedback on the developing script. Even the decision to focus on the theme of mixed marriages was taken by the group as a whole.

The production team worked to make the collaborative nature of the project transparent to audience members. Promotional materials emphasized the devising process and the range of the performers’ backgrounds. The program listed the seven theatre companies as creators along with Lynch and Jones, and the cast list specified to which company each performer belonged. This latter choice foregrounded the performers’ organizational affiliation, which frequently also pointed to their sectarian identity. In some cases, the audiences would have needed to know about the specific companies to know about the community from which they drew. Several were named

after their segregated geographical area, however, which would have instantly informed anyone from Belfast about their makeup. For example, one would assume that anyone from the Shankill or Ballybeen company was Protestant, while anyone from the Dockward company was likely to be Catholic. The program also separated the characters by family (with separate sections for characters introduced at the ceremony and reception), so audiences could easily see that many actors were playing “cross community.” For example, the Catholic groom’s two best mates were from the Shankill company, while the Protestant bride’s father was from the Dockward company. In addition, the Northern Visions broadcasting company recorded the process from the first workshop. The resulting documentary, *Our Wedding Video*, allowed participants to reflect on the project and gave audiences insight into the production they had witnessed.

Building on this process, the plot emphasized unity and similarity over division and difference (using the traditional comedy trope of the wedding that heals a splintered community).¹² It is significant that none of the characters expressed serious concerns about the GFA. Although in reality there were members of both religious communities who objected to it, they were not represented within the play. Even the characters who had been imprisoned for paramilitary activities – who at one point had felt violence was the best solution to the problems within the state – were presented as active members of the peace process. When Damian’s cousin Danny (a former member of the IRA) declared he would not attend the wedding because he didn’t want to see Nicola’s uncle Trevor (a former loyalist paramilitary member), Damian challenged him to put the past behind him:

¹² Many commentators also talk about the play as an inversion (because of the happy ending) of the Romeo and Juliet story, which was frequently deployed in Northern Irish theatre during the Troubles (see Murray 192-94 for more on this trope in the Northern Irish context). This would have been present in the minds of many audience members, who would presumably have taken pleasure in the fact that the young couple did not need to die to bring their community together.

DAMIAN. There's supposed to be a Peace Process on.

DANNY. And who do you think played a major part in bringin' the Peace Process about? The prisoners, that's who. I voted for peace. When I was in jail, I voted to forget the past and go for peace.¹³

Although we might be suspicious of Danny's repeated claims that his refusal to attend the wedding had nothing to do with prejudice against Protestants, these lines showed that even those characters who were the most hostile to the wedding were committed to the peace process as a whole. Even if Danny would not be at the forefront of creating the inclusive community the play imagined, at least he would not be responsible for dragging Northern Ireland back into its violent past.

Instead of showing Nicola and Damian's families as unapologetic bigots, the play presented them as caring individuals struggling to overcome deeply-seated distrust in order to celebrate with their loved ones. Although many of the conversations around the mixed marriage were fraught with tension and anxiety, none of the characters seemed to be angry with the couple. Gone, the play told its audiences, were the days when women could be tarred and feathered by paramilitary organizations for "fraternizing" with the other community. There was never a suggestion that either Nicola or Damian would be rejected by their families because of their choice of partner. Indeed, all the family members seemed to *want* to be happy for the couple, even if they hadn't figured out how to achieve that sense of acceptance. As Cassie, Nicola's staunchly unionist grandmother observed: "There is things you have to do for your own that you wouldn't do for any other man nor beast."¹⁴ The characters revealed that, at the beginning of the Troubles, Cassie had put an end to a developing relationship between her son Trevor and the Catholic Elish (who also happened to be the groom's aunt). As several of the characters

¹³ Jones and Lynch. "Todd Household" 16.

¹⁴ Jones and Lynch. "Marshall Household" 5.

observed, Cassie had changed significantly in the intervening years; she was now ready to help build a shared society. In another scene, Nicola's father, Geordie, demonstrated the tension felt by family members who were trying to suppress their misgivings about the event:

GEORDIE. I love ye no matter what, you know that.

NICOLA. What do you mean, no matter what.

GEORDIE. um... no matter what... um... I don't know what I mean.

NICOLA. Damian isn't some kind of disease you know... it's like saying, I love you Nicola even if you let me down.

GEORDIE. I can't say the right thing to nobody the day.

NICOLA. That's because you're not saying what you really mean.

GEORDIE. You are my daughter, and if you are the happiest bride in the world, what more could a father ask for... and I mean that.

NICOLA. Then be happy for me.

GEORDIE. (smiles) I am doing my best love... come on.¹⁵

Although Nicola drew attention to the fact that Geordie wasn't being entirely open about his emotions, it seemed that he was hiding them in a (possibly misplaced) effort to give his daughter the best wedding possible.

In addition to their own residual prejudices, many family members feared that the marriage would provoke their larger communities, who might not be ready to embrace narratives of unity, to reject Nicola and Damian. Due to the legacy of violent enforcement of segregation, they worried that this mixed marriage would confront the couple with challenges they were not prepared to face. Trying to explain her reservations about the wedding, Damian's mother Margaret said:

¹⁵ Jones and Lynch. "Marshall Household" 11.

It's what him and Nicola are goin' out d'face. I know what this city's like. I know what this city does to people. Smell city, that's what I call it. Smell city. When you're brought up here, y'can't see properly. You only learn how to see half of everything. You only learn to hear half of everything. All we're left with is our smell. We are reduced to judgin' everything and everybody by smell. [...] That's what they are goin out d'face. Him and that wee girl are goin' out to try and buck the whole of Belfast. [...] But do y'know something? We'll have d'give it a try. If Damian and Nicola can look at things at the same time, y'never know, maybe between them, they might see everything.¹⁶

Through this speech, the play pointed to the ways that sectarianism is ingrained in the lives of the people of Northern Ireland. Not only does it affect where and with whom they live, it shapes the way they view the world. Margaret was hopeful that Damian and Nicola would be able to overcome the ways they had been trained to see themselves and their neighbors, but she seemed to view older generations (including, presumably, herself) as a lost cause.

The play's site-specific nature helped to further develop the message of inclusion by challenging both the performers and audiences. For many participants, the rehearsals marked the first time they would enter "the other community's territory." Nor were the fears this border-crossing provoked entirely unfounded; the segregation of space described in my introduction was often backed up with physical violence. Individuals from outside the community could be beaten up for walking the supposedly public streets of Belfast, and large groups of outsiders were even more likely to attract attention. Indeed, two years after the staging of *The Wedding Community Play Project*, Protestant residents in one West Belfast neighborhood staged protests against Catholic schoolgirls traveling through "their" streets to the Holy Cross Primary School. This dispute lasted for months and resulted in riots and death threats against teachers at the school. In a newspaper article previewing the *Wedding Community Play Project*, Mic Moroney noted

¹⁶ Jones and Lynch. "Todd Household." 10.

that: “As a matter of course, consultations were held with representatives of local paramilitary groups to get a quiet go ahead for the project.” The article did not elaborate on the content of these conversations, and as such it is difficult to tell whether the paramilitaries expressed any resistance to the project. The mere fact that these conversations were viewed as one of the many steps necessary for arranging the complicated logistics of the event, however, shows that violence and segregation remained connected and engrained in daily life even after the official peace was reached.

It seems probable that audiences would have felt anxiety entering these unfamiliar neighborhoods, but they also seem to have felt a certain titillation at having the opportunity to peek into the lives of the “other community.” Indeed, the language surrounding the event promised a voyeuristic opportunity to peek in on “authentic” Northern Irish families. The program offered audiences an “invitation to the *real* homes” of the families (emphasis mine), while reviews suggested audiences could “join the cast behind [closed] doors”¹⁷ and be “a fly on the wall.”¹⁸ Reviewer Hugh Linehan described his own reactions to this invitation in great detail:

Modern media fetishises the private and the ordinary to such a degree that being invited into a real house is a voyeuristic experience with which we are all familiar. The eye is free to roam over the mundane details of the house, giving added significance to each element. Is that Catholic wallpaper? Should I read anything into those fridge magnets?

As Linehan’s observations demonstrate, the voyeuristic pleasure of *The Wedding Community Play Project* did not simply lie in seeing what one’s neighbors get up to in private. Instead, the play encouraged audiences to view the characters as “typical” of their sectarian community. By viewing the Todds and the Marshalls as representative of

¹⁷ Clancy.

¹⁸ Moroney.

Catholics and Protestants respectively, audiences may have felt that they gained insight into the ways that real members of these communities lived.

In one scene in the Todd household, the characters modeled this voyeuristic interest in the lifestyles of the “other side.” While getting ready for the wedding, family friend Geraldine pressed the groom’s mother Margaret for information about her future in-laws’ house:

GERALDINE. Is it a very loyalist house... is there any Protestant things on the walls or anything?

MARGARET. What were you expectin’? A life-size plaster cast, of Ian Paisley’s arse stickin’ out from above the fire place?

GERALDINE. Margaret, they might live only 500 yards up Templemore Avenue, but there’s no gettin’ away from it. Protestants are different from us and your son’s marryin’ into them.¹⁹

In this way, the characters excused and even encouraged the curiosity shown by audience members like Linehan. It is only natural, they suggested, to expect there to be striking visual differences between the homes of Catholics and Protestants. At the same time, Margaret’s sarcastic reply to Geraldine pointed to the conclusion that should be drawn once one has had the opportunity to engage in this voyeurism: the lives and spaces of Protestants and Catholics are not different in any of the ways that matter. This message was certainly taken up by some audience members, one of whom wrote: “I enjoyed looking at the décor. At the end, their wee houses are just like ours.”²⁰

Indeed, this emphasis on similarity and equality permeated the entire script. Linehan noted the presence of “the dreaded mirror image effect, in which each side’s flaws and strengths need to be reflected, tit for tat, in the other.” Both families contained

¹⁹ Jones and Lynch. “Todd Household” 4.

²⁰ Quoted in Moriarty 25.

men who had been imprisoned for paramilitary activities and who were afraid of attending the wedding and meeting each other. In the end, both did attend and were able to ignore each other (neither bonding nor causing an unpleasant scene). Similarly, the bride and groom each had a strong-willed, sometimes domineering mother and a more relaxed and passive father. Each family scene also included neighbors who represented the community's discomfort with (although not necessarily opposition to) the union and friends of the couple representing a younger generation less invested in narratives of division.

It is important, however, not to view *The Wedding Community Play Project* as an entirely utopic endeavor that completely transcended all sectarian divisions. The production hinted that a perfect happy ending might not be so easily achieved. Although the families' ability to find common ground remained the focus of the reception scene, tensions lingered between them. During this scene, the characters learned that Margaret was trying to get Damian's uncle, who lived in England, to give him a job. This, she reasoned, would protect the children from the community's potential disapproval of their marriage. When Nicola's family learned of this, they (and especially her mother Jeannie) were furious and argued against the couple moving so far from their families. In this way, the play invoked the trope of exodus and immigration that is prevalent in much Northern Irish literature. Frequently, plays, novels, and films suggest that the only way to live a life entirely unhampered by sectarianism is to leave Northern Ireland. *The Wedding Community Play Project* did not go so far, however, as to fully endorse this point of view. The audience never heard Nicola and Damian's thoughts on this proposed move, so they did not know whether it would come to pass. The play left this issue unresolved, refusing to argue either that the situation in Northern Ireland was unredeemable or that the state's problems could be easily overcome.

These lingering tensions were also reflected in the process of the play's creation. Although the goal of the play in performance was to emphasize the similarities between the two communities, the process of creating *The Wedding Community Play Project* highlighted the problems with assuming the two communities have the same experiences and concerns. Although the interviews with the cast in *Our Wedding Video* showed that most participants were nervous about the image of their community the play would project, it was the Protestant performers who were the most vocal. They generally felt that their community had been unfairly vilified in most artistic representations of Northern Ireland. Maureen Harkins, who played the Marshall's friend and neighbor Tillie, lamented:

When I personally read the script it didn't read like I personally expected it – it read like something that was stuck thirty years ago. Throughout the thirty years of the troubles, the Protestant/unionist community has always been unfairly misrepresented. [...] Maybe I was looking for something that wasn't deliverable – I don't know.

Harkins was certainly correct that, rightly or wrongly, the Protestant community has frequently been criticized in ways that the Catholic community has not. Both sides are frequently stereotyped, with Catholics being generally warmer and more generous (if also lazier and messier), and Protestants being colder and more bigoted (but more reliable).²¹ Thus, the Protestant actors were particularly nervous about the “PR” job that the *Wedding Community Play Project* would do for their community. Indeed, their concerns referenced many of these stereotypes, particularly as they related to the rigid mother of the bride. They expressed special fears about how their fellow Protestants would feel (and would view the actors) after seeing the production.

²¹ Indeed, in 1995 commentator Fintan O'Toole had written a review of Jones's hit play *A Night in November* for *The Irish Times* in which he accused her of embracing these stereotypes uncritically.

In Moriarty's view, their fears and complaints were well-founded. In a book chapter published in 2004, she identifies a disconnection between the writers and the participants as one of the root causes for the problems within the process. She claims that Lynch and Jones remained aloof during the devising and workshopping stages early in the project, and were not receptive enough to the ideas and needs of the participants. She also points out that the decision to use Lynch and Jones as the playwrights appeared to provide balance, but in truth did not. Lynch comes from a Catholic background, while Jones comes from a Protestant background. This would seem to present a pleasing symmetry, but their political commitments did not line up so neatly. Lynch is a dedicated republican, who himself was a member of the Official IRA during the 1970s. Although he has critiqued many of the tactics of violent republicanism (and particularly the Provisional IRA), there is no question that he shares the ultimate goals of these groups. Jones, on the other hand, is not a dedicated loyalist. Indeed, by the time *The Wedding Community Play Project* was produced, she had come to identify as a nationalist. Thus, while Lynch was writing about a community of which he was truly a part, Jones was writing about one with whom her relations were, at best, strained. It was perhaps unsurprising that this anxiety was reflected in the script the pair produced. As Jo Egan (who is also Lynch's romantic partner) observed:

For me, I felt that Martin Lynch had a genuine love of the community he was writing for. I think you feel that even if you disagree with artistic devices or storyline or even depth. Not so in the Protestant house. I felt Marie Jones was still processing stuff about her own community and was coming from a 'guilty prod' perspective, not as accepting or loving. I didn't feel a love for her people... therefore the world I wanted to enter was a little barred to me. Coming from a Catholic background, I felt I wanted to see more.²²

²² Quoted in Moriarty 20.

This perception of hostility from Jones added to the fears that Protestant participants brought into the process, and nearly derailed the whole project. Moriarty claims that many of the Protestant theatre groups nearly dropped out of the project when they felt their concerns were being ignored. Although they ultimately saw the project through, these experiences colored their memories of the project, and caused Moriarty to view it as deeply flawed.

It is thus useful to view *The Wedding Community Play Project* as working on two levels: for the benefit of audiences and for the benefit of performers. For the former group, the play was almost universally successful. Although some reviewers and audience members pointed to limited problems within the performance, their responses were overwhelmingly positive. Indeed, they responded to the play not only as a piece of theatre, but also as a form of cultural tourism; the experience of the play helped to break down their preconceptions about “the other side” by showing that they all dealt with a “universal” experience (marriage) in similar ways. For the participants, however, the results were less clear. Although most participants viewed the performance as a valuable experience, many had significant reservations about the final product. The assumptions of symmetry and shared experiences did not always prove to be correct, and the casts’ reactions point to the needs for more nuanced narratives uniting the two communities.

TWO ROADS WEST: UNITY THROUGH CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS

Kabosh’s *Two Roads West* presented a different path to shared identification between its Catholic and Protestant characters. While *The Wedding Community Play Project* emphasized a type of universal humanist similarity, *Two Roads West* playwright Laurence McKeown imagined his characters coming together based on their shared struggles as members of the working class and their complicated relationships with their

own sectarian identities. The play premièred at the Cathedral Quarter Arts Festival in May 2009 under the direction of Kabosh Artistic Director Paula McFetridge and was revived for the Feile an Phobal festival the following August.²³ Using the structure of a taxi tour of West Belfast (now a relatively common tourist outing), McKeown introduced audiences not only to the play's characters but also to the similar experiences of poverty in two of Northern Ireland's most iconic sectarian neighborhoods.

The play was performed in the taxi and at various stops along its route, which highlighted the physical structures of the neighborhood as well as the daily routines of the "ordinary people" going about their business oblivious to the play. The tour took audiences from the Belfast city centre to the traditionally-Catholic Falls Road in West Belfast, and then back to the centre along the traditionally-Protestant Shankill Road (Illustration 9). The roads run roughly parallel; at their closest they are only a quarter of a mile apart.²⁴ There is little contact between the residents, however; ideological differences and a massive peace wall keep them separated.

These two streets saw a disproportionate amount of violence during the Troubles, partially due to their proximity and iconic status, but also because they are solidly working class. Although any attempt to find the single event that caused the Troubles must be regarded with suspicion, many commentators focus on the burning of Bombay Street, a small street between the two roads. On August 15, 1969, loyalist mobs burned down most of the homes on Bombay Street, forcing out the primarily-Catholic residents. The streets also saw a number of bombings. In 1993, ten people died when the IRA

²³ No video or audio recording of this play was made; my reading is based on the unpublished script from the performance revived for Feile an Phobail, as well as conversations with director Paula McFetridge (who also took me on a tour of the route), author Laurence McKeown, and actor Vincent Higgins.

²⁴ At this location the Falls road is technically called "Divis Street" (the name changes to Falls after one travels west on Divis for approximately half a mile), but it is still colloquially part of the Falls. Indeed, the terms "the Falls" and "the Shankill" are generally used to refer to the neighborhoods surrounding these two roads. Thus, Rosie can speak of being "from the Falls" although she actually lived on Kashmir street.

bombed Frizzell's Fish Shop on the Shankill, where they wrongly believed loyalist paramilitaries were meeting. In the 1970s, the Shankill also gave its name to the Shankill Butchers, a group who would abduct and torture Catholics before killing them and dumping their bodies. Thus, these two roads were important not only as segregated sectarian spaces, but also as locations where violence took place, and from which violence was planned.

Two Roads West had two characters: Protestant driver and guide Bill (played by Vincent Higgins) and Catholic tourist Rosie (played by Carol Moore), whose family had left West Belfast at the beginning of the Troubles (Illustration 10). Because the play was performed in a taxi, each performance could only accommodate five audience members. Before the play began, these few spectators gathered at the West Belfast Taxi Association depot. At this point, Moore joined the group, already in character as Rosie. Higgins then entered as Bill and led the audience up to the taxi. As they made their way upstairs to street level (the part of the depot in which they met was on a basement level), Rosie struck up a conversation with Bill, telling him that this was her first visit to Belfast since her family had moved away in 1969. Understandably, at this point many audience members were unsure whether Rosie was a part of the play or simply an enthusiastic audience member. They then entered the taxi and began their journey.

The black taxi is an image with many connections to West Belfast, and this would also have shaped audiences' understandings of the play. These associations can be categorized into two main categories: local and tourist. For locals, particularly along the Falls, black taxis functioned as community-run bus services. Because of the many riots along the Falls, city buses were unreliable (and often entirely cancelled). To support the community, most of whom did not have cars, taxis would drive up and down the Falls, letting passengers on and off as needed. Thus, the taxis facilitated the development of the

community – strangers would meet in the taxis, which required closer contact between passengers than buses did. These cabs were generally based out of the West Belfast Taxi Association depot, where the performances of *Two Roads West* began. For locals, this experience would be reminiscent of these earlier trips.

As the Troubles ended and tourism in Belfast picked up, many taxi drivers began offering tours of the Falls and the Shankill, as well as other sites from around Belfast (murals in particular are frequent tourist stops). Thus, Bill's tour was not a unique event, but part of a larger commercial industry. The decision to have one guide lead the entire tour was a significant one. When he first conceived of the play, McKeown assumed that he would use two drivers and the audience would transfer between them as they crossed from the Falls to the Shankill.²⁵ Such switches actually do take place frequently (a particularly striking interaction when both guides are former combatants, as is often the case). Increasingly, however, guides like the fictional Bill have built businesses that offer tours of both sides of the community. By choosing this model, McKeown was able to offer a more integrated, less combative experience to his audiences.

After leaving the Taxi Depot, Bill drove the audience up the Falls road, pointing out particular sites of historical and cultural importance. He particularly drew attention to the ways the space (and the use of space) had changed since the GFA. For example, after showing his audience the International Wall, a series of frequently-changing murals on the Falls road which address both local and international politics (Illustration 11), he explained:

The artists say they started painting on the walls because their voice couldn't be heard elsewhere. It became especially popular around the time of the hunger strikes. In those days you could be arrested for writing on the wall. One guy was shot dead with a paint brush in his hand. The police said they thought it was a

²⁵ Interview with the author.

gun. Nowadays you can have your picture taken beside them as they work and no one bats an eyelid. Just part of normal life.²⁶

This anecdote illustrated both the repressive nature of the state during the Troubles and the changes that had taken place since the darkest days of violence. For better or worse, what was once a dangerous act of rebellion has become a part of the “Troubles tourism” that has particularly benefited West Belfast. As Bill drove up to the Shankill road and returned along it to the city center, he shared similar commentary about the changing relationships between the residents, the space of the road, and the rest of the city. Throughout, Bill and Rosie spoke about their lives and memories of Belfast, and the audience learned that Bill avoided getting caught up in the Troubles by emigrating to England (where his experiences challenged his understanding of his British identity).

In addition to the formal tour, which gave audiences a lesson on the history of the area, McKeown incorporated a more personal narrative of romance and loss. As the ride progressed, Rosie told Bill about Phil, who had been her childhood sweetheart. They had lost touch when she moved to England, and she was hurt that he never wrote to her. By asking a few questions, Bill was able to identify him as a local boxer from the Shankill road. This surprised Rosie, who had always assumed that Phil was from her own community (this, in turn, highlighted the ways the Troubles increased the segregation between Protestants and Catholics both in West Belfast and throughout the North). Rosie’s description of her relationship with Phil suggested that the issue of religion had never come up, not that he had been lying to her or deliberately hiding his Protestantism. This realization also led Bill to suggest that perhaps Phil did write to Rosie, but that her parents suppressed his letters. Bill reasoned that even if the child Rosie was unaware of Phil’s religious identity, her parents most likely would not have been. Bill offered to take

²⁶ *Two Roads West* 11.

her to Phil's boxing studio, but Rosie declined, deciding that she preferred to keep her memories in the past.

This combination of individual and collective histories allowed McKeown to offer a nuanced depiction of the residents of West Belfast. While Bill's commentary drew attention to many similarities between the two roads, the characters' histories differentiated them from the "typical" or "representative" Catholics and Protestants presented in *The Wedding Community Play Project*. For example, Bill's descriptions of the economic struggles in West Belfast marked him as a socialist (or at least someone with strong socialist leanings). Although socialist unionists exist, socialism is much more strongly linked to republicanism in the popular imagination. Rosie was similarly transgressive. Although those from the Catholic community usually identify as Irish rather than British, Rosie had spent most of her life in England, where she had married and was raising children with little connection to Ireland or Irishness.

It is impossible to understand the position of this play in the history of Belfast theatre without examining the history of its playwright. Laurence McKeown was arrested for IRA activities and sentenced to life in prison in 1977. While in the Long Kesh prison, he participated in the blanket and no-wash protests, which sought to gain political status for paramilitary prisoners (discussed in more detail in the following chapter). He truly became an icon of the republican movement in 1981, however, when he participated in the hunger strike that would kill Bobby Sands and nine other republican prisoners. McKeown did not die on the protest, but he came close; on September 6, the seventieth day of his strike, he lost consciousness and his mother authorized the authorities to intervene medically to save his life.

Following his release from prison in 1992, McKeown became a prolific commentator on the experiences of republican prisoners. He edited *Nor Meekly Serve My*

Time: The H-Block Struggle, 1976-1981 (1994) with fellow former prisoners Brian Campbell and Felim O'Hagan. The book interweaves the first-person narratives of nearly thirty republican prisoners in order to give an inside view of the protests for political status that took place within Long Kesh in the late seventies and early eighties. He earned a PhD from Queens University and in 2001 published another book about prisoners, *Out Of Time: Irish Republican Prisoners, Long Kesh, 1972-2000*. Like many (although by no means all) other former combatants, McKeown became active in the peace process following the GFA. In particular, he became involved in theatre while working with the organization Healing Through Remembering (discussed in the introduction).

This movement from combatant to peace-maker was not as complete a change as it might initially seem. Most republicans who signed on to the peace process never renounced their past violence. Although they frequently express regret over the loss of life, most view (or claim to view) the violence of the Troubles as a necessary step towards Catholic equality and a united Ireland (in chapter four, I discuss the potential problems with this framing of violence and peace, particularly in reference to the relationship between mainline and dissident republicans). McKeown fits into this model of "reformed terrorist" well; he views reconciliation and peace keeping as part of the same goal that caused him to take up violence in the first place. He still believes that all the people of Northern Ireland would be best served if the state were to be joined with the Republic.

This rich and very public personal history would certainly have shaped audience expectations of *Two Roads West*, particularly regarding the play's political message. While McKeown is a strong supporter of the peace process, he is still avowedly a

republican.²⁷ Some might therefore have felt anxiety that his treatment of the Falls Road would be more sympathetic or nuanced than that of the Shankill. As the process of creating *The Wedding Community Play Project* demonstrated, artistic pieces that seek to depict both communities are often subject to intense scrutiny over their “fairness,” and Protestants tend to be particularly concerned that they are being represented in an unflattering light. McKeown himself was certainly aware of these possible criticisms. Even setting aside his own political views, he knew he was simply far less familiar with the Shankill and its residents than he was with the Falls and that this could make his writing uneven.

To combat this perceived imbalance, McKeown shared his writings with some of the former loyalist paramilitaries he had met during his work with Healing Through Remembering and similar organizations. To get the final stamp of approval, he asked Dawn Purvis, then the head of the Progressive Unionist Party (PUP), to look it over.²⁸ The PUP is the third-largest unionist party in the state, and as their name suggests, they tend to be more socially and economically leftist than either the DUP or the UUP. Thus, their politics are more likely to line up with McKeown’s, as long as one ignores the crucial constitutional question. The PUP is also the only major unionist group to have had ties with a paramilitary organization (in this case, the Ulster Volunteer Force). Thus, it is in many ways analogous to Sinn Féin, in construction and ideology if not in popular mandate. Purvis is a particularly iconic figure, and as such her approval of the play made McKeown more confident about the piece he had written. Further, the fact that the head

²⁷ Director Paula McFetridge and actors Vincent Higgins and Carol Moore also come from Nationalist backgrounds, but none possess the iconic status of McKeown. Their participation in the project might have shaped audience expectations somewhat, but certainly not to the same extent as McKeown’s.

²⁸ Interview with the author.

of a political party was willing to read and comment on a play suggests that she too saw the potential power of the project.²⁹

The Wedding Community Play Project advocated for narratives of unity on the basis of a shared basic human experience. *Two Roads West*, instead, drew attention to the economic struggles the two working-class neighborhoods share. This is perhaps not surprising, given the long-lasting connections between the republican movement and socialism. While not all republicans are socialists (and, indeed, many are deeply socially conservative on issues such as gender, race, and sexuality), the movement is in many ways rooted in a desire to overthrow monarchy and the systems that benefited the wealthy (who, in Northern Ireland, were primarily Protestant). Many Northern Irish socialists argue that the division between Catholics and Protestants is actually fostered by the wealthier classes in an effort to keep the working class from uniting.

Whether or not this is the case, *Two Roads West* certainly made an argument for working-class unity based on shared economic need. Early in the tour, Bill and Rosie discussed the Spartan conditions at the Divis flats, the government housing estates where many Catholics lived during the Troubles (Illustration 12):

ROSIE. Sounds more like a prison than a home.

BILL. That's how those who lived here described it, especially with the army post on the top of the tower. Everything that went into and out of it was by helicopter. Supposed to be everyone's front door could be seen from the post

ROSIE. God.

Bill leads them all back to the taxi

²⁹ In 2010, following the murder of Bobby Moffet by loyalist paramilitaries, Purvis resigned from the PUP. She finished out the first term of the Stormont Assembly as an independent, but failed to be reelected in May 2011. Since all this happened after the performance of *Two Roads West*, however, it would not have affected the meaning of her approval of the play.

BILL. There were housing complexes like this built elsewhere, Europe and the US, but they were differently designed with social amenities and landscaping and everything. There was none of that here and all the blocks were connected by continuous terraces. You could walk along the top row from one end to the other without having to go up or down stairs, which made it easy for the British army to go on patrols throughout the complex.³⁰

Bill made similar observations about the conditions on the Shankill, whose population grew rapidly during the industrial revolution (it was a particularly popular location for workers in Belfast's booming linen industry):

BILL. Linen Lords such as the Ewarts met this demand by building what's called, kitchen houses, or better known as 'two up and two down' because they had two upstairs bedrooms and one downstairs room with a small kitchen and outside toilet. But the rate of building couldn't keep pace with the influx of people and this, combined with low wages, meant as many as three families shared one house. Six to eight people would live in one room.

ROSIE. But where are all the shops? Were they all bombed?

BILL. Couldn't put it all down to that. My father summed it up as jobs, housing and planners; and they were all interconnected. The jobs disappeared in the linen and textiles industries, in shipbuilding and heavy engineering. There was a housing shortage in the early '70's so young people were given money as an incentive to move to the outskirts of the city or to new towns like Craigavon. And to attract new industry to Belfast the planners decided the Shankill was no longer to be a shopping street but instead upgraded to a main traffic route into the city. Profit before people.³¹

In this way, Bill emphasized the poor conditions both groups were frequently subjected to as a result of imbalances in wealth. Although, as I discussed above, these sentiments are not surprising coming from a republican playwright, they are unexpected from the mouth of a Protestant character. Bill directly addressed this dissonance between his expected and actual politics; he spoke of his father's political views (clearly influenced by socialism, although this word is never used), which he initially resisted, finding them

³⁰ *Two Roads West* 8.

³¹ *Two Roads West* 16.

both embarrassing and dangerously radical. His later experiences convinced him, however, that class divisions were more important than sectarian ones, and this was a message he passed on to Rosie and the audience.

Throughout, the production depicted the extreme separation between the two neighborhoods as both unnatural and unnecessary. Rosie, who had been away from Belfast for approximately forty years, embodied a pre-Troubles understanding of the space of West Belfast. McKeown used this to complicate the audience's understanding of the history of spatial segregation and to suggest that narratives of unity might be rediscovered rather than needing to be created anew. Although Rosie was decidedly from the Falls, the Shankill had not been foreign territory to her as a child. As the taxi turned onto the Shankill, she exclaimed:

ROSIE. We can't be on the Shankill already? We just left the Falls there.

BILL. We did

ROSIE. Well it used to be further away than this. Did it expand or something?

Bill shakes his head.

BILL. Naw, nor did the Falls get closer.

ROSIE. But I used to walk over here every Saturday with my mother. She said the shops were better. The Shankill was another world away.

Bill pulls into left on Northumberland Street, level with Shankill Leisure Centre

ROSIE. Walking over to it took ages and the thing that kept me going was knowing that when the shopping was done I'd get an ice cream in Mamas, an Italian ice cream shop. There was also the Anchor but Mamas was best. I walked over here in my Holy Communion outfit - dress and veil and all - to get my photo taken in Mr Bailey's shop. We all came over here. No photographers on the Falls. And this old woman stopped me on the street and said I looked lovely, opened her purse and gave me a thrupenny bit.

BILL. Well, you can take it from me this is the Shankill we're coming onto.³²

When she was a child, Rosie had not viewed the Shankill as a place of danger – it was special, but not fundamentally separate from the world in which she lived. Even when she had ventured into the space in her communion dress, which explicitly marked her as Catholic, she recalled being treated kindly. Indeed, in Rosie's childhood understanding, the more important dividing line seems to have been between the bottom of the Falls and the city center:

When you got to Divis you were almost into the city and that was a different place. We didn't see ourselves as being part of the city. It wasn't that we felt kept out of it or anything like that but we just weren't from there. We were from the Kashmir. That's how you knew people in those days. You lived in your own wee area. The city was where you went to dances and to meet up with other ones. This was the boundary. Once you were past here you were into a different world.³³

During Rosie's childhood, crossing to the city center (a space marked by consumerism rather than strong sectarian identity) was a more significant statement than traveling to the Shankill. Since the residents of both roads were working class, they had more in common with each other than with the Belfast's richer citizens to the east. This is not, of course, to say that Rosie's childhood memories should be treated as a whole picture of the relationship between the two communities before the Troubles. The systematic discrimination and individual civil rights abuses that led, in part, to the Troubles certainly happened. However, it is also the case that the Troubles intensified the divisions between Protestants and Catholics.

Indeed, even as an adult, Rosie remained quite naïve about the wider context of the segregation. Not only did she assume that Phil was from her community, but she also made a similar assumption about Bill (in spite of the Protestant connotations of his name

³² *Two Roads West* 15.

³³ *Two Roads West* 11.

and its implied connection to King William III). After he explained the Irish roots of the name Belfast (“Béal Feirste, the Irish for mouth of the Farset, the river that runs right through the city”), she questioned him about his knowledge of the Irish language. When he told her he didn’t study it in school, she responded: “You didn’t? Thought we all did.”³⁴ It would only be the norm for students in Catholic schools to learn Irish. Protestant children would for the most part have attended state schools, where Irish would not have been taught. Not only did Rosie initially assume that Bill was from the same basic group that she was (whether or not she consciously identified this group as “Catholics”), she also failed to pick up on the very clear signal that her assumption was wrong. Presumably, most audience members would have quickly spotted her mistake. While Rosie had gotten out of the habit of trying to determine people’s sectarian affiliation by their behavior and words, most Belfast residents would not have moved beyond this tendency.

The continuing separation of the two roads and the communities they represented is underscored by the actors’ accounts of their experiences while performing. For example, Higgins (a nationalist) related that he often felt particularly anxious while driving the taxi through the Shankill. Unlike the Falls, it was not familiar territory for him, and he did not feel companionship with its residents.³⁵ On one memorable rehearsal, the taxi broke down on the Shankill, while McKeown was inside. Although the team was soon retrieved by a real taxi driver and the event passed off without incident, all were aware that having a prominent republican like McKeown in the Shankill could have created unpleasantness or even violence.³⁶ Similarly, few audience

³⁴ *Two Roads West* 4.

³⁵ Interview with the author.

³⁶ Paula McFetridge interview with the author.

members would have felt comfortable in both parts of the tour. Many would have been entirely unfamiliar with West Belfast, but those who were “locals” would have their experiences shaped by being surrounded by familiar and then unfamiliar surroundings in rapid succession (or, of course, the other way around if they lived in the Shankill).

Another common point between Catholics and Protestants was suggested by Bill’s narrative of his experiences in England. He told Rosie:

I came face to face with both Thatcher’s Britain and what it was like to be a Paddy in England. Bit of a wake-up call I can tell you. Came to a head one night I was in a pub. The barman handed me my drink and said, ‘There you are Paddy’. I said my name’s not Paddy, it’s Bill. ‘You not from Ireland?’ I said I’m from Northern Ireland and he says ‘Well I’m from Northern England and that makes me English so by the same logic you’re Irish’. He walked off and others at the bar started laughing. I asked them what they were laughing at. One of them told me to take it easy and I said ‘No, I’ll not take it easy. Do you know how much we’ve done to be part of this country? Helping youse fight the IRA, helping youse fight the Germans? The number of our people who died for youse, the ships we built for youse, the engineering we did.’ And one of them said, ‘That’s right, youse built the Titanic’ and I says fucken right we did. And he says, ‘Aye, and it sank on its first fucken voyage’. I says, ‘Aye, it sank because it hit a big fucken ice berg’ and he says ‘It was a Paddy ship. Youse probably put the rivets in with shovels.’ They all burst out laughing and one of them chirped in ‘Aye, there weren’t even enough life boats because youse ran out of fingers to count on when fitting them.’ And at that I just lost it and took a swipe at him. They grabbed me and threw me out. Last thing I heard them say was about Paddies being too quick to use their fists.³⁷

To those in Northern Ireland, the distinction between Protestants and Catholics, between those who identify as British and those who identify as Irish, is clear. They see themselves as from two entirely separate communities. As Bill discovered when he visited England, however, the rest of the British are not so concerned with these distinctions. Bill was also forced to recognize one of the deepest fears of the Protestant people, which extends at least as far back as the beginning of the twentieth century: that

³⁷ *Two Roads West* 21.

Britain doesn't actually care whether Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom or not. In 1912, Sir Edward Carson and his followers created the Ulster Covenant, in which they threatened to fight if the British gave in to the demands of Irish nationalism and made Ireland a free nation. Indeed, for all the blood that has been shed attempting to change or defend the national identification of the North, it is striking how uninterested both Britain and the Republic of Ireland seem to be in the state.

Rosie told of a similar experience of dislocated national identity, although hers was less traumatic:

When I lived here my name was Roisín, but when I went over to live in London no one could ever understand how to spell it. You know the way you spell it R-O-I-S-I fada N. Well they could never get their heads around this so I changed it to Rosie. Thinking recently though of changing it back again. Sure when you hear half of the names in London. You couldn't pronounce them never mind spell them. [...] A name's important, or maybe it's just getting older but I like my Irish name, sort of roots or something.³⁸

Like Bill, Rosie struggled with her identity as a native of the island of Ireland while living in England and being surrounded by the English. It did not create as large a psychic rift for her as it did for Bill, however, because Britishness was never part of her identity. With these two moments, the play highlighted the fact that, in spite of political and ideological differences, in many ways the lived experiences of the two communities mean they have more in common with each other than with those of the countries with which they identify.

McKeown has frequently referred to the setting as the play's "third character," and it is important to note the effect this would have had on audience experiences. They were certainly encouraged to view everything they saw from the taxi as "part of the play" (although nothing was specially staged for them to witness). It is likely that the

³⁸ *Two Roads West* 3-4.

“ordinary” people going about their business would have reinforced this sense of similarity between the two roads. Although the backdrops might have had particular sectarian associations (and explicit imagery, in the case of the many murals that lined the route), the people themselves would have been more difficult to read.

This incorporation of outside reality into the play seems also to have leaked into the taxi, further blurring the lines between what was part of the play and what wasn't. Each of the artists I spoke to commented on this in one way or another – although audiences had needed to buy tickets to a play, and as a result should have had at least some idea what they were in for, many seemed to forget or discard this official structure. They conversed with the characters as real people and frequently tried to talk Rosie into reuniting with Phil in the play's final moments. Although some of this was simply a matter of the audience members failing to recognize that Moore was an actress rather than “one of them,” it seems to have gone deeper. According to all the creators, audiences were frequently eager to share their stories of life on the Falls and the Shankill – they often even interrupted the dialogue to tell their own anecdotes. Thus, at certain performances, the play's narrative became interwoven with the personal histories of the passengers, creating a richer and more complex vision of the two roads filled with experiences other than Bill's and Rosie's.

Like *The Wedding Community Play Project*, *Two Roads West* worked to highlight the similarities between Protestants and Catholics, and to demystify the seemingly-foreign worlds in which they live. Rather than focusing on a humanist universality, however, *Two Roads West* emphasized the very local and particular experiences of the two communities it depicted. The focus on the specific history of the Falls and the Shankill and the personal lives of Bill and Rosie (rather than the general history of Protestant and Catholic communities in the North) meant that the production felt much

more rooted in its time and place. As the socialist moments suggested, however, this acknowledgement of the differences between the two communities did not preclude an acknowledgement of the many ways their histories have paralleled each other. The narrative of unity the play invoked was not necessarily one in which all could participate, but it would establish a firm basis for a stronger relationship between working-class Catholics and Protestants.

NATIONAL ANTHEM AND THE SEARCH FOR NEUTRAL SYMBOLS

The Wedding Community Play Project and *Two Roads West* both presented optimistic visions of connection between Protestants and Catholics. While neither claimed that the kind of narrative necessary to forming a “shared society” would come easily, both pointed to common ground from which such an understanding might be reached. In contrast, Colin Bateman’s *National Anthem*, which premiered in the small Baby Grand theatre at the Grand Opera House as part of the 2010 Belfast Festival, presented a more pessimistic (although not entirely bleak) vision of the attempts to create this common identity. The production, directed by Rachel O’Riordan for the Ransom Theatre Company, emphasized the ways that superficial performances of shared identity can in fact alienate rather than unite the citizens of Northern Ireland.³⁹

The two plays I discussed previously were able to depict cross-community bonds because they largely ignored the constitutional question. While sharing stories can create the empathy needed for true peace, it cannot reconcile the competing views that Northern Ireland is fundamentally part of Ireland or part of the United Kingdom. This is an issue on which it is difficult to compromise. The GFA affirms the right of individuals to identify as Irish or British, but this has little legal meaning (although residents can now

³⁹ My readings of this play are based on the two performances I attended as well as a rehearsal draft of the script provided for me by the Ransom Theatre Company.

opt to have either a British or an Irish passport). For the present, Northern Ireland remains a part of the United Kingdom, and republicans are governed by a country to which they feel little allegiance. If, however, Catholics were to become a majority in the state (a not unthinkable occurrence) and used the provisions of the GFA to join Northern Ireland with the Republic of Ireland democratically, Protestants would be in the same position as Catholics had been in under British rule. Although the Republic has been working to decentralize the Catholic religion within government, many Protestants still fear being subjected to “Rome rule.” This conflict exacerbates the distrust between the two communities. Even though the constitutional question is generally downplayed in public discourse, it remains implicit to interactions between the two communities.

Unlike *The Wedding Community Play Project* and *Two Roads West*, *National Anthem* did not sideline these issues of national affiliation. At the same time, it also did not explicitly stage a debate over national sovereignty. Instead, it took a kind of middle ground, allowing the symbols of the two communities to stand in for their complicated histories and ambitions for the future. The play was set around a massive fictional push to rebrand Northern Ireland and overcome its violent and depressing image. This would be launched with a spectacle of pageantry to be attended (or so rumor had it) by the President of the United States. Although the overall system for funding and organizing the project was never discussed in detail, it was clear that it was intended to create an international sensation.

Catholic poet Desmond O’Hare (played by Miche Doherty) and Protestant musician Gary Miller (played by Stuart Graham) had been hired to write a new national anthem for the state, but because of Miller’s pressing commitments they only had a day in which to finish it. Their cynicism around the project and suspicion of each other compounded their writers’ block, and they struggled with the project they had been

given. Their endeavor was further threatened by Alan (played by Alan McKee), a republican who had decidedly not signed on to the peace process and who bore an old grudge against each of them. He had arranged for them to be brought together on the project so that he could take out his revenge on them. He had also arranged for Sean Maguire (played by Niamh Quinn),⁴⁰ his daughter whom he had watched from afar but never met, to be present at his triumph (she was acting as a liaison between the organizers of the event and Miller and O'Hare). A member of a younger generation for whom the Troubles have little resonance, however, Sean rejected her father, shot him and left O'Hare and Miller to get on with their project. They did, and the production ended with a sincere new national anthem that both addressed Northern Ireland's violent past and sought to find unity within it.

The play's ridiculous plot was in many ways characteristic of Bateman's work. Although *National Anthem* was his first play, he is widely recognized in Northern Ireland as a writer of humorous (and somewhat twisted) crime thrillers. His most recent series focuses on the socially-incompetent, hypochondriac owner of a Belfast mystery bookshop who attempts to solve crimes in his spare time. Although he takes himself very seriously, the unnamed narrator's track record on solving the crimes is, at best, mixed; indeed, in the second novel of the series, *Day of the Jack Russell*, his dramatic revelation of the mystery's solution (performed, of course, in front of all the suspects à la Agatha Christie) proves to be entirely incorrect. The novels are also often softly satirical of the public institutions running the peace process; Bateman in no way romanticizes or expresses nostalgia for the violence of the Troubles, but he does highlight the weaknesses and hypocrisies of Northern Ireland's current political climate. *National Anthem*

⁴⁰ Although "Sean" is usually a man's name, it is also not uncommon among Irish women.

audiences familiar with Bateman's work would then have been likely to expect dark humor, cynicism, improbable events, and few (if any) sympathetic characters.

For the most part, *National Anthem* delivered on this promise. Neither of the production's protagonists was particularly admirable or particularly invested in the peace process. Their reasons for agreeing to write the national anthem were entirely mercenary. Although Alan brought in the specter of the dissident republicans who had not renounced violence in their quest to unite Ireland (discussed in chapter four), his menace was offset by his madcap silliness – for example, he spent much of the play dressed as a badger. The real break with Bateman's style, as I will discuss later, came in the creation and staging of the national anthem in the production's final moments.

The play's premise of the search for a new national anthem was not much of a stretch: like flags, music in Northern Ireland is highly sectarian. Legally, Northern Ireland's national anthem is the same as the rest of the UK's: "God Save the Queen." Unsurprisingly, however, most Catholics view this as a sign of oppression rather than a call to patriotic feelings. Not only does it reinforce the connection between Northern Ireland and the UK, but the lyrics ask for protection for the British monarch. As I suggested in the discussion of the handshake between Martin McGuinness and Queen Elizabeth II in my introduction, the monarch has typically represented a kind of Britishness republicans particularly detest. In place of this song, most Catholics feel allegiance to "The Soldier's Song," the anthem of the Republic of Ireland. This song was written in 1907 as part of the Irish independence movement, and openly exhorts Irishmen to take up arms to defend Ireland from Britain. So it is not surprising that Protestants, who generally consider themselves British, would find the song offensive. There are many seemingly apolitical events – such as sporting matches (although there are many complicated relationships between sport and sectarian identity in Northern Ireland) – in

which it would be usual to play a national anthem. By playing either “God Save the Queen” or “The Soldier Song,” however, the organizers will automatically alienate, and in most cases keep away, half their potential audience.

Music is used as a marker of sectarian identity even beyond these two official songs. Both communities draw from rich folk traditions and have canons of songs they use to proclaim their identities. For Protestants, the song “The Sash My Father Wore” invokes the many parades conducted annually by the Orange Order. For Catholics, such songs evoke not only the bigotry of the organization but also the aggressive claiming of space that the parades enact. Many republican folk songs, in contrast, exhort violence against the Protestant state or offer hagiographies of those who have committed it. For example, “The Men Behind the Wire,” urges solidarity with those who have been interned by a repressive and violent British state, while “The Ballad of Joe McDonnell” is a lament for the IRA prisoner who died on hunger strike. Similarly, McKeown, Campbell and O’Hagan’s account of the hunger strike, *Nor Meekly Serve My Time*, takes its title from a song written in 1976 to protest the removal of political prisoner status. These songs evoke strong community identification for Catholics, while to Protestants, they understandably feel like a threat.

Although the potential value of a new, neutral anthem is thus clear, there was little in *National Anthem* to suggest that the circumstances around O’Hare and Miller’s endeavor were likely to create an effective one. Everything the audience saw of the festivities suggested that they were designed to ignore, rather than reflect, the ideas of Northern Ireland possessed by most of its citizens. From the moment the audience entered the Baby Grand, they were greeted by images of and references to a kitschy and superficial “new” Northern Ireland. The play took place in the room set aside for O’Hare and Miller’s work, but it had obviously been used for other purposes during the planning

of the celebration – it seemed to be a staging area for the merchandise that would accompany the event. In Stuart Marshall’s design, a series of upbeat posters leaned against the wall (some of them upside down) waiting to be taken to their proper places. These featured happy young adults standing in front of various Northern Irish landmarks (including the Giant’s Causeway and the Harland and Wolf cranes at from the Belfast shipyards). On these were printed the enthusiastic (if largely meaningless) slogan “Here’s Me!” This phrase also appeared on the multicolored t-shirts that sat on a rack stage right. A banner of pennants in red, white, blue, orange, and green (a combination of the colors in the Tricolour and the Union Flag) stretched across the space. Everything was glossy and professional, but it resembled a marketing campaign rather than a celebration designed to tap into deeply-rooted feelings. There seemed little hope that the narrative of unity imagined by those behind this event would resonate in the public imagination. To supplement this feeling, the pre-show music consisted of bland muzak-style renderings of Northern Irish songs including “The Sash My Father Wore,” (although this recording was never used or mentioned within the action of the play, descriptions of Miller’s music suggested that he might have arranged and performed it).

As the action continued and the audience learned more about the events planned, this suspicion that the proceedings would not deal with the tensions in Northern Ireland in any meaningful way was confirmed. The set also featured a human-sized badger costume (from which, the audience later discovered, Alan had been observing the other characters). Miller explained to O’Hare that this was the new national mascot, “Snookie.” The mascot was supposed to have been chosen by a vote among the people (which would, theoretically, have ensured that it was something that had meaning to many of them). However, when the giraffe won the poll, it was disqualified because it was not native, and the organizers selected the badger instead. This offered another

example of the organizers of the festivities attempting to craft an image of Northern Ireland with only nominal reference to the opinions of its people. It also suggested that residents of Northern Ireland had never taken the rebranding seriously.

The true scale of the revisionism of the rebranding only became clear, however, when Sean began to describe the event during which the new national anthem would be introduced:

SEAN. Well I'm sure it's wonderful. And you'll be done by five?

O'HARE. Ish.

SEAN. It'll have to be. Time to rehearse the orchestra, the choir, the choreography....

MILLER. Choreography?

SEAN. Yes we have six hundred Irish dancers....

MILLER. That would be Northern Irish dancers....

SEAN.just waiting to....

O'HARE. Like *Riverdance*?

MILLER. Lagan Dance.

SEAN. And a visual depiction of the history of Ireland....

MILLER. Northern Ireland.....

SEAN. Which will not airbrush out the tragic aspects of our history....

O'HARE. The hunger strikes....

MILLER. Shankhill bombing....

O'HARE. Bloody Sunday....

MILLER. Omagh...

O'HARE. The Plantation of Ulster....

MILLER. Build yourself a time machine!

SEAN. But we will primarily celebrate everything that is good and wonderful about the place we call home.⁴¹

The reference to Riverdance – one of the most commercialized constructions of Irish identity – was enough to suggest superficiality (particularly since, as Miller demonstrated by invoking the North’s Lagan river, those who identify as British rather than Irish would feel little or no connection to it). As Sean continued and Miller and O’Hare interjected the events that were important to their communities’ versions of history, it became clear that the event Sean was describing would either offend one side (and probably both) by pointing to the sufferings of the other community, or it would omit these historical events in an effort to offend no one, and by doing so render itself at the very least vapid and irrelevant to the people of Northern Ireland.

Even the selection of Gary Miller and Des O’Hare to create the anthem pointed to this superficiality – although both were originally from Belfast, neither had lived in the North for years. O’Hare had moved to the Republic (largely out of fear that he would be punished for accidentally betraying information that led to the arrest of an IRA volunteer), while Miller lived in luxury in Switzerland, thanks to the profits from his music (although the audience learned that he had squandered this money, and was now in dire financial straits). Neither had even visited Northern Ireland in years, and yet they crafted their personas to convey particular aspects of “Northern Irishness.” Miller had traded on the story of a massacre that happened when he was a young man touring Northern Ireland as part of a show band. His bus was attacked by republican paramilitaries, and he was the only survivor. Recounting the often-repeated story, Alan emphasized the brave light in which it cast Miller:

⁴¹ *National Anthem* 46-7.

Youse were lined up, five Ulster prods in Bandit Country, and youse were shot one by one till they came to you, and they told you to get on your knees, and you said no, you were gonna die standin up, and they said fair enough and pulled the trigger, but the gun jammed and you took off and they came after ya...but you survived, and said you were gonna dedicate your life to the memory of the fallen, and to music.....⁴²

Earlier, Alan had told Sean: “He doesn’t like to talk about it. Apart from his autobiography. And his documentary. And his fucking opera....”⁴³ Clearly, Miller had used this story, and the trauma it allegedly caused him, to market himself as a victim of the Troubles who had nobly overcome his past hardships and moved on to becoming an artist.

This crass marketing of trauma was even further undercut when the audience learned that Miller’s account of his own behavior was false.

ALAN. The truth! Sure, you were last in line, sure you were told to get on your knees, but what did you say, you wanted to die standing up? *Miller starts to nod....* Bollocks! You got on your knees and you cried like a baby, you begged for your life....

MILLER. No, I’m sure I....

ALAN. ...and the gun was put to your head, but it didn’t jam, did it?

MILLER. Yes it....

ALAN. You started singing. Singing. What did you sing?

MILLER. I don’t....

ALAN. singing Sinne Fianna Fáil, A tá fé gheall ag Éirinn,

O’HARE. The Solider’s Song....?

ALAN. Shut up! *Back to Miller.* The Soldier’s Song? In fucking Irish?

MILLER. I.....wanted to live.....

⁴² *National Anthem* 60.

⁴³ *National Anthem* 23.

O'HARE. How the hell did you know....?

ALAN. Shut up! *Back to Miller* How did you know it?

MILLER. We were in a showband! If we were in a protestant club we had to play the national anthem at the end of every show, if we were in a Republican area.....you had to adapt....so we sang the Irish....it didn't mean anything....

ALAN. And you sewed enough doubt that the others said, he could be one of us, let him live, let him crawl away.....crying and droolin and snortin....big hero, yeah? Big fucking hero....⁴⁴

It transpired that Alan knew all this because he was the paramilitary who failed to shoot Miller. Not only did the audience discover that the events on which Miller had based his persona involved him capitulating rather than being heroic (although one can hardly blame him for doing something that did save his life), but they also learned that he had little investment in the symbols of Northern Ireland. The two anthems were interchangeable to him, both subservient to his desire for money and later fame. Whether this is more or less admirable than the behavior of those who fight in the name of these anthems is debatable, but this moment showed that Miller's public persona had been very carefully crafted in order to make money and that any claim to speak from a place of sincere unionist commitment was disingenuous.

Des O'Hare did not have such a dramatic story, but he too had constructed his persona, in this case as that of an artist who spoke truth to power, who was dedicated to the republican movement but not afraid to critique it. O'Hare quickly revealed that he had stayed away from Northern Ireland due to a death sentence from the IRA, but he disguised the reason for it (he accidentally betrayed a member of the IRA to the police force, which set off a chain of events that would lead to Alan's conviction), Instead, O'Hare constructed a lie that placed him in a more favorable light: "A contrary opinion!

⁴⁴ *National Anthem* 60-61.

That's what I do! I'm a poet, the conscience of a nation."⁴⁵ The audience learned that he had written political poetry, but there seemed to be little to recommend it. In particular, one poem was titled "The Men Behind the Men Behind the Men Behind the Wire," a play on the republican folksong "The Men Behind the Wire." Although the audience was never treated to a recitation of this poem, the title suggested that it was a fairly unoriginal attempt to cash in on the feelings of patriotism that surround the original song. It was also possible that the poem tried to glorify those men who played only a small role in the struggle, and could thus be read as O'Hare attempting to write himself into republican history.

Like most of Bateman's work, the play was filled with cynicism and satire and none of the characters (with the possible exception of Sean, the play's smallest part)⁴⁶ were particularly admirable or likable. And yet, the performance ended on a deeply earnest note. After Sean had dispensed with Alan, Miller and O'Hare succeeded in writing a national anthem. While O'Hare's early attempts at the lyrics ("We have mountains, we have trees, / we have birds and bumble bees")⁴⁷ were patently awful, this version rejected the banal optimism that had characterized everything the audience had been shown of the celebration thus far:

With the blood of our fathers
Spilled upon ev'ry street
We're a country divided
And united by our grief
Though the fields may be burning

⁴⁵ *National Anthem* 28.

⁴⁶ As the play's only woman and its only person young enough to not remember the Troubles, Sean is represented as an outsider to the conflict between the three men. Her presence reinforces notions that the tensions behind the Troubles were only relevant to men of a certain generation. She remains a relatively minor character, and the play does not explore either the reasons for her political commitments nor their implications.

⁴⁷ *National Anthem* 25.

With the flames of the past
They're the fires o my homeland,
From the Causeway to Belfast.
Northern Ireland,
North of Ireland,
Northern Ireland,
North of Ireland,
We're Northern Ireland
So we are.⁴⁸

Rather than attempting to erase the Troubles from the story of Northern Ireland, the song suggested that they are a shared experience that can bring the people of the North together, even if they have strongly differing views on what the past means (the nation is both “divided / and united by our grief”). Even beyond these opening lines, however, the anthem implicitly addressed the continuing disagreements over national identity. As I outlined in this dissertation’s introduction, many republicans reject the term “Northern Ireland,” as they feel that it lends legitimacy to something they consider an artificial construct. It is not, they argue, a coherent state in any meaningful way. Instead they prefer the terms “the six counties,” which implicitly references the other 26 counties that make up the Republic of Ireland, or “the North of Ireland,” which defines the state as one region in the larger body of the island of Ireland. It would be highly unlikely for a unionist to use those terms, however; they prefer “Northern Ireland” or at times “Ulster.”⁴⁹ For both sides, the choice of terminology is inextricably linked to their ideas of national identity. As such, the inclusion of names for the region used by both communities in the new national anthem suggested that a state could be crafted in which they might both participate equally.

⁴⁸ Because the anthem was only completed shortly before the production opened, it was not included in the rehearsal script I received. These lyrics were provided to me over email by Eibhlin de Barra, company manager for Ransom Theatre. The song was written by Colin Bateman and Conor Mitchell.

⁴⁹ Although two of the counties that make up the historical province of Ulster are part of the Republic of Ireland.

The song's final lines ("We're Northern Ireland, / so we are") were in some ways a throwback to a joke from earlier in the play, but they also did important work in pointing out the commonalities between many people in the state. Shortly after the pair met, Miller (who has been living in Switzerland for most of his adult life) was reminded of the Northern Irish habit of punctuating statements with "so it is" and similar variations:

MILLER. I'd forgotten. So I had.

O'HARE. What are you.....?

MILLER. So we will. So I do. I've been away so long, so I have. I just think about the music, when sometimes the melody is in the words, so it is.

O'HARE. You taking the piss?

MILLER. No. So I'm not. I'd forgotten the way we add that to everything. So I had. Superfluous words.

O'HARE. Ah. Right. Getcha. Never really thought about it. So I haven't.

MILLER. Well maybe we should, so we should. The repetitive nature of it is good, so it is.

O'HARE. It's an unconscious thing, so it is.

MILLER. It's like we don't expect to be believed. I had lunch, so I did. I really did. I can afford lunch. I have it every day.

O'HARE. Ah, can you imagine it. If Neil Armstrong was from here? That's one small step for man, so it is.⁵⁰

The joking culminated in the pair writing a ditty, set to a tune highly reminiscent of "Head, Shoulder, Knees and Toes," whose main lyrics were "We're Northern Ireland, so we are (so we are)." On one level the reference to this earlier song lightened the final anthem by alluding to a more whimsical moment. It also served to remind the audience of a common ground between the two communities, however, since this is a decidedly

⁵⁰ *National Anthem* 14-15.

non-sectarian speech pattern. This memory of commonality (along with a few other shared memories of their Belfast childhoods) had helped break the ice between O'Hare and Miller and allowed them to work together more amicably. This could extend outwards, the song suggested, to other members of Northern Irish society including, presumably, much of the audience of *National Anthem*. Even if many Protestants feel more kinship to other British people than to Catholics, this moment reminded them that their histories are so closely interwoven that they share the same speech patterns.

The staging of this final moment was crafted to encourage audience members to take part in this new vision of Northern Ireland that could include both communities. Immediately after Sean's exit (having killed Alan and told Miller and O'Hare that they needed to finish the anthem), the audience saw a brief montage of the two men working (blackouts were used to mark the passage of time). After this, a woman who had not yet been onstage and was dressed as an usher walked out and invited everyone to "please be upstanding for the National Anthem."⁵¹ This was particularly striking since it was the first time anyone in the play had directly addressed the audience. The four actors then reappeared, stood downstage in a line and sang the anthem once. They had dropped their characters and adopted a serious demeanor. This was particularly striking in the case of Alan McKee, who played Alan, a character who certainly would not have joined in the song (and couldn't have, since he was dead). After this, the ushers wheeled out a sign with the lyrics of the new anthem printed on it, and invited the audience to join in song. Although all of the festivities surrounding the writing of the new anthem were fictional, the audience was invited to take on the sense of unity it provided and imaginatively enter into a world where such an anthem would be both possible and popular.

⁵¹ *National Anthem* 69.

It is worth mentioning that the audience reactions to this requested participation were very different on the two nights I attended the play. On the first, October 22, 2010, most of the audience participated, at least as far as standing. There were the usual few minutes after the request was made in which the audience tried to decide whether we were really supposed to follow it or not, but after a few people stood, most of the rest followed. As I glanced around the house, it seemed that most were making at least some attempt to appear to be singing. A majority of the people who participated in the song then remained standing for the curtain call. On the second night, October 26, 2010, however, those of us who stood were decidedly in the minority, and few seemed to be singing. As the play transitioned from the song to the curtain call, most of the standers sat, thereby decidedly not giving a standing ovation.

Although I cannot know why each individual audience member chose whether or not to stand, several likely factors present themselves. The quality of the performance does not seem to be one of them. Certainly, there was not a significant difference in the actors' performances over the two nights. As far as I could tell, the laughter throughout the majority of the performances was similar. Although this does not mean that the audiences were having the same experience throughout the "funny" part of the play, it does suggest a certain comparability. The most likely motivators for standing or not, then, seem likely to be the audiences relationship with the material and with each other. There is a dynamic that governs communal audience participation and response. Although some standing ovations occur immediately and in unison, this is not often the case. More often, a few brave or enthusiastic audience members will stand, and others will slowly follow them. The more people that stand, the more likely others will join. This seemed to be the pattern of behavior the first night I attended. Several young

women in the front row stood, and many shortly thereafter followed. The second night there was no such enthusiastic catalyst.

Regardless of the specific reasons behind these different responses, they dramatically shaped my experiences at the two performances. Although I enjoyed both, the first one became more emotionally transformative. The standing and joining in song became a physical embodiment of Jill Dolan's notion of "utopian performatives." Dolan defines these as "small but profound moments in which performance calls the attention of the audience in a way that lifts everyone slightly above the present, into a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like if every moment of our lives were as emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking, and intersubjectively intense."⁵² When the audience stood and sang, we became, if only temporarily, representatives of a united Northern Ireland. When the audience did not stand, however, the final national anthem became another failed symbol, in keeping, perhaps, with the other banal symbols that had littered the play.

CONCLUSION

None of the productions discussed in this chapter imagined a Northern Ireland that had entirely rejected the two communities model. Indeed, the one element that even hinted at this possibility was the much-derided rebranding scheme of *National Anthem*. A utopian vision of a completely non-sectarian "new" Northern Ireland may be appealing, but the productions reminded audiences that it is simply not possible in a state where people's daily lives and experiences are centered on their communities. Like the peace process itself, these plays instead focused on easing the tensions between communities in order to allow them to coexist more happily and to facilitate movement

⁵² Dolan 5.

and sharing between them. Rather than staging worlds in which narratives of unity already prevail, they staged worlds in the process of transitioning away from narratives of division. In order to do so, each production focused on similarities between the groups – the frantic excitement of planning a wedding, a shared history of social deprivation, or the communal trauma of thirty years of violence.

The productions also used the power of live theatre as a force for bringing people together to achieve these goals. In each case, audience members were encouraged to think about themselves as a community. In the case of the two site-specific shows – *The Wedding Community Play Project* and *Two Roads West* – this was largely achieved by moving audiences through unfamiliar space. The unusual structures of the pieces made them adventures that the audience members shared. This was particularly true in *Two Roads West*, since the audience only consisted of five people. It would be impossible for the group not to feel some sense of connection by the end. In *The Wedding Community Play Project*, nothing was staged during the trips between locations; this would have allowed time for a similar “getting to know you” process. In *National Anthem*, this creation of solidarity was attempted (although not always successfully achieved) with the final anthem. The play asked its viewers to physically and vocally pledge themselves to being part of the “new” Northern Ireland. In each of these cases, the audience-communities would presumably consist of both Catholics and Protestants. In this way, the unification the plays sought happened (if only temporarily) both between characters and between audience members.

As I noted at the beginning of this chapter, however, none of these productions dealt directly with the violent legacies of the Troubles. While references were certainly present, in the paramilitary histories of *The Wedding Community Play Project*’s Trevor Marshall and Danny McCleave and in the attack Garry Miller of *National Anthem* had

survived, they remained at the margins. Thus, the plays discussed in this chapter directly addressed Northern Ireland's history of sectarianism, but did little to explore how a reconciliation between the two communities would be affected by the violence of the Troubles. The next chapter discusses plays which took on these legacies of trauma and investigates the ways personal narratives have been in tension with both sectarian narratives and narratives of unity.

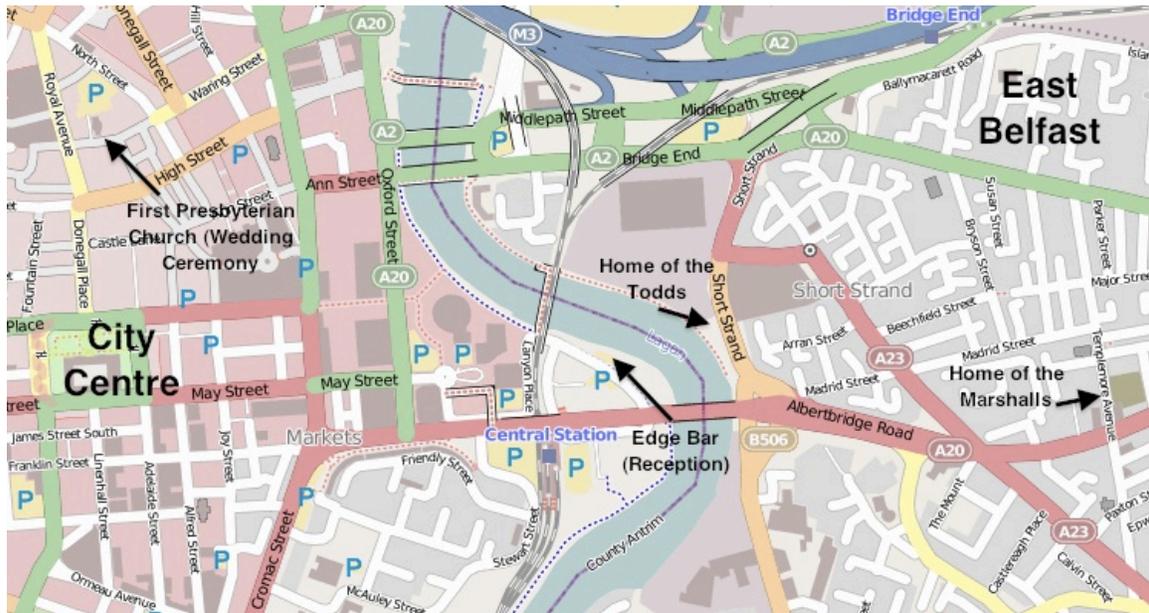


Illustration 8: *The Wedding Community Play Project* locations. Adapted from OpenStreetMap.com, © OpenStreetMap contributors, CC-BY-SA



Illustration 10: Vincent Higgins and Carol Moore in *Two Roads West*. Photograph by Aidan Monaghan. © Kabosh, www.kabosh.net. Used with Permission.



Illustration 11: International Wall, Falls Road, 2009. Photograph by the author.



Illustration 12: Divis Tower, Falls Road, 2011. Photograph by the author.

Chapter Three:

Danger in Silence, Danger in Speaking: Staging Contested Narratives of Trauma

We have much to learn from those who bore the brunt of the small war in the North of Ireland: how they suffered, how they survived and what they need now. Some would love to learn how to forget; others feel they cannot rest until they know the full truth about why the person they loved was murdered, who did it and who ordered them to do it. Some crave justice. Some have forgiven the killers; others want revenge. The generosity of spirit in the former amazes and impresses us, but the bitter and raging have as much right to be heard.

-- Susan McKay, *Bear in Mind These Dead*¹

Can't forget that. Can't forget? Then you have to remember.

-- Jimmy McAleavy, *Sign of the Whale*²

On March 28, 2011, BBC Northern Ireland broadcast a documentary about the Shankill Butchers, the loyalist gang that had kidnapped, tortured, mutilated, and murdered Catholics in the 1970s. The documentary was hosted by radio personality Stephen Nolan, himself a native of the Shankill, the iconic Protestant street featured in *Two Roads West*. A number of themes emerged as Nolan spoke with the relatives of victims, the residents of the Shankill, and the police officers who had investigated the murders. These included horror at the brutality of the crimes (even within the context of the Troubles); the pain still felt by relatives; the feeling that police would have caught the gang sooner if the victims had been Protestant; and indignation on the part of the people of the Shankill, who felt that the naming of the gang unfairly suggested they bore some

¹ McKay 11-12.

² *Sign of the Whale* 17.

responsibility for it. Although the documentary reflected events that had occurred more than thirty years before, it showed that trauma still lingers even for those whose lives had only been peripherally touched by the Butchers.

For the next two days, Nolan dedicated his call-in radio show (the most popular program on BBC Radio Ulster) to viewer responses to the documentary. At first most of the calls came from Catholics who recalled “near misses” with the Butchers (or people who might possibly have been the Butchers). This changed, however, when Nolan took a call from a man giving the name “Michael.” Michael expressed indignation at the (apparently) widely-accepted narrative that the Butchers were the most horrific terrorists in the history of Northern Ireland. He said:

It seems just to be all one way this morning. Just to raise a few points. The first point is that, you know, the Butchers, while they were doing these things, they were retaliating against the IRA and what they were doing. And people are going on about the nineteen gruesome murders, you know, what about the leading members of Sinn Féin, maybe, in the Belfast brigade and the Londonderry brigade, and how many people they killed, and how many bombs did they plant? [...] The then RUC, they were picking limbs up off the ground. Not just cut throats, but arms up, they were picking legs up, and that’s all forgotten about.³

As he spoke, Michael’s voice trembled with emotion; it was clear that the discussion of the Butchers had deeply upset him. For Michael, it seemed dishonest to speak about Protestant killers without also acknowledging Protestant victims. Although Michael did not seek to excuse the Butchers, he worried that even temporarily focusing on them would occlude a greater truth about the Troubles.

When put into context with the documentary and the rest of Nolan’s radio show, his words illustrate the challenges in dealing with the remaining trauma of the Troubles, particularly within narratives of unity. Public conversations about specific griefs and

³ *Best of Nolan Podcast*, March 29, 2011.

losses frequently devolve into debates around the relative innocence of the victims and deflection to discussions of other deaths. As a result, many citizens argue that the only way forward is to forget all the wrongs of the Troubles, or at least not to discuss them in the public sphere. Sociologists Patricia Lundy and Mark McGovern argue, however, that “the question as to whether or not to remember the past is a false one: for those individuals, families and communities directly or pervasively affected by the conflict, remembering is often not a choice. However, the role that personal traumatic narratives should play in the public sphere is a more difficult issue.”⁴ As Lundy and McGovern highlight, personal narratives can often come into conflict with sectarian narratives and the narratives of unity at the heart of the peace process. Michael, for example, could not hear the experiences of those traumatized by the Butchers without reading them in the context of his own sectarian narrative that Protestants had been unfairly branded the villains of the Troubles. Similarly, those who think the past should be forgotten (at least within the public sphere) fear that remembering these past actions will draw attention to the flaws in the narratives of unity. In both cases, critics frequently attempt to silence or undermine personal narratives that do not validate the critics’ preconceived narrative of the history of Northern Ireland.

This chapter examines three productions that rejected these modes of discourse and advocated for ways of directly addressing trauma that did not depend on competition between narratives of suffering or hierarchies of victims. Tinderbox Theatre’s *convictions* (2000), Martin Lynch’s *The Chronicles of Long Kesh* (2009), and Jimmy McLeavey’s *Sign of the Whale* (2010) all emphasized the complexity of the traumas left by the Troubles. In doing so, they sought to address many groups within the state, defined by

⁴ Lundy and McGovern 32.

both sectarian affiliation and personal experiences with violence. By exploring the many ways identity can be constructed in the wake of the Troubles, they hoped to avoid replicating the divisions that led to the conflict.

Each production acknowledged the important relationship between narratives of the Troubles and larger narratives about Northern Ireland's identity and future. As I outlined in my introduction, members of each community typically subscribe to a sectarian narrative that casts themselves as the oppressed and wronged party. They then see themselves as deserving of more consideration and resources than the other side. Importantly, in examining the history of Northern Ireland, these plays did not attempt to replace these sectarian narratives with a new narrative of the Troubles to which everyone could subscribe. As I outlined above, efforts to create such a narrative (such as the festivities at the heart of *National Anthem*) typically rely on the minimization or marginalization of narratives of individual trauma. This in turn alienates the traumatized from the narrative of unity.

In place of this search for an elusive single narrative of the Troubles that would encompass all stories, *convictions*, *The Chronicles of Long Kesh*, and *The Sign of the Whale* suggested that the impulse to synthesize the many experiences that make up the Troubles into one history is fundamentally flawed and destructive. These productions refused to privilege one sectarian narrative over another or to draw clear boundaries between victims and villains. This deliberately ambivalent approach to the idea of traumatic narratives was mirrored in the plays' structures. In each case, a fragmented narrative comprising many individual stories mirrored the play's complex and often internally contradictory views of Northern Irish history.

In presenting these fractured narratives, each production focused on a different aspect of the Troubles. Staged in a decommissioned courthouse, *convictions* brought

seven playwrights together to offer mediations on ideas of justice and passing judgment. By letting these stories stand independently without a connecting narrative, artistic director Paula McFetridge emphasized the complex nature of justice after a period of such widespread violence. *The Chronicles of Long Kesh*, in contrast, focused particularly on the active participants of the Troubles. By depicting the diverse experiences of paramilitary members (both loyalist and republican) and prison guards, the production worked to undermine the many stereotypes (both positive and negative) that surround these figures in the public imagination. Finally, *The Sign of the Whale* sent audiences back in time to 1977 and used magical realism to place them within an uncertain world where all were traumatized, regardless of direct contact with violence.

TRAUMA IN NORTHERN IRISH PUBLIC DISCOURSE

In the aftermath of the Troubles the importance and power of narratives of the past has become particularly evident. As I discussed in my introduction, each community adheres to a narrative in which it is the hero/victim, and the other the villain/aggressor. Sociologists John Nagle and Mary Clancy note the rhetorical power that comes with being understood as a victim:

The innocent and blameless victim merits compassion, assistance, and resources to help subdue their victimizer. Their inherent defenselessness means that any attack by the victim can be seen as legitimate self-defense. As such, groups who have taken up arms during the Troubles have done so by claiming they are victims defending their communities.⁵

This was evident, for example, in Michael's attempts to reframe the discussion of the Shankill Butchers; although he did not defend the brutality of the Butchers, he felt that the focus on these particular atrocities occluded the ways the Protestant community had been victimized during the Troubles. These efforts to refocus the debate on attacks

⁵ Clancy and Nagle 169.

committed by “the other side” are so prevalent in the public discourse of Northern Ireland that they have been dubbed “whataboutery” (as in “yes, but what about the horrible things that were done to us”).

How and whether to incorporate these personal narratives into the peace process’s larger narratives of unity has become one of the primary problems facing Northern Irish society. This is particularly complicated since, as Susan McKay outlines in the quotation that opened this chapter, individual victims have diverse needs and understandings of the relationships between their losses and larger political forces. One strategy implicit in much of the state’s public discourse has been that the trauma should simply be ignored. This depends on a narrative of the Troubles that is necessarily vague: many people suffered, but the wrongs to various sections of the population balance each other out, and there is therefore no reason to rehash individual events. When people bring up past crimes, others will inevitably tell them to move on and not to dwell in the past. In its most cynical form, this line of reasoning seems to be based on the logic that Northern Ireland only has to hang on until all the people who lived through the Troubles have died, when a healthy society will naturally emerge.

Michael’s testimony demonstrated the folly of this notion, however. The lasting effects of these traumas were evident in his delivery; his voice trembled as he spoke, and he sounded as if he might be overcome by emotion at any moment. When he spoke of the RUC picking up limbs from the street following a bombing, he was not simply trying to score a point against the IRA – he was speaking of something viscerally traumatic to him. This was particularly striking when Michael revealed his own connection (or lack thereof) to the Troubles. Near the end of their conversation, Nolan commented on Michael’s distress and asked him if he had lost someone during the Troubles. Michael responded that he had not, and observed that he was only 28, which would have made

him approximately fifteen when the GFA was signed (and would have meant he had not experienced the early and most bloody years of the Troubles, even as a child). He went on to explain that his knowledge came from having learned about history rather than through first hand experience. In spite of this apparent distance, the violence visited upon Protestant communities by the IRA was clearly still immediate and painful for him. Although he did not remember these events from having experienced them directly, he possessed a strong cultural memory, presumably handed down from previous generations in his community. In the foreword to the 1993 edition of *Nor Meekly Serve My Time*, republican civil rights activist Bernadette Devlin McAliskey voices a similar belief in trauma's power to transcend generations: "A good friend, the mother of a life sentence prisoner and a patriot in her own right, once said that we are all marked, indelibly marked by this struggle and our children would carry that mark for three generations."⁶ Although Michael and McAliskey subscribe to diametrically opposed narratives of the Troubles, they share the conviction that the trauma of these years will not fade as those who lived through them die.

Many commentators have addressed the damage done by excluding past traumas from public debate. In her book *Bear in Mind These Dead* (2008), McKay gathers the stories of a small number of victims of the Troubles in an effort to remind readers of the lost humanity represented by each death. She based the book primarily on interviews with victims' families, and as such was in a position not only to hear their grief, but also to hear how that grief had been affected by the changes in the state. She recalls: "I have heard people speak about thirty-year-old grief with the raw pain of one bereaved yesterday, and I have heard people say, sometimes bitterly, sometimes with resignation,

⁶ *Nor Meekly Serve My Time* xiii.

that nobody wants to hear about it.”⁷ This feeling that the world has moved on while those who lost loved ones cannot is prevalent throughout victimized communities in Northern Ireland.

This pain is frequently exacerbated by the fear that “drawing a line” separating the past and present frees the perpetrators of violence in a way that victims and their families can never share. This is most evident in the complicated emotions surrounding the election of several former Provisional IRA members to the Stormont Assembly. The most notable of these is of course Martin McGuinness, the IRA-leader-turned-Deputy-First-Minister I discussed in the beginning of my introduction. Although loyalist paramilitaries generally have not been active in elected politics,⁸ they do often hold prominent roles in their communities.⁹ This presence is understandable, given the widespread support the paramilitaries (particularly republicans) enjoyed from their own communities and the fact that the peace process could not have occurred without their active participation. Many victims of the Troubles feel, however, that the people who caused their suffering have now been rewarded with respectability and political power while the victims are ignored.

This is frequently a fair accusation, since the stability of the peace process largely depends on the continued participation of former terrorists. In June 2011, for example, the family of Mary Travers (a young Catholic woman killed by the IRA in 1984) spoke out because Mary Ann McArdle, who had been part of the gang that killed her, was appointed as a Special Advisor to the Culture Minister by Sinn Féin. The issue became

⁷ McKay 9.

⁸ One exception would be David Ervine, a former UVF member who served as leader of the Progressive Unionist Party between 2002 and his death in 2007. The PUP is a very small party, however, and although they maintain ties to the UVF, their candidates are rarely themselves former terrorists.

⁹ For example, following riots in East Belfast in June 2011, the primary people speaking on behalf of the affected Protestant communities were former members of loyalist organizations.

contentious when the Travers family demanded that McArdle resign or be removed from her position. In this moment, the family moved beyond publicly remembering Mary (a relatively uncomplicated political activity) and into a call for future action. Although many people called into radio shows and posted online in support of the Travers family's demands, many others felt that the request for McArdle's resignation could set a precedent that would derail the entire peace process. McArdle herself was a relatively small figure within Sinn Féin, but the logic that sought to exclude her from public office would also apply to many more prominent republicans.¹⁰

At the opposite end of the spectrum from the enforced forgetting that many asked of the Travers family, others believe that Northern Ireland should have some sort of truth recovery process (perhaps modeled on South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission) to investigate all the deaths of the Troubles.¹¹ Proponents seem to feel that once all the truths about the Troubles are known, there will no longer be a need for competing narratives because an objectively correct one will emerge. This seems unlikely, however; although such a process might reshape people's understandings of individual events, it would probably fail to shake their view that the violence committed against them was unjustified, while that committed on their behalf was merely defensive. There are also practical objections to a truth recovery process; many fear that such an endeavor would destabilize the peace process by bringing the past misdeeds of both paramilitaries and security force members into the spotlight. Many are also skeptical that

¹⁰ In order to limit the potential effects of their critique of McArdle, many who agreed with the Travers family suggested that former criminals could be elected to office, but should not be appointed. They argued that, in the latter case, the person in question held no public mandate.

¹¹ The only organization even resembling such a process is the police service's "Historical Enquiries Team" (HET), which seeks to solve the many open cases left from the Troubles. This is a small group, however, and they are making very slow progress through the cases that have been brought to them. Further, since they are a part of the police force, many republicans are skeptical of their ability to address issues of collusion between loyalist paramilitaries and the security forces.

such a commission could actually produce unbiased and comprehensive findings or fear that the outcome would not be worth the monetary cost.¹² At present, there seems to be little political will to enact such a process.

As a midway point between complete silence and complete investigation, many have proposed ways of commemorating the dead and traumatized more symbolically. One such effort was proposed by the ill-fated Consultative Group on the Past, commonly known as “Eames-Bradley” after its chairs. This group was established in 2007 in order to: “find a way forward out of the shadows of the past.”¹³ They released a detailed report in January 2009 that included a number of suggestions for ways that past trauma could be addressed and hopefully healed. One particular recommendation, leaked before the release, caused massive outrage. As a result, the specifics of the rest of the report were never seriously discussed. The report suggested that the families of those who died as a result of the Troubles should receive a payment of £12,000 as a recognition of their suffering. This would go to all the bereaved families, whether the person they lost was a civilian, a member of the security forces, or even a paramilitary. When this was leaked, there was a popular outcry, with most people shocked by the possibility that a terrorist accidentally caught in his own bomb would receive the same recognition as his “innocent” victims (those who could not be shown to have taken part in a paramilitary organization).¹⁴ This points to the power of the “victim identity” Nagle and Clancy

¹² David Park’s novel *The Truth Commissioner* (2008) uses a fictional truth recovery process to express this skepticism; a nascent tribunal is corrupted when an investigation into the death of a young Catholic police informant threatens to expose the involvement of a man who is now a minister in the Sinn Féin government. To prevent the upset to the peace process that such a revelation might provoke, the powers-that-be in Northern Ireland exert pressure on all aspects of the tribunal so that the truth won’t come out. The result is a fundamentally corrupt and meaningless tribunal.

¹³ *Report of the Consultative Group on the Past* 14.

¹⁴ While some objected to the idea that money might somehow compensate them for their losses, most seemed to primarily reject the idea that terrorists would be put in the same categories as the apparently innocent victims.

observed: to allow paramilitaries to claim this mantle would suggest that there was at least some legitimacy to their actions.

To combat these complaints, the group tried to frame the payment in the context of universal suffering: each family that lost someone grieved equally, regardless of the circumstances of that death, they argued. This attempt to move the identity of the victim from the person who had died to their grieving family was largely unsuccessful, however. Many who objected responded by observing that family members might have known about and even encouraged the dead person's paramilitary activities. Although this recommendation did not advocate a complete erasure of the past (since it explicitly offered recognition to those who had lost loved ones), it did depend on a narrative that all suffering was equal.¹⁵

Finally, although such nuances tend to be lost in these public debates, it is important to remember that issues of trauma are more complicated than the binary of "nationalist versus unionist" suggests. Both communities include perpetrators and victims of violence; indeed, many individuals fall into both categories. Similarly, the web of trauma is far more complex than the model of two competing communities suggests: some Catholics (including Mary Travers) were killed by Catholics and some Protestants were killed by Protestants. People on both sides of the sectarian divide were killed by members of government security forces. Thus, victims' individual experiences of violence may work against their sectarian affiliation to shape the ways they assign blame and sympathy within the larger conflict.

¹⁵ It is important to note that the entire document relied on a much more nuanced narrative of the Troubles than this one suggestion implies. The 190-page report also includes provisions for recovering information about the unsolved crimes of the Troubles, creating memorials, and addressing the particular sufferings of young people. The fact that it was largely dismissed because of this one recommendation represents a lost opportunity for Northern Ireland.

CONVICTIONS AND FRACTURED NARRATIVES OF JUSTICE

Tinderbox Theatre Company's site-specific play *convictions* highlighted the complicated and frequently conflicted nature of the narratives that surround the Troubles. Staged in November 2000, only two and a half years after the signing of the GFA, the play spoke to a society still in the early stages of recovering from violence. Efforts to overcome this trauma and "move forward" were hindered by fundamental disagreement over why the Troubles had happened and what they had meant. Rather than seeking to resolve these conflicts and find the elusive universal narrative, *convictions* embraced and indeed showcased the fractured nature of the Northern Irish psyche. Further, instead of focusing on the dominant narratives of the two communities, the production pointed to the ways that other identity markers, including class, gender, occupation, and status as a victim or perpetrator of violence shape each person's understanding of the Troubles. Thus, rather than framing the problem as "Catholics versus Protestants," the production opened possibilities for more nuanced understandings of the state's conflicted history. To do this, the play concentrated on one of the most contentious subjects in the state's past: the justice system.

Convictions was staged at the Crumlin Road Courthouse as part of the 2000 Belfast Festival (as part of which *The Wedding Community Play* had been produced the previous year). It was an ambitious project, both thematically and structurally, and throughout artistic director Paula McFetridge (who would go on to be the artistic director of Kabosh, where she would direct *Two Roads West*, discussed in the previous chapter) strove to highlight the many different relationships the people of Northern Ireland felt with the space. The performance consisted of seven short plays by prominent Northern

Irish playwrights, each staged in a different room. Each offered a different take on the role the state and the building had played in Belfast's history.¹⁶

The Crumlin Road Courthouse (colloquially referred to as "the Crum") was closed in 1998, but it still enjoys an iconic and divisive position in the history of Northern Ireland. Built in 1850, it saw the trials of the Shankill Butchers in 1977 and 1978 and was the location of the notorious jury-free Diplock trials that, according to journalist David McKittrick's estimations, tried more than 10,000 people and gave a total of more than a quarter of a million years in jail sentences. The courthouse was closed and decommissioned in 1998, and thus its life seemed to end with the Troubles. As is frequently the case in Northern Ireland, unionists and nationalists hold different views of the justice system the building represents; most unionists feel that it protected the victims of the Troubles, while most nationalists feel it perpetuated inequality and created more victims.

Convictions acknowledged these two contradictory narratives of the justice system but also worked to unsettle and undermine them. McFetridge used the divisive nature of the space to bring forward a multitude of counternarratives that emphasized the ways individuals' views on the justice system were shaped by factors beyond their sectarian affiliation. Instead of trying to force her writers to agree on one narrative of the space, she encouraged them to work independently and to present their own reflections on the ideas of justice and passing judgment. She also requested that the plays look forward to Northern Ireland's future rather than simply rehashing past debates. Together, the short plays created a complex, often contradictory view of the ways the legacies of

¹⁶ My reading of this play is based on an archival recording provided by McFetridge, as well as the production's program (which included the script and supplementary essays), conversations with McFetridge, and performance reviews.

the Troubles and the justice system in Northern Ireland would continue to affect the state's future.

The audience's first movements at *convictions* were structured to create the feeling that they were entering an operational courthouse rather than a theatrical space. As they arrived, the audience gathered not in the courthouse itself but in an adjacent building. Here, ushers took their tickets and divided them into the four groups that would determine the order in which they saw the plays (although some would be seen by the entire audience together). When it was time for the performance to begin, the audience was led from this room into the Crum itself. The audience briefly gathered in the main hall, where they heard recordings of interviews with people whose lives had been shaped by the Crum. This meant that the performance began as the audience entered the courthouse. If the "lobby" where they gathered before the show had been inside the Crum itself rather than adjacent to it, the audience would have had time to inspect the space casually and become familiar with it. Instead, because every moment in the space was part of the performance, the Crum retained its mystique and aura of authority. After their brief time in the main hall, the entire audience moved into a courtroom for the evening's first play, which offered a model for how audiences might understand the production.

This piece, Marie Jones's "Court No 2," introduced the audience to the space with a conflict drawn primarily from the two sectarian narratives of the Troubles. The play followed a planning meeting among three people responsible for turning the Crum into a heritage center whose primary audience would be school children. The exhibit in this courtroom would reenact the murder trial of Tom McConville (a figure Jones invented, but who was real within the world of the play), but it quickly became apparent that the three had different ideas about what this trial had actually meant. Claire (Maria

Connolly), the designer, followed a traditional unionist narrative. She wanted to depict McConville as evil and the judge as the embodiment of impartial justice. She described the dummies that would eventually be installed to represent these characters in similarly simplistic terms. For example, she referred to: “The criminal, leering, unrepentant, showing no remorse, mad staring eyes.”¹⁷

In contrast, the composer Fabian (Conor Grimes) offered a typical nationalist narrative in which McConville was the noble victim of a corrupt system, embodied by the judge. Fabian’s vision was no more nuanced than Claire’s; it maintained a binary of good and evil, merely reversing it. His description of the judge was as caricatured as Claire’s description of the prisoner: the judge would be “old decrepit, his reasoning faculty gone years ago... tired bitter eyes, piercing any victim that comes before him... face knarled, twisted, contorted.”¹⁸ Indeed, the symmetry between Claire and Fabian’s visions could be seen throughout their descriptions of the exhibit. As the judge’s voice announced a death sentence for the prisoner, each imagined the crowd yelling “murderer!” – but in Claire’s mind, this cry would be directed at the prisoner, and in Fabian’s it would be directed at the judge.

Karen (Abigail McGibbon), who was ultimately responsible for the project, was dismayed by both these visions. She had hoped for neutrality, and although this might seem virtuous, the production did not position her as the “good guy” of the piece. Karen did not walk through her ideal vision of the exhibit in the detailed way Claire and Fabian did, but what she did say suggested that an exhibit designed by her would largely ignore the context that made the Crum actually matter. For example, she argues that the dummies would not have any distinct appearance: “they will have the look of dummies...

¹⁷ *convictions* 9.

¹⁸ *convictions* 10.

bland, like, no particular look.”¹⁹ This seems to be both a practical fact (presumably the team is working with a limited budget) and her way of avoiding making clear statements. This cautious method of approaching potentially fraught subjects has become familiar in Northern Ireland since the peace process – exhibits, documents, and symbols which are intended to have cross-community appeal are frequently stripped of anything that might appear to favor one side (we might think of the proposed celebrations in *National Anthem*, discussed in the previous chapter).²⁰

With its explicit reiteration of over-determined narratives, “Court No. 2” was the least nuanced of the seven plays, but it served an important function in introducing audiences to the spirit and themes of *convictions*. As the play ended, Fabian was left onstage with only the sound man (Alan McKee). Here, he displayed a kind of thoughtful, reflective nature he had previously lacked: “I just wanted to finish up by saying when the children return to class a very lively debate will ensue... isn’t that what it’s about... discussion... so, okay, I imposed something on the piece, well at least they have something to argue about.”²¹ In purely dramaturgical terms, this shift in character seemed largely unmotivated, and one might question Jones’s decision to include it. Taken within the context of the entire production, however, it positioned the characters’ debate as a starting point for the many perspectives that would be offered. For the people of Belfast, particularly in 2000, the meaning of the Crum and the government it represented would have been deeply interwoven with their own sense of their relationship to the state. For these audiences, then, Fabian’s line would ideally have acted as an invitation to experience the diversity of opinions presented fully and to understand them

¹⁹ *convictions* 9.

²⁰ Another example is the Ulster Museum, whose relatively new exhibit on the Troubles contains mainly factual text and few artifacts or visual references.

²¹ *convictions* 12.

as part of a larger ongoing conversation between the playwrights as a group as well as between the plays and the audiences.

Once “Court No 2” ended, the four audience groups were led to different locations to see different plays. They saw two plays individually, then the groups joined together to see Owen McCafferty’s “Court No 1,” in which the ghost of a victim of the Troubles was confined to a purgatorial space because his killers remained unidentified and unprosecuted. The audience then split into groups again to view two more plays, finally regrouping for Martin Lynch’s “Main Hall,” which also featured a ghost. In this case, however, he was a man who had been hanged at the Crumlin Gaol across the road from the courthouse for murdering his wife. He berated the audience for their (presumed) middle-class identity and argued that the essential inequality of the justice system lay in its treatment of class rather than sectarian divisions.

The four plays that the groups saw separately took on a similarly wide range of themes. Nicola McCartney’s “Jury Room” staged a heated exchange between a young woman and an older man as they prepared to deliberate on the case they had just heard. “Male Toilets,” by Daragh Carville, depicted a conversation between two newspaper workers – one a photographer and one a “word man” – who complained that the end of the Troubles would decrease international interest in Northern Ireland and thereby reduce their income. In Damian Gorman’s “Judge’s Room,” a judge who had spent the past thirty years in Canada explained his plan to convert the Crum into an opera house and in doing so demonstrated that he had no real sense of the lived experiences or lingering trauma of the Troubles. Finally, Gary Mitchell’s “Holding Room” consisted of a dialogue between a jaded guard and a young prisoner full of bravado and addressed the trauma the justice system created for both the prisoners and those who imprisoned them.

There was no unifying voice among the seven scripts; unsurprisingly, they were stylistically very different. “Male Toilets” and “Judge’s Room” were darkly satirical, demonstrating the kind of cynical humor that many people of Northern Ireland credit with helping them cope with the day-to-day violence of the Troubles (the kind of humor evident in *National Anthem*). Both Jones and McCartney rooted their plays in realism, but Jones’ “Court No. 2” was didactic and political while McCartney’s “Jury Room” made no reference to either Northern Irish politics or the Troubles. Lynch’s “Main Hall” and McCafferty’s “Court No. 1” both depicted ghosts, but Lynch offered an eloquent and passionate monologue directed at the audience while McCafferty presented a stilted conversation decidedly in the style of Samuel Beckett.

In addition to these stylistic differences, there was no unifying story between the scripts. Indeed, on the most literal level, the seven plays could not have existed in the same universe. In “Jury Room” and “Holding Room” the Crum was still operational, while it had already closed in “Court No. 2,” “Male Toilets,” “Judge’s Room,” and “Main Hall.” Further, each of these latter four plays presented a different (and mutually exclusive) story about what was to be done with the space – in “Court No 2,” it was to become an educational center, while in “Judge’s Room” it was being transformed into an opera house. Through this structural fragmentation, the creative team prevented audiences from finding one overarching story about the Crum. Each play came to represent a possibility, not a certainty; a point of view, not an objective truth.

Although there is not space to analyze each play in detail, a few deserve special comment. McCafferty’s “Court no 1” directly addressed the abandonment felt by many victims of the Troubles. In addition to the pain they feel at losing a family member, many relatives are further traumatized by not knowing what happened to their loved ones or why they had been targeted. This is particularly true in the case of the “disappeared,”

those who were killed and secretly buried by republicans. Even families who have a body and know which organization had killed their loved one, however, frequently do not know who precisely been responsible. The release of the prisoners following the GFA left many of them feeling that their dead relatives had been abandoned in favor of political expediency.

This feeling of abandonment filled “Court No. 1.” The only onstage character was an unnamed victim for whom the courtroom appeared to be a kind of limbo. In James Kerr’s staging of the play, the Victim (Lalor Roddy) sat on the benches in the court (far from the center of the room) and theatrical lighting was not initially used to draw attention to him. Thus, he appeared to be truly isolated and forgotten even by the lighting designer – his slumped shoulders suggesting that he had given up. The other character, the Administrator (Stella McCusker), was only a voice, although her presence was indicated by a single light bulb turning on at the center of the room. She was the voice of bureaucracy – trying to keep the conversation as short as possible so she could update the Victim on the current status of his case in the land of the living and then move on. The Victim, however, wanted to connect with her in some meaningful way. While she forced him to repeat the specific details of his life and death (to verify his identity), he attempted to engage her in a banal conversation about the scoring of darts and snooker. Having confirmed his identity, she brusquely informed him: “i have to go / your situation remains unchanged / no person has been convicted of the crime against you.”²² With this declaration, the light went out. The victim remained alone, brokenly repeating his theories about scoring in darts and snooker. In this way, the play staged the experience of many victims – not only do they feel abandoned, but they feel they have not fulfilled a

²² *convictions* 23. The lack of capitalization and punctuation is typical of McCafferty’s style.

duty to their loved ones. Many, regardless of their stated views on the afterlife, feel that their loved ones cannot be peaceful (metaphorically if not literally), until the truth about their deaths is known.

Gorman's "Judge's Room" approached this lingering trauma differently, by directly staging the opposition between the experiences of victims and official narratives that gloss over the past. In this play a former judge (J.J. Murphy) who had been protected from the impact of the Troubles both by his class and the fact that he spent most of the conflict living in Canada described his plan to tell the story of the Troubles "in the only manner in which it can be told, in the only art form big enough – Opera"²³ (Illustration 13). The play cast the audience as potential funders, and they were treated to a sales pitch from the judge. The vision he presented was full of spectacle but displayed little understanding of or interest in the actual effects of the Troubles – the primary artists involved in the opera were to be imported from other countries, and in a particularly macabre moment, he revealed that his plan for "community involvement" was to use members of the disabled community as a kind of set dressing. He assured his potential funders that "thirty of their number will be on stage at all times – twisted, mute, representing us all. They will be the literal foundation of this spectacular. What more could be asked of us?"²⁴ The answer to his rhetorical question was of course that a great deal more could be expected – starting with not fetishizing the disabled and allowing them to tell their own stories.²⁵

²³ *convictions* 39. Gorman relied on popular conceptions about the irrelevance of opera to modern life. Particularly, he allowed the judge to reinforce the notion that opera is primarily for the wealthy, a group that was largely shielded from the worst of the Troubles.

²⁴ *convictions* 41.

²⁵ The issue of disability takes on a particular significance in Northern Ireland, since many (although of course not all) disabilities arise directly from the violence of the Troubles.

Once Gorman had established the Judge's pompous disregard for others, he introduced the play's second character, Maura (Abigail McGibbon). Maura's father had been killed during the Troubles, and the play showed the ways that her story threatened the simplistic narrative the Judge had created. It seemed clear that, like the disabled community, she was meant to be a prop in the Judge's presentation. First he called her by the wrong name (Myra), and then he was visibly impatient with her desire to speak. He instructed her to keep her remarks brief, although he had shown no such inclination himself. She read from a statement about the death of her father and his killers' attempts to reconcile with her. "Seventeen years ago, almost to the day, my father was murdered by someone who thought his death was a good thing. He felt that my father's murder added up to something; was a contribution to some cause. Though it is hard for me to accept, I know that he felt that sincerely."²⁶ She explained that she had decided not to meet with the killer because it would have been too painful and read the poetic letter she had written him instead:

You say that you were involved – that we all were – in something bigger. That you made sacrifices. Yes, but you killed. And in killing you became smaller than the smallest, greyest rabbit of a man. There is a blood-wet stain running through you, all through the fabric of your life. You can never dry it out. You can talk all you like about Causes – you can talk up a storm, but don't think for one minute that your breath can ever dry out what soaks you: that you murdered, ended somebody else's world. Broke the glass of life. Deliberately. Someday I might meet you. But not today. I am not ready.²⁷

For the Judge, the Troubles were over and could be neatly packaged into a pre-existing formula; his opera seemed to mimic Wagner in unimaginative ways – he had even given it a German name, "Der NordIrischeKriegZyklus," or "The Ulster War Cycle." For Maura, the pain was still present and the story was ongoing.

²⁶ *convictions* 41.

²⁷ *convictions* 42.

The final subversion of the Judge's narrative of the Troubles came when Maura implicitly revealed the identity of her father's killer. The judge (and presumably much of the audience) had assumed that the killer was a member of a paramilitary organization. It became clear that this was not the case, however, as the Judge tried to move on from the raw emotion of Maura's story and return the meeting to his own agenda. He made the superficially sympathetic remark that "we do appreciate what you've suffered at the hands of terrorists," to which she responded, "It wasn't terrorists, Your Honour."²⁸ He cut her off before she could explicitly reveal the identities of those who did kill her father, but there was little need for her to continue. To anyone familiar with the violence in Northern Ireland, Maura's statement that her father wasn't killed by terrorists would have had one clear meaning: he was killed by agents of the state (probably the RUC or the British Army). This was clearly incompatible with the Judge's vision of the Troubles, in which the state bore no culpability for the violence. Hearing Maura's story at all made him nervous, lest her real emotion should bring down the mood of his elegant soiree. There was simply no place in his narrative for victims who would not fall into line and do as they are told.

Although class was referenced throughout *convictions* and was clearly present in "Judge's Room," it became most important in the final play, Lynch's "Main Hall." In this piece, the ghost of a man who was hanged for murdering his wife argued that the justice system worked against working-class people from both sectarian communities. *Convictions* both began and ended with didactic plays; in the case of "Main Hall," this didacticism was literal – the play's one character berated the audience for being a theatre audience. In "Judge's Room," the only other play in which they had been acknowledged,

²⁸ *convictions* 42.

the audience had the comfort of being cast in the roles of wealthy potential donors; in “Main Hall,” this pretense was stripped away and each audience member was merely herself. The Ghost addressed this audience aggressively, drawing attention to the (presumed) difference between their class and his:

Okay, it was good of you to come. Y’wait until the place closes down and all the pain and heartbreak has come and gone, before you set foot in the place. Yes, then you turn up, then you turn up, then you turn up, y’shower a bastards. And, behave like a pile of voyeuristic, theatre-goin’, fun-seeking, hedonistic, facile assholes.²⁹

In Jimmy Fay’s staging of the piece, the Ghost moved from the scaffolding around the main hall’s balcony down to the audience’s level as he berated them. He strode through the group, delivering lines directly to individual audience members:

I’ll tell you what I want to know. Do you know what I want to know? Here’s what I want to know. How come the jails were always filled with the poor people, the poor people, the working man, the labourin’ man, the poor uneducated, stupid, no hopin’, no mouth, no hopin’, tongueless, ordinary, stupid, bastard workin’ man, eh? [...] I mean. Am I only imaginin’ this? Maybe I am. Maybe there was a Courthouse and a Gaol hidden in some other part of Belfast that dealt with all the money people that did wrong, but I just never heard of it.³⁰

Here, the Ghost introduced a new binary – not Catholic versus Protestant, but working class versus wealthy. He later spoke of the seventeen men who were hanged in the Crumlin Road Gaol across the street from the Courthouse and stressed that they were there for both political and non-political crimes. Northern Ireland has become so defined by the idea of a sectarian conflict, the play suggested, that injustices committed along other lines have been ignored.

The site-specific nature of *convictions* ensured that every moment would be part of the performance, whether or not any actors were present. Thus, McFetridge and her

²⁹ *convictions* 15.

³⁰ *convictions* 16.

collaborators included yet another set of ideas about the space through the use of art and music along the paths between the rooms. In particular, Amanda Montgomery's art installations invoked the experiences of those who had worked in the building. As part of the process of creating *convictions*, the artistic team had interviewed many people who had been associated with the Crum and particularly focused those who had worked there. These included those in prominent jobs like judges and lawyers, but also the working-class employees like cleaners and kitchen staff who almost invisibly allowed the court to function. These interviews were explicitly depicted in the play – some were played as the groups assembled in the main hall prior to seeing “Court No 2,” while others were printed in the program. They were conceived more abstractly in the installations. For example, an early interviewee told McFetridge that female shorthand writers were required to wear hats in court, and were given an income tax allowance to cover the cost. As he recalled: “It was like Ascot with them trying to outdo each other, and some of them had these big flowing things.”³¹ Thus, the female workers transformed the rules of the court into an opportunity to express their individuality and interact with each other (albeit in a competitive and traditionally gendered way).

In order to depict this story, Montgomery suspended a number of hats at just above head-level in a corridor audiences used after seeing the gritty and bleak “Holding Rooms.” This somewhat whimsical exhibit helped audiences transition from one play to another, but more importantly it evoked the ghosts of the people who had passed through these corridors, and did so in arguably a more visceral way than the plays themselves. In the program, Montgomery wrote:

Though the building has been vacated the human presence still remains. There are clues and reminders in the human debris sprinkled everywhere in the

³¹ *convictions* 52.

Courthouse: rooms full of files, anonymous keys strewn haphazardly around and messages from those in the holding cells engraved into the metal doors and walls. Through my work, I have attempted to revive this essence.³²

If the plays were intended to be forward-looking, the installations allowed audiences to dwell entirely in the past and to remember the sheer volume and diversity of people who had been through the space since its 1850 construction.

The overall feeling of *convictions* was one of instability and irresolution. The individual plays spoke of things left undone, and particularly of traumas that had not been addressed. This was particularly evident in the two plays about ghosts – both evoked the typical narrative that those who haunt do so because of some unfinished business. These instabilities were present elsewhere, however – in Maura’s refusal to forgive her father’s killers; in Claire, Fabian, and Karen’s ability find three different meanings in the same court transcript; and particularly in the anxiety so many of the plays expressed about what role the space of the Crum should play in the ‘new’ Belfast. As a whole, the production argued against a push for easy resolution. The use of the Crum was an essential part of this goal, and the production’s text was inextricably linked to this use of space. As Jen Harvie argues:

By entering, occupying, and installing work in the Courthouse, *convictions* challenged the site’s dominant position in the social memory of Belfast, as well as the physical, intellectual, and emotional topography of the city. It undermined the Courthouse’s assumption of authority by challenging the obedience the building enforced in Belfast’s citizens and it destabilised the extraordinary power assumed by the Courthouse by filling it with the ordinary and everyday and acknowledging its banal unpleasantness.³³

By evoking and then rejecting the building’s authority, the production suggested that, even if a singular narrative of the Troubles that would be acceptable to all existed, we were and still are far from finding it. It also reminded audiences that no such narrative

³² *convictions* 13.

³³ Harvie 60.

would truly unite the state if it did not address the diversity of experiences and relationships people had with the Troubles. Even more than this, the multivocal structure of the play suggested that the desire to find an inclusive story of the Troubles is inherently flawed and perhaps even dangerous. More truth may be found in many contradictory stories than in a single cohesive narrative.

THE CHRONICLES OF LONG KESH AND NARRATIVES OF GUILT

While *convictions* emphasized the endless ways narratives of victimhood and trauma might be constructed in Northern Ireland, *The Chronicles of Long Kesh* sought to complicate simplistic narratives about those who actively engaged in the violence of the Troubles. That republican and loyalist paramilitaries put down their arms and worked together for peace in Northern Ireland was in many ways remarkable. The peace processes demanded that each side compromise on their demands in real and meaningful ways, and this should not be underestimated. In spite of this apparent change of spirit, however, the paramilitaries remain the same people who caused most of the deaths of the Troubles. It is hardly surprising, then, that their position within public life in Northern Ireland remains contested. As the controversy over Mary Ann McArdle's appointment as a special advisor demonstrates, many feel that former paramilitaries have got off "scot free" for their actions. This debate occurs most frequently around the elected officials of Sinn Féin who were convicted of terrorist activities – many unionists struggle with their feelings towards such politicians. On the one hand, the democratic logic of the GFA demands that Protestants recognize the legitimacy conferred on these people by the very fact of being elected, regardless of their histories. At the same time, many Protestants find it difficult, if not impossible, to view Sinn Féin's current movements towards cooperation as sincere, given their earlier commitment to violence.

The truism that one person's terrorist is another's freedom fighter is clearly displayed in the rhetoric surrounding former paramilitaries in Northern Ireland. Since both Protestant and Catholic communities see themselves as the primary victims of the Troubles, they tend to view those who attacked them as villains and those who attacked others as heroes defending them. Although the specific histories of individual former paramilitaries of course influence the narratives surrounding them, these tend to be narratives of good and evil with little nuance. Even people who don't condone the violence done by "their side" tend to place the blame for it on the terrorists of the other community, claiming they drove basically good people to commit immoral actions. This tactic is evident in Michael's reaction to the Shankill Butchers documentary (although he never goes so far as to call the Butchers "basically good").

The agents of the state during the Troubles provoke similar reactions, as we saw with the treatment of the justice system in *convictions*. While many saw them as protectors, others viewed them as cruel and morally bankrupt. Although this latter perspective was more likely to be endorsed by nationalists, it is important to remember that the state forces also targeted loyalist paramilitaries (although not always with the same diligence they showed towards republicans). As such, many loyalists saw the predominantly Protestant security forces as traitors to their own people. Overall, paramilitary organizations and the security forces were often treated as homogeneous groups, and the nuances of individual personalities or experiences were discarded.

Martin Lynch's *The Chronicles of Long Kesh* attempted to destabilize this iconicity. Rather than portraying the paramilitaries and members of the security forces as either villains or victims for whom violence was the only defense, the production presented them as deeply flawed but still fundamentally sympathetic characters. Covering nearly thirty years, the play followed the experiences of both republican and

loyalist paramilitary members who were imprisoned in the iconic Long Kesh prison (officially “The Maze,” and also colloquially referred to as the “H Blocks”). Freddie, a prison guard whose life had also been shaped by the prison, narrated and offered commentary on the building and its inmates. The play offset scenes of pain and violence with moments of humor and camaraderie. Most strikingly, the prisoners frequently broke into musical numbers, singing songs ranging from Motown to Bob Dylan. Such moments maintained a quick pace and kept the play from becoming maudlin.

In addition to destabilizing narratives of paramilitaries, the play also had to contend with narratives of the space. Long Kesh prison was built in 1971 and quickly became one of the most iconic spaces of the Troubles. Unlike the Crum, which already had a long history by the 1970s, Long Kesh was defined entirely by the Troubles. It was built to hold the large numbers of prisoners interned without trial in the early 1970s. Although these included some suspected of loyalist activity, the early prisoners were drawn primarily from republicans – of the nearly 350 people arrested on the first day of internment in 1971, none were loyalists. Thus, for republicans Long Kesh immediately became emblematic of the state’s civil rights abuses, both because the right to trial was suspended and because the policy was not evenly enforced. The building again took the headlines in 1976, when republican prisoners began the “blanket” protest in an effort to reclaim political prisoner status. They refused to wear prison uniforms, and instead wrapped themselves in their blankets. This elevated to the “dirty protest” in 1978, in which prisoners refused to wash or to “slop out” (empty their toilets in a sanitary way). This in turn led to the Hunger strike of 1981, in which ten men died. These events gripped the nation (and indeed the world), again making Long Kesh an iconic and horrific space in the public imagination. Long Kesh closed in 2000, and there has since

been much debate about what should happen to the space – some want it turned into a museum, while others want it to be entirely destroyed.

Chronicles of Long Kesh was very popular with both critics and audiences. Lynch's Green Shoots Productions premiered the play in 2009, under the direction of Lynch and Lisa May. This first production took place in Belfast's Waterfront Hall, a venue built in 1997. Guides on bus tours of the city frequently point to it as emblematic of the rebirth of Belfast following the peace process. This association may have encouraged the first audiences to think about the material of the play in the context of a "new" Northern Ireland even more than they already would have. Later that summer, the ensemble received the Stage Award For Excellence in Acting at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. This production has been revived several times, both in Northern Ireland and for international tours, with almost entirely the same cast.³⁴ The play text and the choices made in production worked together to suggest that viewing people's roles in the conflict as the totality of their personality is both unfair and fundamentally unhelpful to the ongoing process of reconciliation within the state.

Before writing the play, Lynch conducted interviews with many people who had been associated with Long Kesh. These were primarily members of paramilitary organizations, but also included prison guards and prisoners' families. Although Lynch is a republican, meeting with former republican prisoners was not simple. Lynch was a member of the Official IRA, which gave up its violent campaign in 1972. The republican prisoners during the remainder of the Troubles were thus almost entirely drawn from splinter groups, primarily the Provisional IRA. There were fierce feuds between the Official and Provisional IRAs, and as a result these former prisoners would not

³⁴ I saw the play in one of these revivals, at the Grand Opera House in Belfast in February 2011. My analysis of the performance is based on that iteration, as well as reviews, the published script, and a conversation with Martin Lynch.

necessarily have viewed Lynch as a comrade. As such, Lynch could not be said to be in full sympathy with the political beliefs or actions of any of his interviewees (although naturally some subjects' views were closer to his own than others). By listening to their personal stories and treating them as individuals rather than stand-ins for everyone in their organization, he found that they had diverse experiences and used complicated and nuanced narratives to describe their own actions during the Troubles.

This diversity was present in Lynch's characterization of the prisoners, who had different personalities, experiences, and understandings of the conflict. Although the play gave special attention to the journeys of one loyalist and one republican, the many other characters were also developed and given space. This diversity of views was particularly evident in the republican prisoners' reactions to the hunger strike. Eamon (Chris Corrigan), the play's main republican, supported the strike but struggled with whether to risk his own life by joining it (in the end he did not). In contrast, his friend Oscar (Marty Maguire) felt the strike was pointless. Oscar began the play as an extroverted joker, almost obnoxious in his joviality, but the death of his friends in the strike sent him into a deep depression. Toot (Packy Lee),³⁵ the well-meaning but hapless young man who was probably innocent of the crime for which he was sentenced, did not comment on the strike, leaving others to worry about politics. By dramatizing these many different reactions to one of the most iconic events of the Troubles, the play emphasized that the characters were not entirely defined by their sectarian or political affiliation.

In order to stage this more nuanced understanding of identity, the play used an ensemble cast of six (five men and one woman) who shifted among many characters. The one exception was Billy Clarke who only played the narrator Freddie, a prison guard;

³⁵ In the original cast, this role was played by Marc O'Shea, but Lee had taken over by the time I saw the play.

the rest moved between many roles including loyalists, republicans, prisoners' families, and prison officials. In performance, no effort was made to hide the transitions between these characters. The cast almost never left the stage and there were no costume changes (the actors wore neutral "street clothes"), so the shifts in character were accomplished by the actors changing their physicality in full view of the audience. This fluidity discouraged audiences from dividing the characters into rigid groups and encouraged spectators to make connections across identity categories. Further, actors were frequently cast against the "type" that many would associate with their characters' organizational affiliation. For example, many view loyalist paramilitaries as the most "thuggish" and least sympathetic participants in the conflict. Thus, the decision to cast the boyish and charming Andy Moore in the role of Hank (the main loyalist prisoner) encouraged audiences to rethink their assumptions about loyalists who had taken up arms during the conflict.

The play's design was minimalistic, but this was offset by the carefully choreographed performances including both Motown dancing and military drilling; these demonstrated the cohesion of the cast and mirrored the camaraderie many found within the prison. The only set was a series of gray blocks that the performers moved (often while dancing or drilling) to indicate changes in location. All props were mimed, with the exception of a large drum beaten during scenes of violence and the sequence in which the loyalist prisoners staged a Twelfth of July parade. In addition to allowing the performance's many short scenes to flow more naturally, this simple design avoided trying to represent the Long Kesh in any literal way. In this way, the production was able to maintain a fluidity of meaning and narratives around the prison.

The fact that the same actors portrayed the loyalists and the republicans of course encouraged audiences to find similarities between the two. Yet there was not the same

one-to-one character correspondence that we saw in *The Wedding Community Play Project* (discussed in the previous chapter). There was certainly a strong similarity between the story arcs of Eamon and Hank; in both cases, audiences saw their beginnings as generally likeable young men and the circumstances that inspired them to join paramilitary organizations. By the end of the play, both had hardened considerably and had become commanding officers (OCs) of their wing. At the same time, their circumstances were different – Eamon was a family man who struggled to maintain a connection to his wife and children while in prison, while Hank began as a free-spirited hippie without apparent family ties. The different priorities and outside connections this gave them were present throughout the play. Thus Lynch avoided creating a forced equivalence between the two men.

Similarly, when a loyalist and a republican finally met (only as they were released, since they would have been segregated in prison), it was not a symmetrical meeting between characters who had played equal roles in the play. If Lynch had been aiming for perfect balance, he would have scripted a meeting between Eamon and Hank. Yet the meeting on the bus leaving Long Kesh actually occurred between Hank and Toot, the lovable if simple republican who spent much of his time in Long Kesh talking to seagulls. One might expect this encounter to involve either overt hostility or a maudlin reconciliation, but the play avoided both outcomes. The conversation between the two men was cautious but not hostile. The scene ended as Toot began to explain his campaign to have “Bealfeirstian” become the official name for people from Belfast (a topic he had discussed several times throughout the play). This opened the possibility that Toot and Hank (who was also from Belfast) could connect based on a shared sense of geography, but also acknowledged that they might not. This avoidance of perfect balance in the play as a whole was necessary – due to the dirty protest and the hunger strikes, the

story of republicans in the Long Kesh is far more dramatic than that of loyalists. An attempt to create two symmetrical stories would thus have rung false to all familiar with the history of Northern Ireland.

The choice to use a prison guard as the play's narrator was both striking and unexpected. Certainly it was not part of the plan when Lynch began his interviews. He told me that he originally pictured prison guards as "innately fascist [and] innately self-serving," a point of view many (particularly in the nationalist community) would have shared. Even after the Official IRA renounced violence, they maintained a distrust of the justice system. For Lynch, this was bolstered by personal experience. He drew on this to write *The Interrogation of Ambrose Fogarty* (1982) which stages a violent interrogation of a suspected republican paramilitary. Lynch found his point of view radically transformed, however, by a meeting he had with one particular guard. The two men met three times, and Lynch found him thoughtful and sympathetic. Many of this man's stories were given directly to Freddie, including his struggle with alcoholism, the strains the job put on his marriage, and the eventual solace he found in the Bible. This depiction would have acted as a challenge to audience members who shared Lynch's initial assumptions about prison guards. The decision to make the guard central to the play was even more radical than the decision to portray him sympathetically. Freddie was the narrator and the only character to address the audience directly. This structured him as the audience's guide and forged a connection between actor and spectator that was not present elsewhere in the play. Furthermore, since Clarke played no other characters, Freddie was the only really stable person on stage; while the rest of the cast shifted between many characters, Freddie remained constant.

Billy Clarke's portrayal of Freddie also undercut the stereotype of the harsh prison guard. Clarke is a slight man, and his Freddie was hesitant and almost apologetic.

With a slightly slumping posture, he was far from the threatening, macho image associated with prison guards. Indeed, this was particularly evident when contrasted with Packy Lee's portrayal of Spencer, the guard who did fulfill these stereotypes. Lee's Spencer stood tall, with chest out and shoulders back. From his first entrance, moving aggressively through Long Kesh, he appeared to be the archetypal heartless guard. In harrowing scenes, he gleefully oversaw violent washings and searches of the republican prisoners (this was particularly disconcerting as Lee also played Toot, the kindest and most likable of the prisoners). Still, Spencer was a relatively small character; by including him, the play acknowledged the sadistic potential of some guards, but by keeping him in the background it argued against viewing him as the "typical" guard.

The production also addressed the traumatic effects Long Kesh had on the prisoners, and the way these experiences shaped their understandings of the conflict; this was most evident in Oscar's reaction to the hunger strike. As I outlined above, at the beginning of the play, Oscar was loud, confident, and aggressively jovial. He poked fun at the other republican prisoners in a way that walked a thin line between friendly and cruel, and most of his exits were preceded by an announcement that he was going away to masturbate (expressed through a range of increasingly vivid euphemisms). He loved Smokey Robinson, and frequently cajoled the other prisoners into participating in concerts to celebrate various events within the jail. After the strikes, however, he became deeply depressed, refusing to leave his bed. In these moments, Maguire's performance was small and hopeless, and the gregarious Oscar of earlier scenes seemed to have entirely vanished. When Eamon tried to cajole him out of his cell, asking what he could do to help, Oscar replied: "Can y'bring Bobby back? (*Beat.*) And Joe? (*Beat.*) And the

rest of the boys? Can y'get Damian back from Wales?"³⁶ Damian was Oscar's son; Oscar's wife Breige had moved out of Northern Ireland after Oscar was imprisoned. In this moment, Oscar weighed the losses of those he loved against the goals and successes of the republican movement, and found the latter wanting. He did not renounce the goals of republicanism or become a pacifist – such a move would have reinforced the narrative that all who willingly participated in paramilitary violence were evil. Instead, he found that he was unprepared for the actual complexity of the struggle.

The production could not depict all of the issues that surround the history of paramilitaries, nor did it try to. As many reviewers (particularly those writing for English papers) noted, the play did not address the victims of the characters' violence.³⁷ Since most of the action was centered on the prison, with the outside world becoming increasingly distant, this was perhaps not surprising. The most viscerally traumatic terrorist attack the play staged was not committed by one of the characters, but rather presented as a turning point in his life. Hank started out as a Bob-Dylan-loving hippie who dreamed of going to India to "find himself" (which itself challenged the stereotype that all loyalists are socially conservative). This initial demeanor was changed dramatically by an IRA attack:

We hear an explosion, the blaring of police and ambulance sirens. A MAN staggers backwards across stage banging into HANK, his hands covered in blood. Hank tries to grab the man and talk to him but without success.

MAN. Jesis Christ! Where's the fuckin Peelers. Jesis Christ!

HANK. What's the story man, what the fuck's happened?

³⁶ *Chronicles of Long Kesh* 78. Bobby Sands and Joe McDonnell were two of the prisoners who died on hunger strike.

³⁷ See, for example, Dominic Cavendish in *The Daily Telegraph* and Benedict Nightingale in *The Times*.

FREDDIE. One of the early IRA bombs was in a furniture store on the Shankill Road – a six-month old baby was killed as she lay in her pram.

The MAN turns around and around, appealing in desperation.

MAN. Can nobody do nothin'!³⁸

The audience then saw Hank approaching a loyalist paramilitary officer and inquiring about joining up. This moment showed how trauma combined with a feeling of helplessness spurred people to join the paramilitaries, but the play did not focus on this cycle of violence in great detail. Hank and Thumper (a sartorially-obsessed loyalist played by the production's one actress Jo Donnelly)³⁹ were arrested after planting a bomb together in a pub. Although the audience saw them react to the explosion – Thumper complained that his suit was damaged – no one revealed what damage it had done. Although Thumper and Hank must have had blood on their hands at this point, the specific effects of their actions remained obscure. A different play might have traced the violence both backwards and forward. Who specifically had planted the bomb on the Shankill, and what had led them to join the IRA? Whom did Hank's subsequent actions send into the arms of the paramilitaries?

In spite of this, it would be an over simplification to say that the production entirely occluded the murderous potential of its characters. Early in the play when Freddie refused to bend the rules to allow loyalist prisoners to get certain packages, Hank implicitly threatened Freddie's family: "Wife's name is Maureen. She works part-time in a Bakery on the Woodstock Road. Has one child Alan and another on the way. Maureen gets the bus home every day at a quarter to five at the bus stop directly facin' the Bakery."⁴⁰ Although the primary dramaturgical purpose of this moment was to

³⁸ *Chronicles of Long Kesh* 14-15.

³⁹ In the original production this role was played by Laine Megaw, but Donnelly had taken over the role by the time I saw it.

⁴⁰ *Chronicles of Long Kesh* 20.

demonstrate the effect that being a prison guard had on Freddie's entire life, it also showed the callous disregard for others that Hank had developed. Moore's delivery of the threat was chilling, a far cry from his earlier portrayal of the happy-go-lucky Hank.

A similar event occurred about halfway through the play when Eamon, who had been released, was recaptured and interrogated. The police accused him of supplying information about the movements of policemen to IRA killers, leading to the death of two officers. Eamon denied this to the policemen, but Corrigan's performance in this moment was full of disdain and cockiness – he did not come across as an innocent man desperately fighting a corrupt system. Eamon never confessed to facilitating these murders (a choice which would have made the trauma he caused others explicit, particularly if more information about the lives of the police officers who died had been shared), but nor did he ever again deny it. Even when his wife berated him for breaking a promise to her and getting involved in the IRA again, he did not plead his innocence. Thus, even if the violent actions of the prisoners were not the focus of the play, they were not entirely absent. The production did not turn its terrorists into loveable rogues or victims of circumstance without any options beyond violence.

Although the play sought to destabilize narratives around paramilitary members, it reinforced many traditional narratives about gender in Northern Ireland. For example, it only focused on male paramilitary prisoners. Structurally, this was necessary – there were no women in Long Kesh – but is also part of the general erasure of female combatants from histories of the Troubles. Republican women in Maghaberry prison even participated in the dirty protests, although their contributions have been largely ignored by commentators and theatre artists.⁴¹ When female characters did appear in the

⁴¹ These women's protests were explicitly linked to their gender. In addition to smearing their feces on the wall, as the men did, the women on the dirty protests covered their walls with their menstrual blood. In this

play, they were the wives of those involved with the prison (these characters were all played by Donnelly). In each case, their dramaturgical function was to emphasize that the effects of Long Kesh extended outside the boundaries of the prison. This was a theme that frequently arose in Lynch's interviews – the wives of prisoners were in effect made single mothers, and many struggled with these practical burdens in addition to the psychological effects of the Troubles and supporting an incarcerated husband. At the same time, the play's female characters were entirely apolitical, concerned about the impact of their husbands' choices on their homes, but not with the issues at stake in Northern Ireland as a whole. The one possible exception was Hank's girlfriend Theresa-the-commie, but she never appeared onstage. Although, as her nickname suggests, she was politically committed, the audience never learned enough of her for her presence to offer a meaningful counter to the women who were onstage.

In this way, the play mirrored the trend that Stephen Baker and Greg McLaughlin observed in Northern Irish antiterrorism advertisements. In the 1990s these ads stopped depicting paramilitary members as purely evil and began to show them as family men (always men) caught between the claims of domesticity and politics. The men were depicted as noble when they chose to protect their families by giving information to the police. The women in these advertisements were motivating factors for the men but not subjects in their own right. The female characters of *The Chronicles of Long Kesh* served a similar function; they reinforced the separation between the public and private spheres. While men could move between the two, women were confined to the private sphere and needed to be protected and shielded.

case, it seems likely that the general lack of interest in discussing female combatants was reinforced by squeamishness around menstruation.

Donnelly, the play's one actress, thus became a particularly interesting focal point, both in the ways the script cast her and in her performance choices. Lynch could have structured the play so that she only played the female characters – that is, wives of the central characters. Such a choice would have relegated the Donnelly to the periphery of the play. Even if Lynch had written more scenes for the female characters so that her part was the same size as the other performers', she would have remained a part of the "outside world" in a play that was strongly focused on life inside the prison. Instead, her role was structurally the same as those of the four other actors who played prisoners. Her primary character was Thumper, the loyalist first arrested with Hank following the pub bombing. She also played Steal the Sheets, a (male) Scottish prison guard. Thus, she was not even playing "Thumper and the women." She was offered the opportunity of playing a variety of male roles in the same way the other actors are. In addition to the characters she played, she participated in all the drilling and set manipulation, which made her appear an equal member of the ensemble. Finally, Donnelly has a fairly masculine appearance – she is solidly built, with a round face and strong features. With her hair cut short, she stood out from the men in the play far less than one might have imagined.

Although the play encouraged the audience to view Donnelly as "one of the boys," it would be foolish to suggest that her gender disappeared. It was, of course, always part of the meaning she made onstage. She stood out simply by virtue of being the only woman onstage, and one was encouraged to admire Donnelly's virtuosity as she cultivated a masculine persona that allowed her to blend back in with her male castmates (hers was indeed a striking and memorable performance). It is also significant that Lynch chose to have the one actress play Thumper rather than any of the other prisoners. Thumper was the most bloodthirsty and least compassionate of the prisoners. He most

resembled a caricature of the evil terrorist, and the fact that he was played by a woman encouraged the audience to think of him as less genuine than the other characters. For some, it might even have reinforced the notion that female terrorists are more dangerous than male, thus making the characters played by men seem less objectionable by comparison.⁴²

In spite of these limitations, *The Chronicles of Long Kesh* did succeed in its primary mission of creating a nuanced picture of the men whose lives were shaped by Long Kesh and who are still irrevocably a part of Northern Irish society. In the play's final moments, the audience learned what happened to the characters after Long Kesh was closed – or perhaps what might have happened, since the disclosure was framed as a dream Freddie had. Some mirrored the most common ways former prisoners have remained in the public eye – Eamon become a politician (presumably for Sinn Féin) and Hank became a community worker who also lectured at the University of Ulster. Peace also brought tranquility to both men's domestic lives. Freddie's dream reminded the audience, however, that there are other trajectories for former terrorists. For example, Oscar moved to the Republic of Ireland and married, but still remained separated from his son Damian. Although he seemed to be basically happy, his brief description evoked a sense of loss – primarily for his son, but also for his home in Derry. Thumper's story was the least optimistic – he became a drug addict and went to live with a daughter born from a casual relationship he had on a brief release from Long Kesh. He seemed to be in a deep depression – he announced that he never left the house and rarely washed. These many stories brought the play to the present, explicitly making the connection between the experiences of those who were imprisoned in Long Kesh and their current situations.

⁴² For a discussion of the ways this trope has been used in the context of Northern Ireland, see Susanne Greenhalgh's "The Bomb in the Baby Carriage: Women and Terrorism in Contemporary Drama."

It suggested that the varied and complicated ways that these men understood and behaved in the Troubles would continue on to their relationship with the peace process.

THE SIGN OF THE WHALE AND THE FAILURE OF NARRATIVES

While both *convictions* and *The Chronicles of Long Kesh* drew attention to the many different narratives surrounding Northern Ireland's complicated history, Tinderbox's *The Sign of the Whale* took this suspicion of narratives one step further. Rather than exploring the many contradictory narratives about the Troubles, the production called into question the possibility of creating narratives at all. Drawing from magical realism, the play sought to evoke rather than literally present the trauma of living through the Troubles, particularly in Belfast. Written by Jimmy McAleavey, the play was first produced in the small Baby Grand theatre at Belfast's Grand Opera House in 2010, under the direction of Michael Duke. The overall feeling of the production was haunted and rich with symbolism, and it insisted on instability both in its characters and its structure.⁴³

The Sign of the Whale was set in Belfast in an alternate version of 1977, eight years after the Troubles began. In this world, a whale had been spotted in the Belfast Lough, the large lake in eastern Northern Ireland that is connected by rivers to the sea. This threw the people and media of the state into an uproar – it seemed certain to be a portent, but no one knew of what. When the whale disappeared, they begin to doubt that it had ever existed. The play followed two men who were in hospital having been recently blinded in ways that could be connected to the whale. Dermý (Miche Doherty) was a middle-aged sub-editor who had become fascinated with the whale. He was attacked and blinded while walking the streets of Belfast at night, following a theory that

⁴³ My reading of the play is based on an archival video recording provided by Tinderbox as well as the published script, reviews, and conversations with dramaturg Hanna Slättne.

the whale had escaped the Lough through one of the rivers that runs under the streets of Belfast. Tony (John Travers) was a teenaged boy who had been initially excited about the possibilities the whale represented. He became disillusioned and angered when the media decided that the whale had never existed and was blinded while participating in a riot. Over the course of the play, the two became friends, eventually making fantastic journeys through imagined landscapes of Belfast. Two other actors (Michael Condrón and Mary Moulds) played many roles including journalists, Dermý's wife, Tony's Da, and the Reverend Ian Paisley. These characters remained remote; their scenes were short, and they generally appeared from behind a scrim. Thus, much like Freddie in *Chronicle of Long Kesh*, Dermý and Tony became the only constants in a shifting world.⁴⁴

Generally, there is a sense of inevitability in plays set around major historical events. Even if audiences aren't familiar with the events depicted, they know that the course of the plot is predetermined. It is thus noteworthy that *Sign of the Whale* was imbued with the sense that the Troubles could have unfolded differently within the play than they did in reality. The whale itself was the largest sign of instability. While there were other slight changes to Belfast's political landscape (for example, a fictional "Eight Years is Enough" peace campaign), the whale was the audience's primary clue that the history depicted in the play was imaginative rather than literal. The play very deliberately refused to turn the whale into a direct or simplistic symbol, however. As Dermý asked in a newspaper sidebar on "whales in literature":

Is it good luck or bad to have a whale in your back yard? As it is a Belfast whale it depends on whether you're Irish or British. In Gaelic literature it is an omen of good fortune; in Anglo-Saxon the devil himself. Cuchulainn's spear is guided by

⁴⁴ This also means that, like many of the plays discussed in this dissertation, women remained on the sidelines of a story primary about men.

good magic because it is made of whalebone. But in English medieval depictions of Armageddon the whale is always present, his mouth gaping like the plughole in the bloodbath: the entrance for the damned into hell. It is a sign of what we dearly want. Peace. Or all-out civil war. Although the whale can mean anything, there is one thing it cannot mean: nothing.⁴⁵

The play was rife with the language of change. “Funny thing about a whale,” Dermý observed. “When it actually shows up on our doorstep, when it actually sails into your head... it tends to give other things... a nudge.”⁴⁶ By changing history and being filled with so much indefinable symbolism, the whale suggested the possibility that the Troubles of the play might progress differently from the Troubles of reality. Dermý’s description of the whale’s many possible meanings suggested, however, that this new history need not be a better one. It could be even bloodier, particularly given that in reality, by 1977 the most violent years of the Troubles were already over.

Echoing his world, Dermý was deeply unstable as a character; this manifested most strongly in his futile attempts to understand the relationship between the violence of the Troubles and his own life. In this way, he clearly illustrated the relationship between trauma and a lack of coherent narrative, as outlined in my introduction. Before he was attacked, Dermý had been traumatized by the existence of the Troubles rather than by any particular personal connection with them. The play suggested that the experience of merely being surrounded by so much violence could have effects that could not be quantified or explained. Dermý made many ineffectual efforts to overcome this trauma by memorializing the events of the Troubles (even those he was not directly touched by) or distilling them into smaller problems that he could fix.

As a newspaper sub-editor, Dermý’s role was to proofread and fact check, not investigate or create. Still, he told himself that his work played an important role in

⁴⁵ *Sign of the Whale* 32.

⁴⁶ *Sign of the Whale* 28.

helping those who were grief-stricken. He dismissed the notion that the newsroom was a bustling hive of energy:

No. It's not like that. It's as quiet as a grave in the dummy's graveyard in the land where no-one speaks. You can hear your thoughts all too clear.

Subs grooming reporters' copy, combing it for grammatical nits.

And Barry, Barry the single night reporter they employ in a country where everything happens at night, his mouth hangs open quietly. He's trying to remember how to spell 'devastated'.

Never forget what you learned, Barry! 'All Protestants are staunch, all Catholics are devout and all firemen wear breathing apparatus'.

And everyone, whether they have lost their entire family in a firebomb or their dog in the park, is devastated.

As for me, I'll make sure when a guy gets 20 years' jail for killing your daughter who was seven months pregnant, and the reporter writes that he got 'seven years jail for killing your daughter who was 20 months' pregnant'... I'm the one who corrects it. I'm the one who makes sure the duty to the dead is paid.⁴⁷

Although he drew attention to it, Dermoy could offer no alternative to the clichéd and insufficient language used to describe the Troubles. Later, he recounted a conversation with a woman whose husband had just been killed. No one else was in the office, and so he answered the phone and had the rare experience of speaking with a victim rather than editing her story. Trying to find the words to express her pain to the paper's readers, he too fell back on the word "devastated."⁴⁸ If he could offer no way of adequately describing this loss and emotion, he needed to believe that his job of checking and correcting the facts was important, that he was offering real comfort to the bereaved.

⁴⁷ *Sign of the Whale* 18-19.

⁴⁸ *Sign of the Whale* 26. In another example of the limitation of language, the widow did not particularly want words about her husband in the paper. Her goal was to get his picture in, so that "people [will] see his face." For the widow, at least, this seemed to be a more powerful way of marking the loss than any words.

Dermý also took his efforts to master the violence of the Troubles outside his work. In his spare time, he compulsively memorized the details of the deaths of the Troubles. He did not simply recite them, however – he made pilgrimages around the city, remembering the specific locations and circumstances of each lost life. Even when he was blind and in hospital, he walked the streets of Belfast in his imagination:

DERMY. Your man, shot here. Christian name? Your. Surname: Man. Mr Y Man, shot in the head as he put the key in the door.

TONY. Nurse!

DERMY. Thereby dropping the fish... fukfukfuk... chicken supper he was bringing his invalid mother.

And here's a collector's item, this one, a Protestant lady – who was admittedly in a Catholic-owned bar as it was blown up. Worse, somehow, that she was only having a lemonade.⁴⁹

Again, Dermý tried to pay a “duty to the dead,” but he was caught by his inability to make any gesture that would be truly meaningful to the bereaved. His insistence on correctly remembering what kind of supper the victim was bringing home pointed to his helplessness. As with his copyediting, he had to cling to objectively insignificant details because the larger ones remained unfathomable.

The idea that to remember the dead and tell their story is in itself a kind of justice is prevalent throughout Northern Ireland. The most ambitious project along these lines is the encyclopedic *Lost Lives*, in which journalists David McKittrick, Seamus Kelters, Brian Feeney, Chris Thornton, and David McVea attempt to briefly tell the story of every person who died as a result of the Troubles.⁵⁰ The deaths are listed chronologically, and

⁴⁹ *Sign of the Whale* 17-18.

⁵⁰ The authors try to include every person who died as a result of the Troubles, but naturally they can only use the information available to make such distinctions. This means that some people are still omitted. For example, in *Voices from the Grave* (2011), Ed Moloney tells the story of the death of Paddy Joe Crawford,

each person is identified by their organizational affiliation (paramilitary, security forces, or civilian) and religion. There are then a few paragraphs describing their lives and deaths. In their introduction, the authors describe the project as an attempt to create an “accurate inventory” of the lost lives. They hope that by presenting the facts in a straightforward, unembellished manner the victims’ “experiences should serve as a lasting reminder of why Northern Ireland should never again return to full-scale conflict, a lasting reminder of the sadness and the pity of it all, a lasting reminder that war is hell.”⁵¹

Many other projects have limited their scope in order to go into more depth; I have already discussed Susan McKay’s haunting *Bear in Mind These Dead*. Acting under a similar impulse to do his duty to the dead, Kevin Myers fills *Watching the Door*, his memoirs of his experiences as a journalist in Belfast in the 1970s, with the names of those who died. He writes: “It is my hope that those who read through these pages will understand something of the reality of what violence does. This is why I have related the names of so many victims. Their deaths were the result of the failure of politics, but more crucially for me, each death formed a tiny brick in the edifice that was my earlier life.”⁵² For Myers, then, the imperative to remember and retell the stories of these deaths acts as both a way of furthering the cause of peace and of easing his own traumas. This is the logic behind many of these enumerations of the dead. The process of repetition was not successfully therapeutic for Dermot, however. For him, remembering these deaths (and indeed reembodying their movements) appeared to bring little peace.

a republican prisoner in Long Kesh. Although his death was officially declared suicide, most now believe that he was murdered by his fellow Republicans. His death is not included in *Lost Lives*.

⁵¹ *Lost Lives* 13, 15.

⁵² Myers IX.

The Sign of the Whale also depicted Belfast's geography as filled with suffering but unable to hold a fixed meaning. The city became a character the moment Dermoy began to recount his travels through the streets of Belfast. The production's set was claustrophobic; the literal setting for most of the play was a hospital room, but the design made little effort to realistically represent this. The set was all white, with an arch near the back that resembled the ribs (or perhaps jawbone) of a whale. The black stage had been painted white, with the most coverage center stage – the paint radiated out from this point in circles, slowly fading away, as if into shadows. A scrim hung upstage, and a majority of the scenes involving the other two actors took place behind it. This further separated Dermoy and Tony from the rest of the world. Overall, the feeling of the set was not that the men were in hospital, but that they were in the belly of the whale (Illustration 14). The characters were able to escape these confines, however, when they imaginatively traveled throughout the city. At first, the treatment of geography seemed to be straightforward: as Dermoy described his walks, he was precise about both the streets and their sectarian meanings. Dermoy explained: "If you are in Castle Street, you are a Fenian, walking up, down or across or levitating. Even if you're not."⁵³

As the play progressed, however, the fixity of the Belfast landscape became more and more uncertain. Indeed, the first suggestion of this came from the show's promotional materials. The image on the flyers and posters for the show was a whale, with part of the skin pulled back to reveal its ribs. The spinal cord was labeled "Rivers Lagan, Farset & Owenvarr," while the ribs were labeled with the names of several of the city's major streets (Illustrations 15 and 16). Larger posters and the program cover also featured a key labeling individual parts of the whale with abstract concepts like

⁵³ *Sign of the Whale* 19. "Fenian" is a derogatory word for a Catholic.

“democracy,” “freedom,” and “terror.” This image asked audiences to prepare to view the geography of Belfast through new eyes – to think of it in symbolic rather than literal ways.

The meaning of Belfast’s geography was truly called into question when Dermot and Tony took overdoses of their sedatives and embarked on a hallucinogenic tour through a topsy-turvy Belfast (which they gave the cheerier name of “Bestlaf,” both an anagram of “Belfast” and a homophone of “best laugh”). As Dermot explained: “There’s another city beneath this one. You get a glimpse of it every now and then be it in a puddle or the mighty Lagan. You think it’s just a reflection of Belfast, but it isn’t. It is an upside-down city which you’re actually seeing through the water. All you need to do is capsize!”⁵⁴ The men then made a leap, finding themselves in the new city, where many of Belfast’s iconic landmarks were reversed. The two cranes Samson and Goliath (Illustration 17), remnants of the city’s ship-building days, became the means by which the city hung from the sky. Because the letters were reflected, the “H & W” of “Harland and Wolf” became “H & M” of Harmony and Merriweather. The giant dome of the City Hall (Illustration 18) became a baptismal font. The city’s history was also rewritten – rather than the dark history of the industrial revolution that had dominated Belfast, Bestlaf was a place of light without poverty or inequality. Dermot explained that the city was built on the profits from the hot-air balloon industry, which were equally shared: “The citizens were well paid for raising the silk worms. As a consequence, there were huge rates of infant normality. They are famous here also for their cuisine. Their favorite dish is a ‘full-stir-fry’, with carrots, broccoli...”⁵⁵ The “full-stir-fry” is a pun on the deeply unhealthy “Ulster fry,” a breakfast that traditionally contains eggs, bacon,

⁵⁴ *Sign of the Whale* 40.

⁵⁵ *Sign of the Whale* 40.

sausages, fried soda bread, and potato bread. This suggested that everything, down to the eating habits, was better in Bestlaf.

Yet, much like the whale, Bestlaf was not allowed to rest in this utopic realm. Rather than a conflict between Protestants and Catholics, Dermý imagined a conflict between Catholics and the gay community. He described a melding of a gay pride parade and the Twelfth of July celebrations, and explained that these events caused conflicts similar to those that actually occurred in Belfast (and indeed still do – as I noted in my introduction, it is common for parades through contentious areas to be followed by several nights of rioting). Given the whimsical and idealized nature of Bestlaf, the audience might have been forgiven for initially assuming that the imaginary city was unaffected by sectarianism. The play suggested, however, that this kind of freedom from hatred is not possible in any version of Belfast. If Dermý and Tony’s effort to create Bestlaf was a metaphor for the play – both offered alternative histories – then the audience was warned not to look for uncomplicated happy endings in *Sign of the Whale*.

Indeed, as the play progressed, the narrative structure itself became unclear. Dermý miraculously regained his eyesight (or appeared to). The exact mechanics were unexplored, and it remained possible that he was lying. Dermý and Tony again left their hospital room (possibly in reality rather than drug-induced dreams, but possibly not) and took to the streets of Belfast. Dermý took Tony to the waterside and claimed to see the whale. He narrated its actions as it said farewell and turned towards the sea: “It’s turning toward us... I think it sees us... It spouted! Tony! Do you feel the spray?”⁵⁶ By the time the whale was out of sight, Tony claimed to have recovered his sight and seen it as well. This scene was intercut, however, with commentary by Barry, the night reporter at

⁵⁶ *Sign of the Whale* 49

Dermmy's paper, who seemed to be taking a call from Dermmy. Barry repeated the story Dermmy dictated to him, and it was different from the one Tony heard; in this version, Dermmy found the whale's carcass, which had already been desecrated by both animals and people:

'One can only imagine the dedication of the souvenir-hunters, climbing down the retaining wall...' Splashing? 'Plashing... through the creature's blood and fluids to secure their trophy.' [...] 'Hacking through the spinal cord and ripping associated membranes...' Yes? 'They must have then placed a lever between the vertebrae, displacing the liver which was found sluped around the heart.' Yes? 'It is unclear if the whale, wedged as it was halfway out of the culvert, was alive or dead during the procedure.'⁵⁷

These two narratives, of the whale's Free-Willy-esque escape and its gruesome death, were mutually exclusive. If the audience wanted to create a solid realistic narrative for the whale, they could – after the two descriptions had finished, Dermmy got Tony to an ambulance and sent him back to the hospital. Dermmy announced that he had to make a phone call and then walked in the direction of a probable imminent bombing.⁵⁸ This phone call could have been to Barry, and their phone conversation could actually have taken place a few minutes after Dermmy told Tony he saw the whale. The audience might imagine that Tony was either lying or delusional when he claimed to be able to also see the whale's escape.

Until this explanation was offered, however, the audience could exist between the two possibilities. Indeed, by this point the play was non-realistic enough that the logical

⁵⁷ *Sign of the Whale* 49.

⁵⁸ It was common for terrorists from both sides to give warnings of an hour or so before a bomb went off. This would (theoretically), allow the security forces enough time to evacuate the area but not find and diffuse the bomb. Early in the play, Dermmy repeated a rumor that the police would sometimes evacuate people into the danger zone, not out of it. The alleged logic of this move was that a bombing with a very high death count would provide bad "PR" for the paramilitaries. In the final moments of the play, a bomb-related evacuation was announced. In spite of Tony reminding him of the rumor, Dermmy decided to walk in the direction he had been directed. The audience was never told whether the rumor was correct and he was walking into danger, but the gravity of his final exchange with Tony suggested that this was at least what Dermmy expected.

explanation did not have to be the correct one. If the audience wanted to believe that the whale was saved, they were free to do so. For Tony, perhaps, the whale did survive; he saw its departure, or believed he did. If the play held out hope, it was for Tony – he had been given the chance to find a new path. Although the play offered no platitudes to assure the audience that he would take advantage of this moment of transformation, at least it was clear that he had the option.

In contrast, Dermý's apparent death in the bombing can be understood as the inevitable fulfillment of his earlier efforts to follow in the footsteps of the victims. His last line, directed at an imaginary bartender, was "Two lemonades," which recalled the story of the Protestant woman blown up in the Catholic-owned pub where she was drinking only lemonade.⁵⁹ Remembering the dead and ensuring that their stories were told correctly was not enough for Dermý – he had been traumatized by the Troubles in ways he could not even articulate and thus death was the only way to finish the memorial he had created with his actions.

CONCLUSION

The carefully staged funeral of police constable Ronan Kerr in April 2011 indicated how drastically the relationship between violence and the people of Northern Ireland has changed since 1998. Kerr, who was killed when dissident republicans planted a bomb in his car, was a Catholic and a member of the Gaelic Athletics Association (GAA), and thus in many ways a model of the new inclusive policing that the creation of the PSNI was intended to facilitate. After his death, First Minister Peter Robinson and Deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness jointly addressed the media condemning the attacks. Vigils were held all over the country, both to mourn Kerr and to take a stand

⁵⁹ *Sign of the Whale* 50.

against violence. His funeral was attended by major figures from all political parties (and indeed, those who were members of the Orange Order risked censure for attending a Catholic mass).⁶⁰ In the most striking moment of pageantry, members of the GAA carried Kerr's coffin part of the way to the funeral and then passed it over to members of the PSNI. For years this cooperation would have been unthinkable, since the GAA only began allowing members of the security forces to join in 2001.

All of these events were designed to send a message that the people of the North would not tolerate violence, but the power of the symbolism relied on a tacit acknowledgement that in the past many had. This was most striking in McGuinness's condemnation of the violence (a strong statement from a former leader of the IRA), but was also present in the rhetoric of "coming together" that filled Northern Ireland at the time. The ease with which a narrative of unity sprung up following Kerr's death stands as a contrast to the difficulties of creating a narrative around the violence of the Troubles. The Troubles lasted as long as they did because paramilitary organizations enjoyed widespread support within their communities. Even people who did not approve of the actions allegedly committed on their behalf were hesitant to condemn paramilitaries on their own side – this was partially due to fear of reprisal, but also to a general sense that what was being done to them was worse than what they were doing. Although most people in Northern Ireland now support peace, few who supported violence during the Troubles currently regret taking that stance. All of this complicates the rhetoric of "moving on" at the heart of the peace process, since no one quite agrees on from what Northern Ireland is moving on.

⁶⁰ Following the funeral, the relatively hardline Orange Order lodge in Belfast's Sandy Row filed complaints against the attendance of then-UUP leader Tom Elliot and UUP minister Danny Kennedy, both prominent members of other lodges. Although the Orange Order did not uphold the complaint, the fact that it was filed and seriously considered caused outrage in many parts of the state.

In many ways, this dilemma is at the heart of the three productions discussed in this chapter. In their own ways, *convictions*, *The Chronicles of Long Kesh*, and *The Sign of the Whale* each drew attention to the ways that possible narratives of the Troubles, whether sectarian or not, offer over-simplifications of the events and ignore the lasting trauma with which the period left the people of the state. In each case, the play acknowledged the lure of a powerful narrative. In *convictions*, “Court No. 2” and “Judge’s Room” particularly highlighted the ways that being able to package a narrative as “the real” history makes the past seem comfortably finished and diminishes its power to return. *The Chronicles of Long Kesh* acknowledged that labeling former paramilitaries (and indeed prison officers) as either heroes or villains makes it easier to ignore the complicated webs of violence in which most of the people of the state were in some way implicated. Finally the introduction of the whale in *The Sign of the Whale* could have been used to create the clear narrative of a fairy tale or myth, where good and evil are distinct and easily separable. Instead of this, the production used it to highlight the complicated and conflicted experience of living through the Troubles. In acknowledging the lure of these simplistic narratives, the plays did not try to replace them with more complicated but still cohesive counter-narratives of blame and suffering. Instead, they encouraged audiences to sit with the contradictions of the period rather than rush to assimilate them into new narratives. This asked spectators to put themselves in potentially uncomfortable positions by acknowledging that virtue existed in their enemies and guilt existed in their friends.

Commentators in Northern Ireland frequently claim that plays that stage past conflicts should not be produced because they “open old wounds.” This, of course, relies on the narrative that the wounds have healed on their own. The three productions discussed in this chapter suggested that this is not the case and advocated against the kind

of public healing that removes the personal narratives of those who are traumatized from the public sphere. They recognized that there is no surefire method that will quickly move people through the process of mourning, and so they did not suggest one. Instead, they reminded audiences that the process of grieving and recovering from trauma is difficult, and that while moving on may be an admirable goal, it cannot be forced.

Although these productions emphasized the diverse experiences and relationships to violence and trauma present in the state, they still focused on characters with relatively uncomplicated relationships to one of the two communities. While many residents of Northern Ireland feel this strong allegiance to their community of birth, others do not. These include those who were never part of one of the two communities as well as those who, due to their identity and political opinions, no longer feel welcome in their former communities. The next chapter looks at productions that have depicted and addressed these groups. These plays emphasized the ways that the logic of the two-communities model has been transferred into the narratives around the shared future, perpetuating the marginalization of those who lack power.



Illustration 13: J.J. Murphy as the Judge in *convictions*. Photographer unknown. © Tinderbox Theatre, 2000. Used with permission.



Illustration 14: John Travers, Michael Condron, and Miche Doherty in *Sign of the Whale*.
Photograph by Ciaran Bagnall. © Tinderbox Theatre. Used with permission.

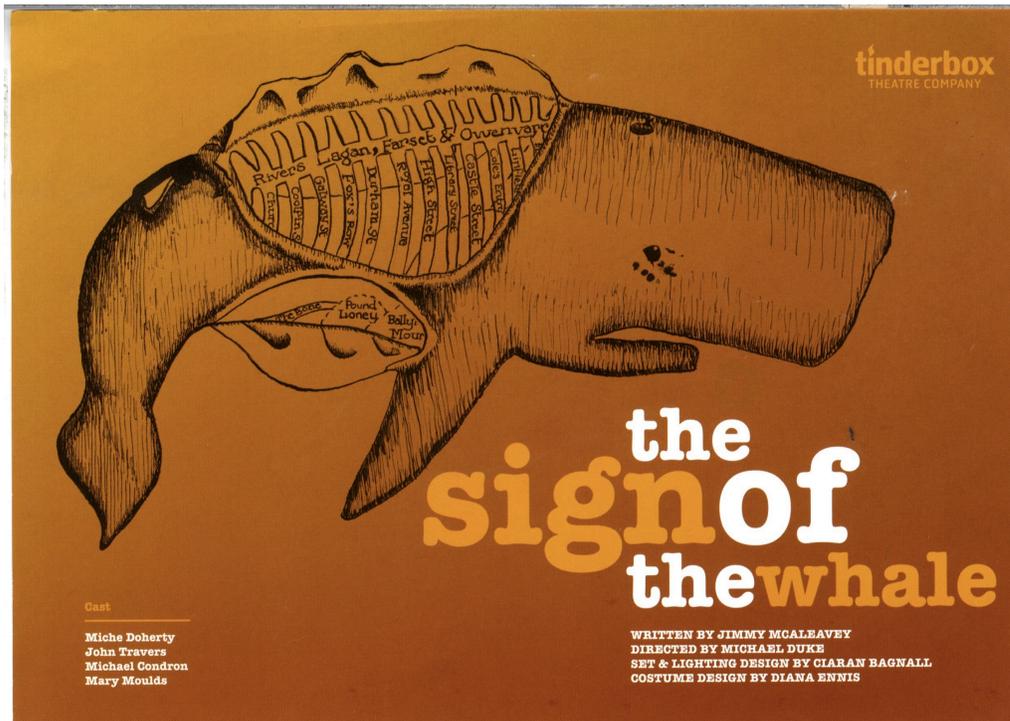


Illustration 15: Promotional Flyer for *The Sign of the Whale*. From the collection of the author.

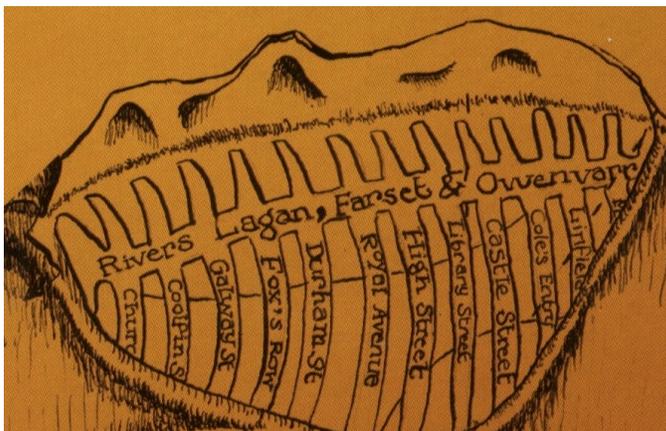


Illustration 16: Detail of promotional Flyer for *The Sign of the Whale*. From the collection of the author.



Illustration 17: Samson and Goliath cranes, Belfast, 2011. Photograph by the author.



Illustration 18: City Hall, Belfast, 2010. Photograph by the author.

Chapter Four

Performing the Margins of the Shared Society

“Images of the hospitable Irish or friendly Ulster-folk are sentimental. Anti immigrant and racist feeling should not have been such a shock. It continues the sectarian, exclusivist, conservative and insular attitudes that helped to produce the Troubles.”

-- Edna Longley, “Multiculturalism and Northern Ireland”¹

“Belfast in the 1950s. I had a very enjoyable time. [...] The trad scene was having its revival at the time and I got interested in that. I was there when the McPeakes started up. I bought an Arran sweater. I expect you know this, but the piano for traditional music is really a rhythmic accompaniment. Not too difficult, and the tunes you know were very close – Yiddish and Irish.”

--Gavin Kostick, *This is What We Sang*²

In his 2010 memoir *Where Are You Really From?*, Tim Brannigan reflects on the experience of growing up as a black man within a white republican family.³ This was a complicated experience, as Brannigan both identified with the larger republican community and felt isolated within it. He generally felt supported and accepted by his family and immediate neighbors, but was never accorded “insider” status by those who saw him. His childhood playmates frequently drew attention to this difference, in both positive and negative ways.

‘Right, Tim, you be on my team and you can be Eusebio,’ my older brother Paul said as we kicked a ball outside our door. Eusebio was a black Portuguese superstar at the time. I didn’t mind being called Pelé or Eusebio because I enjoyed playing football, but it stung if someone I didn’t know said it to or about me. From an early age I was able to detect when a name, even a foreign name, was meant as a compliment and when it was an insult.⁴

¹ Longley 5.

² Kostick 53.

³ The circumstances surrounding Brannigan’s birth are worthy of a soap opera. He was raised believing he had been adopted, but later in life discovered that he was actually his mother’s biological child. She had become pregnant in 1965 after an affair with a black English doctor during a brief separation from her husband. With the knowledge of her husband, she arranged to have the baby put in an orphanage where she volunteered, and told the rest of the family he had died. The couple then adopted the baby from the orphanage.

⁴ Brannigan 21.

Brannigan was born in 1966, which meant that he came of age with the Troubles. He was peripherally involved in paramilitary activities and as a result served a five-year prison sentence. In spite of these commitments, many (although not, he is careful to clarify, all) in the republican movement saw him as an outsider. The book's title references the question he was repeatedly asked by people in the state – they could not conceive of a black person being “from” Northern Ireland or existing there in anything other than a transient way. Much as he had been by his playmates, he was frequently identified – as either a compliment or an insult – as something other than Northern Irish.

The peace process's push towards narratives of unity seems to be having some success and a more cohesive Northern Irish identity is beginning to develop. Yet this identity still appears to depend on membership in one of the two sectarian communities – nationalists and unionists are beginning to come together, but ideas of who belongs in the North remain rigid. Brannigan recalls an incident in which “A spokesman for the Northern Ireland tourism and hospitality sector said that immigrants employed in local hotels and restaurants were ‘diluting the brand.’”⁵ While Northern Ireland is working to cast off its image as a violent, backward region, it does not seem to be comfortable crafting a version of itself that addresses the diversity of identities and experiences present within the state. Few residents are willing to state this as openly as the representative of the tourist board, which is responsible for explicitly marketing this identity, but it remains a problem for those who do not easily fit into narrow visions of the shared society.

As the previous two chapters have explored, the narratives of unity at the heart of the peace process depend on creating feelings of similarity and shared purpose. The efforts to create this inclusive Northern Irish identity have assumed that sectarian identity and political affiliation are the only important difference between residents of Northern Ireland. Although the plays I discussed in the previous chapter emphasized the many different experiences with violence that

⁵ Brannigan 168.

marked the Troubles, they treat the conflict as the most, if not the only, important political issue facing the state. As Brannigan's comments and the quotation from Edna Longley that opened this chapter illustrate, however, other issues and oppressions are present within the state, and for many they are more important than the conflict between Catholics and Protestants.

The idea of the "shared society" provides an opportunity not only to address the divisions between Catholics and Protestants, but also to shift thinking so that those who were marginalized by the two-community model become equal shareholders in the new state. Nic Craith believes all within the state must accept these more nuanced notions of identity, arguing "that politicians and communities should adopt a more inclusive discourse of multiculturalism and give greater recognition to minorities, to those on the margins of the two traditions paradigm, and those with hyphenated identities."⁶ As we saw with the productions discussed in chapter two, much of the work of the peace process has depended on reconciling or minimizing difference; these productions worked to find common ground between historical enemies (although *National Anthem* did so with many caveats). In the case of many marginalized groups – whether defined by race, religion, sexual orientation, or political commitments – this call to find shared ground seems to be a call to assimilate. A different tactic is therefore required, one which calls on the people of the state to develop a more nuanced and complex definition of Northern Irish identity that embrace a range of experiences that have largely been deemed irrelevant to the peace process.

The productions I discuss in this chapter took up Nic Craith's call for an examination of complicated and hyphenated identities. Each investigated a group at the margins of the shared society and explored how the incorporation of their stories into the peace process's narratives of unity might contribute to a better "shared future." Like Brannigan, the characters in these productions possessed a complicated and frequently-ambivalent understanding of the relationships between their own multi-dimensional identities and Northern Ireland's history and

⁶ *Plural Identities - Singular Narratives* 5.

future. While all felt ties to the space of Northern Ireland (if not its construction as a state), they also felt excluded from full participation within its public sphere; they were simultaneously insiders and outsiders. Importantly, the plays hoped to broaden the narratives of unity so that they might include these characters' experiences and identities rather than suggesting that the characters should take part in the same "movement towards the center" that has been asked of those who fit comfortably within the two-communities model.

I have deliberately selected plays dealing with groups with markedly different relationships to both the shared society and the two communities. The first production I discuss explored a group that was not marginalized from the two-communities model, but which has chosen to largely absent itself from the shared society. *To Be Sure: Or How to Count Chickens When They Come Home to Roost*, written and directed by Tim Loane for the Lyric Theatre in 2007, was a darkly violent, highly physical farce centered on a family of dissident republicans in West Belfast. Dissident republicans reject the validity of the GFA and the power-sharing agreements that followed it, and have been responsible for most of the terrorism in the state since 1998 (including the 1998 bombing in Omagh and the 2009 murders of a policeman and two soldiers). While the rhetoric of the peace process has depicted dissidents as fundamentally separate from the new society, Loane asked his audiences to question this clear division. The production also suggested that, although the beliefs and actions of dissidents may be repugnant, they are at least more internally consistent than those of republicans who argue that violence was acceptable during the Troubles but barbaric in the present.

In contrast, the second play focused on a group that was not part of the two communities but which could be a part of the shared society. In Kabosh's *This is What We Sang*, written by Gavin Kostick and directed by Paula McFetridge in 2009, members of a Jewish family who had immigrated to Belfast at the end of the nineteenth century described their relationship to each other, the city, and its people. Although the stories the characters told concentrated on the first half of the twentieth century, it is easy to draw parallels between the family's experiences and the plights of more recent immigrants to the state. Since the beginning of the twenty-first

century, the peace in Northern Ireland and changes in regulations on movement within the European Union have led to an increase in immigrants. In particular, the state has seen an influx of eastern Europeans who have been met with significant bigotry. The play offered models of how immigrants could be integrated (although, again, not assimilated) into Northern Irish society. It also spoke to the experiences of religious minorities and offered an alternative view of Belfast's history through the eyes of characters not caught up in sectarianism.

Finally, Tinderbox's *God's Country*, written by Colin Bell and directed by Des Kennedy in 2010, dealt with the experiences of gay men in Northern Ireland. Northern Irish Catholics and Protestants both tend to be socially conservative, and as a result homophobia is a significant problem within the state. As a whole, the people of Northern Ireland have been resistant to the UK's increasing legal and social acceptance of the queer community.⁷ Therefore, while gay people may be born into one of the two communities, they often do not feel welcome in them after coming out. In this production, a young man who had left Northern Ireland for London years before returned home to his parents, both prominent politicians in the Democratic Unionist Party (or at least a party that closely resembled it). While there, he wrestled with his father's mental deterioration following a stroke, his mother's homophobia, and the community's reaction to a recent hate crime against another gay man. By invoking the trope of the exile or emigrant (very common within Irish literature), the play asked whether there is a place for homosexuals within the shared society or whether they are better off abandoning the state all together.

In their own ways, each of these productions focused on the liminal condition of its characters. Like Brannigan, the characters were neither entirely part of the shared society, nor entirely separate from it. These plays pointed to the problems with focusing entirely on the divisions between Catholics and Protestants, and drew attention to the many other ways the state

⁷ Republican politicians tend to be more accepting of gay rights than unionist politicians. In September and October 2012, Sinn Féin and the Green Party made a motion in Stormont to legalize gay marriage in Northern Ireland. They were defeated when unionists invoked a rule that would have required the motion to be approved by a majority of nationalists and a majority of unionists. A number of polls suggest, however, that gay marriage does not enjoy this same approval among nationalist voters.

has failed to become an integrated society. They argued that the communal narratives of minority groups, as well as the personal narratives of individual members of these groups, should play a key role in the construction of the narratives of unity that form the basis of the shared future. They also suggested that the peace process's focus on similarity serves to further marginalize these groups and reinforces the power of those who are already perceived to be truly Northern Irish.

THE MARGINS OF THE SHARED SOCIETY

Northern Ireland's demographics have shifted since the peace process, but narratives of unity and regional identity have largely failed to adapt. As globalization and immigration increase, the national identity markers of "Irishness" and "Britishness" that have been so central to the conflict in Northern Ireland have begun to lose their fixed meanings, but many still cling to them. In his introduction to the collection *Being Irish: Personal Reflections on Irish Identity Today* (2000), Paddy Logue argues:

The peace process has allowed us to snap out of the trance of the two traditions, that mutual obsession of nationalists and unionists, the hypnotic focus of a cobra and a mongoose about to attack each other. As the shouts and din of ancient quarrel begin to subside, we hear other voices. In Ireland today there are atheists, Jews, Sikhs, Buddhists, socialists, Chinese, Travelers, blacks, Muslims, gays, asylum seekers, feminists, and others, all of whom locate themselves outside the two traditions and are entitled to parity of esteem and equality of treatment.⁸

Logue's list emphasizes the multi-dimensional nature of identity; in addition to religion and political belief (the two traditionally important identity categories in Northern Ireland), he highlights ethnicity, national origin, and sexual orientation. Further, these identity categories are not mutually exclusive; one could be a gay, socialist, Buddhist feminist from the Traveler community, for example. The most appropriate response to the growing recognition of diversity Logue articulates is therefore not to create further rigid divisions in society. Northern Ireland should not transfer from a two-community model to a fourteen-(or more)-community model.

⁸ Logue xviii.

In spite of the transformations Logue cites, distrust of difference remains a problem in the state; while many prominent commentators and politicians have addressed distrust of sectarian difference, they have largely allowed distrust of other difference to continue unchecked. As I noted above, during the Troubles most social problems other than sectarianism were treated as secondary or unimportant. In their discussion of racism and the construction of whiteness in the North, Paul Connolly and Romana Khaoury argue that the extreme consequences of the sectarian bigotry underlying the Troubles made many citizens feel that other forms of bigotry did not exist: “Nationalists and unionists have been so obsessed with fighting one another, so the argument goes, that they simply have had no time to consider the voices of others.”⁹ They argue that this has led to the assumption that any racism in the North was and still is passive rather than active; if government institutions do not serve the particular needs of those who are not from the two communities, this is due to negligence or laziness on their part rather than to a feeling that immigrants (for example) do not deserve the same services. Using a variety of sources and opinion polls, Khaoury and Connolly demonstrate that this assumption that racism is only a limited problem in the North is fundamentally untrue. Near the end of *Where Are You Really From?*, Brannigan makes a similar observation; he describes a television documentary’s superficial attempt to depict racism in Northern Ireland: “I’m not sure what point, if any, the programme was trying to make but the presenter seemed to suggest that racism was a small, isolated problem caused by a handful of bigots. It was a lazy, complacent conclusion.”¹⁰ Racism exists in Northern Ireland on both systemic and individual levels and has damaging effects both on members of minority groups and on the entire society. The same is true for many other kinds of bigotry.

Khaoury and Connolly quote a 2000 study by Connolly and Michaela Keenan, which asked members of the two communities how accepting they would be of ethnic minorities in various roles (for example, as citizens of Northern Ireland, colleagues, or relatives by marriage).

⁹ Connolly and Khaoury 192.

¹⁰ Brannigan 168.

Respondents were also asked the same questions about members of the “other” of the two communities. The study found that respondents were significantly less likely to accept members of ethnic minorities than members of the other community (although the most-distrusted ethnic minority was the Travellers, the only group with a long-standing history in the state). While only 26% of respondents said they would object to having a close friend from the other of the two communities, 42% would object if the friend were Afro-Caribbean, 41% if they were Chinese, and 43% if they were Asian.¹¹ The responses to the other questions showed a similar cluster for these latter three categories – in all cases Asians were the least accepted and Chinese the most, but there was never a difference of more than two percentage points.

Thus, the study found a strong prejudice against people of color rather than against a particular ethnic identity or national origin (although one can presume that these prejudices manifest themselves in different ways depending on ethnic community). Although the study did not address minorities defined by non-ethnic traits (such as sexual minorities), it seems likely that their difference would have been met with similar suspicion. Much has changed in the North in the twelve years since the study was published, and most commentators agree that the society is becoming more diverse and minorities are becoming more visible.¹² Thus, it is difficult to say whether the numbers would be significantly different if the study were to be redone now. The study clearly demonstrates, however, that in the years immediately following the GFA, the members of the two communities were more trusting of each other than of ethnic minorities, in spite of the trauma of the Troubles they were presumably still working through.

Sadly, the lack of interest in addressing these issues of racism noted by Khaoury and Connelly has remained largely unchallenged by theatre in the North. While theatre in Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland have dealt with issues caused by increasing racial diversity,

¹¹ Connolly and Kahoury 202. In British and Irish contexts, “Asian” generally refers to those from the Indian subcontinent.

¹² The results of the 2011 census pertaining to the ethnic breakdown of the current Northern Irish population will not be released by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency until early 2013. When they are released, we will be able to see to what extent these subjective observations mirror recorded population trends.

the same is not true of Northern theatre.¹³ Although there are several Northern plays featuring European immigrants (albeit frequently in peripheral roles),¹⁴ I have only been able to locate one play about the North that features a person of color. Christina Reid's *Belle of Belfast City* (1989) focuses on a young woman whose mother is from a traditional unionist family and whose father is Afro-Caribbean. Belle lives in England with her mother Rose, and has never had a relationship with her father.¹⁵ Belle's blackness primarily functions as a signifier of her "otherness" when she and Rose visit Rose's family in Belfast – she is visibly different from everyone else, and thus provokes many meditations (some complementary and some not) on the meaning and strength of family within the larger unionist community. She could be from any other race (or different in another way), however, without changing the plot of the play. Thus, this play does not provide a significant corrective to the omission of people of color in Northern theatre.

As it becomes increasingly obvious that suspicion of difference is a problem in the North, many suggest that sectarianism has fueled other forms of bigotry rather than diminishing them. In June 2009, more than one hundred Romanian immigrants left Northern Ireland because of a campaign of intimidation and violence.¹⁶ English television presenter Esther Rantzen caused a great deal of protest in the North by responding that these events proved the state was "addicted to hate." Rantzen herself has little knowledge of Northern Ireland and questionable credentials as a social commentator, and many accused her of simply trying to grab headlines.¹⁷ Her

¹³ While this is a relatively long-standing trend in theatre in Great Britain, it is more recent in theatre in the Republic. See Patrick Lonergan's *Theatre and Globalization – Irish Drama and the Celtic Tiger Era* (2009) and Charlotte McIvor's "Staging the 'New Irish': Interculturalism and the Future of the Post-Celtic Tiger Irish Theatre" (2011) for discussions of the ways theatre has been used to challenge the presumed whiteness of "Irishness" in recent years.

¹⁴ For example, the roles in Daragh Carville's *This Other City* (2009) include a Moldovan immigrant woman who is held in sexual slavery. The script is less about her, however, than about the effects she has on the family of a successful businessman who becomes her client.

¹⁵ This of course plays into stereotypes of black fathers as inherently less reliable than white fathers, although it should be noted that Reid's plays also include many examples of white men abandoning their families.

¹⁶ Those responsible were never identified or brought to justice, but the attacks have generally been blamed on young loyalist men (the immigrants were living in unionist areas). It seems unlikely, however, that the attacks were organized or sanctioned by a paramilitary organization.

¹⁷ "Rantzen – NI 'addicted to hate'" http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/northern_ireland/8110100.stm

comments did, however, strike a chord with others and led to many public discussions about whether or not the people of the North were welcoming to “outsiders.” Most argued that the attacks on the Romanian families (and similar events) were the responsibility of individuals and did not reflect on Northern Irish society as a whole. This, of course, mirrors Connolly and Khaoury’s arguments about Northern Ireland’s inability to identify its own endemic and systematic issues with racism. One telling facet of the public debates, however, was the number of people who condemned the attacks but expressed the view that the North would be better off now that these immigrants were leaving.

These events, and others like them, have prompted many to take action. A campaign called “Unite Against Hate,” which was created in 2009 by the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, has drawn several prominent supporters and offers a strong presence at many events. For example, they were visible at the doors of the Chinese New Year celebrations I attended in February 2011, where they handed out “Unite Against Hate” merchandise (including the ubiquitous rubber bracelets popularized by Lance Armstrong’s “Live Strong” campaign) and directed people to a booth where they could learn about more concrete actions. The campaign is not necessarily targeted at those who perpetrate hate crimes, but rather at those who may see them and say nothing. It is designed to raise awareness of the fact that hate crimes are a real problem in the North, and to encourage people to challenge or report those who commit them. One of the most exciting things about this campaign is that it refuses to treat sectarianism as fundamentally different from other forms of bigotry. Unite Against Hate’s website lists the six categories of hate crime recognized by the PSNI: racist, homophobic, transphobic, disability-related, religious, and sectarian. Although the site acknowledges that sectarian hate crimes are the most prevalent, it does not treat them as intrinsically different from the other categories.¹⁸ Policies like this offer at least a first step towards creating a truly shared society in which those who do not fit easily into the two communities may comfortably exist.

¹⁸ “Unite Against Hate: About Hate Crime” <http://www.uniteagainsthate.org.uk/about-hate-crime/>

These policies are designed to prevent those who are already full members of the shared society from excluding Northern Ireland's "Others," but in some cases it is the outsiders who refuse to play any role in the shared society, no matter how nuanced or accepting of difference it is. Policy makers and public commentators struggle with how and whether such groups should be addressed. These groups – both republican and loyalist, although the republicans are much more prominent – reject the validity of the GFA and therefore also reject the "shared society" it is working to create. Since many still employ violence or view it as justifiable, those in power debate about whether dissidents should be further isolated or approached with the goal of integration.

On balance, most public rhetoric depicts these groups as morally vacuous so as not to give their position any aura of legitimacy. This is particularly striking when it comes from those who had previously endorsed violence as a legitimate means for achieving political goals. For example, Martin McGuinness famously called those republicans who murdered two soldiers and a policeman in 2009 "traitors to Ireland." While this statement linked the unification of Ireland with the democratic systems put in place by the GFA, many found it ironic that it came from a former member of the IRA governing council. Similarly, the BBC News website maintains a "Timeline of dissident republican activity" which begins with the shootings of soldiers Patrick Azimkar and Mark Quinsey and Police Constable Stephen Carroll in March 2009.¹⁹ This list is continually being updated as new attacks and prosecution occur. Such a timeline could have begun with the GFA (since that was where the idea of "dissent" entered republicanism), and thus included the Real IRA's Omagh bomb of August 1998, which killed 29 people. The fact that the BBC editors opted to begin in 2009 is evidence of a larger public narrative that seeks to mark dissident activity as unconnected with earlier Republican struggles.

As this overview demonstrates, the role of those who do not easily fit into the two-community or shared-future models is an ambivalent one in the public imagination. Over the

¹⁹ "BBC News – Timeline of dissident republican activity," <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-10866072>

years since the GFA, they have grown more visible, but have not necessarily been incorporated into shared narratives of Northern Ireland's identity and future. The productions discussed in the following sections advocated for more nuanced understandings of Northern Irish identity and insisted that ideas of the shared society, rather than these marginalized groups, needed to change.

***TO BE SURE* AND DISSIDENT REPUBLICANISM**

Tim Loane's morbid farce *To Be Sure: or How to Count Chickens When They Come Home to Roost* depicted a day in the life of a violent but also fundamentally incompetent family of dissident republicans. Set on Good Friday, the play began with Marian (Nuala McKeever), matriarch of the Powers family, preparing a "cultural celebration" to commemorate both Jesus's crucifixion and (more importantly to her) the failed Easter Rising of 1916. She wanted this performance to emphasize the family's continued opposition to any peace process that did not include an immediate reunification of Ireland, but her husband Joe (Paddy Jenkins) and sons Liam (Martin McCann) and Thomas (Michael Condrón) were more politically ambivalent. The visit of their daughter Grace (Rachel Tucker), now a university student, to tell them about her new boyfriend (a policeman) and Liam's peripheral involvement in a post-office robbery set off a series of violent and increasingly chaotic events. By the end of the play, the audience had witnessed the family brutally attack a policeman, a member of the IRA army council, a republican politician, and the politician's female bodyguard (all played by the same actor, Dan Gordon). These attacks were not framed as politically motivated, but rather momentary bad decisions the family made in order to protect itself in a situation increasingly becoming out of control. Like *National Anthem* (discussed in chapter two), *To Be Sure* used dark humor to comment on the absurdities and inconsistencies of the peace process. Above all, it argued against the narratives of the peace process that depict the non-dissidents as heroes by framing the dissidents as the "bad guys."

The play premiered under Loane's direction at Belfast's Lyric theatre to mixed reviews on March 7, 2007 (which, as I explore later, was an important date in Northern Ireland's political

history).²⁰ Loane had already experienced success on the Belfast stage with his 2002 play *Caught Red Handed: Or, How to Prune a Whin Bush* (produced by Tinderbox Theatre). This play was also a dark farce, but focused on the hypocrisies of unionist politicians. Many reviewers framed *To Be Sure* as a “companion” or “follow-up” to *Caught Red Handed*,²¹ even though the plays were set in different worlds; *Caught Red Handed* was set around an imaginary 2005 referendum on whether Ireland should be reunited, while it was clear that no such measure had taken place in the 2007 of *To Be Sure*. Still, the plays were thematically and generically similar. Framing them as a unit also might have allowed Loane a bit more leeway when criticizing the current state of republicanism – he is a Protestant, but with *Caught Red Handed* he had shown he was willing to point to the flaws of “his own side.” Therefore his criticisms of republicanism would be less likely to be viewed as motivated by anti-Catholicism.

The presence of actor Dan Gordon also connected the two productions. Gordon is iconic within Northern Ireland; he originated the role of Kenneth McCallister in Marie Jones’s wildly successful one-man show *A Night in November* (1994) and played Red Hand Luke, a supporting character in the satirical TV show *Give My Head Peace* (1998-2008).²² He played multiple roles in each of Loane’s plays. In *Caught Red Handed*, he was the Ian Paisley-esque leader of the unnamed unionist party who died on the toilet early in the play, as well as a cleaner and the cleaner’s brother who just happened to be identical to the leader and was thus drafted to impersonate him (in spite of the fact that the stand-in was a Catholic nationalist). In *To Be Sure*, Gordon played all the characters who were not members of the Powers family, all of whom the family attacked: Catholic policeman Leslie (who the family discovered was daughter Grace’s boyfriend only after they believed they had killed him),²³ violent republican Thumper McGee,

²⁰ I have not been able to access a recording of this production, and as such my reading is based primarily on the play text published by the Lagan Press. Reviews of the performance and the production photographs accompanying the published text have also proved useful.

²¹ See for example Karen Fricker in *Variety* and *The Guardian*, as well as Jane Coyle in the *Irish Times*

²² The “red hand” is a symbol of militant loyalism, which is why it appears in both the title of Loane’s first play and Gordon’s character in the TV show.

²³ In her reading of the play, Eva Urban argues that Leslie is of African descent (178-9). I believe this is a misreading of son Thomas’s line on first seeing him: “Go on, piss away off you black bastard!” (138). I would

newly-respectable republican politician Jerome Duffy (who, in performance, was modeled on Sinn Féin president Gerry Adams),²⁴ and bomb-making bodyguard Kathleen De Ruin. He also gave the pre-recorded offstage voice of the police inspector who put the house under siege when the family took Duffy hostage. Gordon was nominated for an Irish Theatre Award for this performance. In his introduction to the published scripts of the two plays, Mark Phelan argues: “It is impossible to explain just how central Dan Gordon’s superb performances of frightened ingénue and fulminating ideologue in *Caught Red Handed* and his etch-a-sketch characterizations of peeler, politician, paramilitary and paramour in *To Be Sure* were to the success of both productions.”²⁵ Thus, Gordon’s iconic presence would have acted as a connective thread between the two plays.

Like many choices within *To Be Sure*, the decision to have one actor play all these characters worked both on the level of the ridiculous and the political (and indeed these reinforced each other). Loane did not shy away from gags that drew attention to the absurdity of the quadruple casting; for example, when Kathleen De Ruin first entered and identified herself as Duffy’s bodyguard, the family observed that she hadn’t been doing a good job of it. She countered “It’s not easy when we’re not able to be seen in the same place.” The stage directions then asked the other actors to reinforce that this is a result of the two characters being played by the same actor: “All recognise her physical predicament.”²⁶ Only a few moments earlier, Duffy had been knocked unconscious and stuffed in a cabinet, allowing Gordon to re-enter as De Ruin. The absurdity of such changes increased as the show progressed, mirroring Loane’s initial stage

argue that, in this context, “black” is an insult to the character’s morality (albeit one with racist overtones) rather than a literal description of his race. While this isn’t precisely a common insult, Loane certainly did not invent it. Dan Gordon is certainly white and the photographs of him in this character show no effort to mark him as anything else (for example, through the use of blackface or stereotyped costumes). Urban does not address Gordon’s race or performance in her discussion of the character’s race.

²⁴ Fricker.

²⁵ Phelan 19.

²⁶ Loane 176.

direction about acting style: “Beginning almost, but never quite, naturalistic, the performance style should become increasingly heightened as the story unfolds.”²⁷

At the same time, the use of multiple casting also made a broader political point about the interchangeability of the figures acting within “official” republicanism. Jerome Duffy was only superficially different from Thumper McGee, the member of the IRA army council who maintained order in West Belfast through violence. Eva Urban stresses the importance of the play as political satire, noting Loane’s admiration of Dario Fo. She also quotes Loane’s frustration with people who write his plays off as “merely” silly: “He is ‘annoyed’ by comments describing *Caught Red Handed* and *To Be Sure* as ‘a bit of a laugh’ and ‘not to be taken too seriously’, a misunderstanding of his plays with which he takes ‘huge offense.’”²⁸ Thus, it is important to view this zany and macabre humor as intrinsic to the play’s political messages, not detracting from them.

To understand *To Be Sure*, one must also understand the specific historical context of Northern Ireland in early 2007. In her review of the play for *Variety*, Karen Fricker emphasized this connection: “Play and production are a celebration of theater’s immediacy and its localness: The jokes probably wouldn’t play very well anywhere else in the world. But at Belfast’s Lyric Theater, the cathartic laughter it provokes and the ideas it leaves lingering resonate deeply in this troubled context.” The play was not only of its place, but also of its time; it was written and performed before the 2009 upswing in dissident violence. This began with the shootings of two soldiers and one policeman in March 2009, and has since included several bombings, one of which killed Catholic policeman Ronan Kerr in 2011. Dissident republicans are now recognized as a dangerous group with the potential to wreak serious havoc in Northern Ireland, but this would not necessarily have been the case in 2007. A perusal of newspapers in late 2006 and early 2007 yields several references to republican violence, but it was primarily presented as occurring on a small scale over internal conflicts or territory disputes. A few voices warned that

²⁷ Loane 120.

²⁸ Urban 168.

these groups might become a serious threat, but overall the writers presented the dissidents as thugs who were perhaps a danger to their immediate communities, but not as organized political actors capable of the large-scale terrorism they would engage in only two years later. It is important to read the Powers family in light of these earlier narratives of dissident republicanism – if the play had been written two years later, their actions might have seemed less outlandish and more like a reflection of the real danger such groups posed.

Indeed, we can see this difference in comparing the Powers family with Alan, the deranged dissident in *National Anthem* (chapter two). Alan shared many characteristics with the Powers family: he did not seem to be entirely sane, and his republican convictions (although deeply held) were rooted in a simplistic understanding of Irish nationalism. *National Anthem* was staged in 2010, however, and it presented Alan as a much more serious threat to the society than the Powers family. Alan's schemes might have been ridiculous (he spent much of the play dressed as a badger in order to exact personal revenge on two men he believed injured him decades ago), but they were far more premeditated than the Powers's violence. In addition, the Powers largely acted in isolation – their actions had consequences for the larger republican movement, but they acted independently of it. In contrast, Alan was still tied in to the republican leadership – he was able to manipulate the preparations for the celebration to ensure that his two enemies and his daughter would end up in the same room. Thus, the threats presented by the two sets of dissident republican characters generally mirrored the perceived threats present by real dissident republicans at the time of the plays' productions. Alan could pull strings and manipulate major events, while the Powers ability to disrupt the peace process was largely accidental.

Audiences at *To Be Sure* could not, of course, have known that their understanding of dissident republicans would dramatically shift in two years; the play did, however, have a more urgent and immediately recognizable resonance with the specifics of the political process. In addition to being the opening night of the production, March 7, 2007 saw the first elections for the newly-reinstated devolved Northern Irish government. The body had been suspended in

2002, and the parties only agreed to cooperate and attempt to govern together again after lengthy negotiations. Many of these were contained in the St Andrews agreement of October 2006. One of the final hurdles to be cleared was the stipulation that Sinn Féin must accept the legitimacy of and agree to cooperate with the Police Service of Northern Ireland. As I outlined in my introduction, this organization was the result of a significant overhaul of the former primarily-Protestant Royal Ulster Constabulary, and many nationalists remained skeptical about its ability fairly administer justice. At Sinn Féin's Ard Fhéis (or annual convention) in January 2007, however, the party agreed to put their support behind the PSNI. This concession allowed the formation of the devolved government to take place. While those who supported the GFA saw it as an important step towards peace, dissidents saw this as yet another betrayal of the history of Irish republicanism.

The characters in *To Be Sure*, particularly the mother Marian, were obsessed with this history, and especially its violent legacies. Loane used this to counter the mainstream republican narrative that the current peace is a natural step on the path to Irish freedom laid out by those who gave up their lives for this goal. This logic makes the precarious argument that violence was justified in the past, but that changes in Northern Irish law and society have made it indefensible now. In opposition to this narrative, the play suggested that violent republicans of the past had more in common with the dissident Powers family than with smooth politicians like Jerome Duffy (and by extension Gerry Adams). Rather than ennobling the dissidents, however, this called into question the reverence in which most republicans hold the “martyrs” of the past.

As the play began, Marian and her son Thomas were preparing for an Easter celebration, but it soon became clear that its message owed more to Irish politics than to Christianity. The “cultural expression,” as Marian insisted on defining it,²⁹ was to be superbly tacky; Marian

²⁹ This phrase itself acts as a jibe at the current state of Northern Irish discourse. Urban links it to the celebration of the republican “West Belfast Festival,” but it also evokes the debates around the Orange Order’s Twelfth of July parades (175). As overt sectarianism becomes less publically acceptable, many on both sides argue against changing their traditional activities because they are “part of their culture,” a category which the GFA explicitly protects.

wanted this performance to rival the elaborate Christmas lights of their neighbors.³⁰ Her plans included a full sized cross (which was to be paraded up and down the streets on the family's backs before someone was attached to it), with Marian performing the role of the Virgin Mary kneeling at the bottom. Symbols of Irish nationalism were also present; Marian planned to drape herself in an enormous Irish tricolor, which she had made because she couldn't find a large enough version in the shops.

Easter has a particularly strong resonance in the history of Irish nationalism, largely due to the Easter Rising of 1916, in which Irish nationalists took over the center of Dublin and held it for six days. From their headquarters at the General Post Office, the rebels released a proclamation declaring an Irish Republic. In the end, the Rising failed, and the British executed fifteen of its leaders. These men then became some of the most significant martyrs of the Irish republican movement. The Powers family took this event very seriously; at the beginning of the play, Joe was uncomfortable with his wife's overt display of her dissident views, but the two shared a reverence for the Easter Rising. While Marian emphasized the martyrdom of those who died in the Rising, Joe used the proclamation these men issued as a guiding moral force.

As both Urban and Phelan have observed, Marian was a parody of the figure of "Mother Ireland" most prominently represented in Yeats's and Gregory's *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* (1902). In this play, a young man is moved to abandon his fiancé and join the 1798 rebellion when a strange old woman comes to his parents' house and tells them of her problems, which include having lost her "four beautiful green fields" and having "too many strangers in the house."³¹ It becomes clear that she is an embodiment of Ireland – the four fields represent Ireland's four provinces, and the invading strangers are the English. The old woman does not engage in violence herself, but rather inspires young men to go and lose their lives in her name (since the play depicts a historical revolution, the nationalists' loss is a foregone conclusion). Similarly, Marian spent the beginning of *To Be Sure* haranguing her sons and husband about their failures

³⁰ Loane 129

³¹ "Cathleen Ni Houlihan" 7.

as republicans. She imagined herself as a melodramatic martyr, just as Cathleen is presented in Yeats and Gregory's play. This served to connect her to the history of Irish nationalism, but also undermined the romanticism of the Mother Ireland trope. If Marian was representative of the Irish mothers who sent their sons off to die for the country, then these mothers were hardly to be admired. Since Yeats himself connected Cathleen Ni Houlihan with the Rising (asking with typical hubris in a 1938 poem: "Did that play of mine send out / Certain men the English shot?"),³² it is not unreasonable to transfer the deromanticization of Mother Ireland to the Rising itself.³³ Through this construction, Marian became the true heir of Irish nationalism, but it was no longer a particularly desirable inheritance.

Joe initially used the language of the proclamation made at the Rising to object to some of Marian's actions, but as the play progressed, Marian's view of the Rising came to be accepted as the correct one.³⁴ Certainly, Duffy, the republican who had accepted the Agreement and taken his place in a British-controlled government, was depicted as having broken faith with republicans. As Fricker observes: "Most of the meat of Loane's argument rests in the Powers' interaction with political leader Jerome Duffy, played by Gordon, imitating Adams' particular diction and smile with uncanny accuracy. With his Saville Row attire and empty politico-speak, Duffy is portrayed as a slick operator who has lost touch with the people he represents and not fully cut ties to his violent past." The play was at its most didactic during Duffy's scenes with the family. He was initially charming and ingratiating when Grace brought him in to deal with what she believed was merely Liam's peripheral involvement in a robbery of the post office³⁵ (she did not know that the rest of her family had already killed a policeman and a prominent IRA

³² "Man and Echo" 11-12.

³³ There are other connections between the "Mother Ireland" trope Marian embodies and the Rising. Urban, for example, links Marian to the speaker in Padraic Pearse's 1916 poem "The Mother" (174). Here, the mother refuses to grieve for her sons who have died fighting the British because she believes they sacrificed their lives nobly. Pearse was a leader in the Easter Rising and wrote the poem while he was waiting to be executed.

³⁴ To cement this rejection of the noble ideals in the 1916 proclamation, Marian offered her own Easter oration, which she eventually forced Duffy to read on videotape. It made extreme and outlandish demands, including outlawing the Orange Order (192).

³⁵ This, in itself, is a parody of the "noble" violence at the General Post Office in 1916.

member and stashed the bodies around the house). As the tension escalated (and the family took him hostage), Duffy's "man of the people" image cracked and he displayed himself as little more than a power-hungry hypocrite. First, he observed "The man on the street is basically thick. If he wasn't, he wouldn't be on the street, narr would he?"³⁶ After Grace argued that "the people want to think for themselves," Duffy countered:

They want to *think* that they're thinking for themselves. But they don't like complications. They want easy answers; they want black and white; they want lines they can understand: that's fighting talk. (*Beat*) We said fight, and youse fought. Narr we say stop. And I think it's best for all of the people if you be good and do exactly what you're told.³⁷

Here, Loane demonstrated the same frustration with sectarian politics he expressed in *Caught Red Handed*. The politicians in both productions had contempt for the people and acted in their own best interest rather than in that of the state (or even that of their own community). They were also inherently fickle and self-serving; Duffy did not frame the argument for peace in terms of the common good, but rather as another instance of the manipulation of the republican people. Thus, the production's vision of the assenting republicans, those in power who did sign on to the GFA, was arguably even less flattering than its portrayal of the dissidents.

The play ostensibly ended happily, with the familiar comedic trope of unification through heterosexual marriage.³⁸ Leslie proposed to Grace, and she accepted. As Urban observes, this was not the normal cross-community union so common in Northern Irish plays (see, for example, *The Wedding Community Play* discussed in chapter two); instead, the couple were both Catholics, but represent different sections of that community.³⁹ By becoming a police officer, Leslie had entirely accepted the peace process, while Grace's family had rejected it. Thus, their

³⁶ Loane 196. Jerome initially made this comment to Grace in Irish, as she was the only other character present who spoke the language. He viewed her as an ally (potentially due to the distance her university education had created between her and her working-class family), but she was disgusted by his contempt and translated his statement for the whole family (and the audience).

³⁷ Loane 196, emphasis in original.

³⁸ According to Urban, this was not Loane's initial plan; Leslie's "resurrection" was added to allow a happy ending (184).

³⁹ Urban 184.

marriage could have brought the Powers family back to the center of a shared society. Indeed, the family's input might even have fixed some of the problems demonstrated in the republican leadership. In spite of their criminal behavior throughout the play, this reintegration might even have been possible; it seemed likely that there would be no repercussions for the family's violence. They had pinned the blame entirely on the now-deceased Thumper Magee, and the assumption was that, in order to maintain the stability of the peace process, the events would be hushed up rather than investigated.

Yet this very escape pointed to the continued corruption of the Northern Irish state and unsettled any easy reading of the play's ending as "happy." The problems within the republican community that the play outlined would not be solved by a simple marriage. The family's acceptance of Leslie had more to do with expediency and their efforts to protect themselves than with any softening towards his political position. In the play's final moments, as the family left their house, having planted a bomb to frame Thumper as "Ireland's first suicide bomber,"⁴⁰ they shared an exchange that suggested their views on the current state of the peace process had not fundamentally changed. Joe asked "D'you really think we'll win?," to which Grace and Marian responded "It's not about winning... It's about never being beat."⁴¹ It seemed that the Powers family would make it out of the current mess, but it would not fundamentally change their politics.

The play refused to suggest a narrative of true peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland: the Powers family was despicable, but so were Duffy and the other republicans who signed on to the GFA. Phelan argues that, in Loane's plays, the younger generation offers hope for the future: "[I]t is in the apostate children of political activists, Wayne [the Leader's son in *Caught Red Handed*] and Grace, that some hope for the future exists. Both break ranks with their families and communities to espouse a civic, shared sense of belonging that suggests the

⁴⁰ This, of course, evokes the specter of Islamic terrorism, and in particular the ways that the attacks on September 11, 2001 changed the romantic view of IRA terrorism held by many outside of Ireland and the United Kingdom.

⁴¹ Loane 207.

next generation just might make it ‘to the other side of revenge.’”⁴² While this was undeniably true of Wayne, who overcame his fear of public speaking and moved his father’s party in a more moderate direction, I would argue that it, at best, only partially applied to Grace. She began the play as an active supporter of the peace process, but by the end she had largely rejected it. Her disgust with Duffy caused her to try to shoot him (an attempt which only failed because Joe had removed the bullets from the gun); if she later regretted doing this, it was because of the possibly legal repercussions not the morality of the action. Although she became engaged to Leslie in the play’s final moments, it was clear that her views had changed drastically over the course of the play; there was little reason to believe that the union would now be a happy one. Thus, the production refused to fully endorse the narrative that the next generation will automatically be free from sectarianism. Instead, it suggested that this group is capable of as much corruption and hatred as their parents.

To Be Sure demonstrated one of the pitfalls of narratives of unity that attempt to force dissidents to become active participants in the shared society. Although the Powers family did eventually throw in their lot with Duffy and those controlling the peace process, they did so for expedience rather than because of a sincere desire to work with their Protestant neighbors to improve society. Indeed, the shared society depicted in the play was a brittle and superficial one; the Powers were not outsiders in a society that was otherwise healthy and thriving. By depicting those in power who signed on to the peace process as similar to those who did not, the play rejected the narrative in which the “bad” dissident outsiders are used to prove that the “good” non-dissidents have fully integrated and embraced the shared society.

THIS IS WHAT WE SANG AND BELFAST’S JEWS

While *To Be Sure* depicted a group that chose to move to the margins of the shared society, the characters in Gavin Kostick’s *This Is What We Sang* were never offered such a choice. The play centered on a Jewish family who immigrated to Belfast at the end of the

⁴² Phelan 16.

nineteenth century, and insisted on their centrality to narratives of Northern Ireland's history and future. *This Is What We Sang* premiered on October 21, 2009 and like *The Wedding Community Play*, *National Anthem*, and *convictions* was part of the Belfast Festival at Queens. The play was staged by Kabosh Theatre at the Belfast Synagogue in the north of the city, again under the direction of Paula McFetridge (Illustration 19).⁴³ The play was told through monologues, with four characters representing three generations reflecting on their lives and choices. The fifth character, Saul (Alan Burke), sang rather than spoke; he was the synagogue's cantor, and provided the music as the other characters worked through a process of repentance and forgiveness for Yom Kippur.

The play was an epic story that covered more than a century in the family's life. Brothers Lev (Lalor Roddy) and Saul left Latvia in 1897. Although they had initially planned to travel to the United States, they were left in Hull, England by unscrupulous agents who demanded more money to take them the rest of the way (or so Lev claimed – later generations expressed doubts about the story). They decided to end their journey in Belfast after hearing about the city's industry. Once settled in the North, Lev partnered with a carpenter, and the combination of Lev's business skills and the carpenter's artistry made them quite successful.⁴⁴ After several years, Lev married Hannah (Laura Hughes), an English Jew who then moved to Belfast with him. Saul married her sister, Lottie, who was not an onstage character in the play. Lev and Hannah had three children: two boys (who also did not appear) and one daughter, Siss⁴⁵ (Jo Donnelly). Siss never married or entered into a romantic relationship (she told the audience that one of her regrets was having remained a virgin until her death) but was an active member of

⁴³ My reading of this play is based primarily on two viewings: a recording of the original production in Belfast and a live viewing when Kabosh brought the play to the 1st Irish Festival in New York in September 2010. I have also used the script that was published by Lagan Press as a program for the initial production, conversations with McFetridge, and reviews of the play to expand my reading.

⁴⁴ In this way, Lev did fall into the stereotype of the Jewish man who is good with money, but he was also depicted as an honorable and honest businessman, so the play avoided the extremes of this trope. His behavior was also in keeping with the general ethos of Belfast at the moment: it was an industrial city that admired innovation and strong business skills. Finally, the carpenter with whom he partnered was also Jewish, and was depicted as having minimal business sense.

⁴⁵ "Siss" was a nickname given by her brothers; her real name, Ruth, was only used once in the play.

both Jewish and non-Jewish Belfast society. She was also the only family member to have lived through the Troubles, although these events did not play a significant role in the play. The final family member was Bill (Paul Kennedy), Lev and Hannah's great grandson and Siss's great nephew. His grandfather moved to the United States at the beginning of World War II, and Bill never had significant contact with the Northern Irish part of his family. He was summoned to Belfast, however, by Siss, who was dying of lung cancer. At the beginning of the play, he was the only character still alive – the play was set in a liminal, ritual time and space that was neither the afterlife nor the world of the living.

To research the play, Jo Egan, then Kabosh's Creative Producer, conducted interviews with many Northern Irish Jews. Excerpts of these interviews (along with the script) were included in the play's program. They demonstrated a rich and diverse history of the Jewish community in Belfast. The testimonies detailed the experiences of new immigrants; the struggle to preserve their religious and cultural practices in the new land; and the traumatic effects of the Troubles, which prompted many to leave Belfast and in some cases Northern Ireland entirely. The final document in the program was a reflection by Katy Radford, a prominent organizer within the Belfast Jewish community. Here, she recalled the thinking that guided her first conversations with McFetridge about the possibility of creating a site-specific play about her community:

We began from the premise that the Jewish Community in Belfast (in keeping with other Jewish communities throughout the world) is a success story of the survival, against the odds, of a people living in diaspora, with all the frailties of being human brings [sic]. The history of the Belfast Jewish Community provides a pertinent reminder of the need to ensure that minority communities, new migrants and those who are marginalised (including women) are given the opportunity to participate fully in the economic, social and cultural life of Northern Ireland.⁴⁶

This quotation suggests ways that the empathy created for the Jewish community by the play might transfer onto other groups. This is particularly important, since the size of the Jewish community in Northern Ireland has rapidly declined in recent years. Radford estimated that the

⁴⁶ Kostick 72.

Jewish population in the North in 2009 was only one tenth of its largest size.⁴⁷ Although the production insisted on the specificity of the characters' experiences as Jews, it also marked Jews as representatives of two larger groups: religious minorities and immigrants. The remainder of my discussion of the play focuses on the ways the characters' experiences as historical members of these two groups might transfer to the anxieties around inclusion of religious minorities and immigrants within contemporary narratives of unity.

In the introduction to this dissertation, I discussed a joke prevalent in Northern Ireland: One man (always a man) asks about another's religion; the second man responds that he is Jewish (or Muslim, or Hindu, or Buddhist). "Yes," the first man responds, "but are you a Catholic Jew (Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist) or a Protestant Jew (Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist)?" I argued that the joke, while of course poking fun at the reductive binary created by the "two-communities model," also points to the ways that religious affiliation acts as a stand-in for political identification. In many ways, the first man is actually asking whether the second is a nationalist or a unionist, and as such his dissatisfaction with the answer provided makes a certain amount of sense (although the fact that the second man might be neither remains unthinkable). The fact that the joke can be told using any non-Christian religion, however, offers another level of insight into the position of religious minorities: in place of the two-communities model, the joke imagines Northern Ireland as divided into three communities: Catholic, Protestant, and "other." While this allows more nuance than the two-communities model, it still lumps all other religions (as well as ethnicities and national origins) into one group with little regard for their differences. *This is What We Sang* decidedly did not have this problem; the structure of the script, the plot, and the performance all insisted on the play's Jewishness.

First, the play was structured around the observations and rituals of Yom Kippur, arguably the most sacred Jewish holiday. Yom Kippur marks the end of the high holy days in the Jewish calendar, and is also commonly called the "day of atonement." Jews reflect on their

⁴⁷ Kostick 72.

misdeeds from the past year and seek forgiveness for them, both from God and those who were wronged.⁴⁸ The characters in *This is What We Sang* engaged in a similar process, reflecting on the choices they had made and offering repentance where they felt it was necessary. Although it was not evident in performance, Kostick divided the script into three sections: “Repentance,” “Sacrifice,” and “Forgiveness,” which further emphasized the centrality of Yom Kippur to the play.

McFetridges’s staging of *This Is What We Sang* further highlighted this centrality; the decision to use the synagogue and the specific staging choices both reinforced this message. The play was not set in a realistic space (but rather some kind of liminal place between life and death), so logically the characters need not have behaved as though they were actually in a synagogue. For the most part, however, Kostick and McFetridge did instruct them to follow the customs of this sacred space. As the characters entered at the beginning, the men conducted a ritual that involved covering their eyes and praying as they put on their shawls. The performers were all dressed in white, a tradition for Yom Kippur. The music at the beginning (composed by Neil Martin, who had previously served as the choirmaster for the synagogue and worked with McFetridge on *convictions*) was a variation of the Kol Nidre, the chanted prayer that opens the Yom Kippur service. Given the small Jewish population in Belfast, one can assume that a majority of audience members were not Jews, but the production made little effort to explain these traditions to the audience. The significance of these moments might therefore have been lost on many non-Jewish members of the audience, but they would have resonated clearly with those who were Jews, emphasizing that the production was truly invested in giving an accurate portrayal of the Jewish faith (in all its complexity).

While the rituals and beliefs of Judaism were emphasized non-verbally, the monologues focused on the more practical aspects of the characters’ experiences both as Jewish immigrants

⁴⁸ The text did not connect this ritualized repentance and atonement with the discussions about whether and how those who committed violence during the troubles should apologize or make amends. The prevalence of these themes within the play did, however, offer the possibility for audience members to make connections between the production and this element of the state’s political discourse on their own.

to Belfast and as a family with its own secrets, struggles, and joys. The conflict between Protestants and Catholics remained largely at the edges of the story. Siss recalled a childhood incident in which different (sectarian) lyrics to a jump-rope song had caused a fight between her playmates,⁴⁹ but overall the play painted the issues at the root of the conflict as largely irrelevant to the Jews (even though, as the community's real-life retreat from Belfast demonstrates, they were also affected by the violence of the Troubles). This distance was further emphasized by the fact that the Troubles did not play a significant role in the narrative; the play concentrated on the first half of the twentieth century, and Siss did little more than acknowledge that the Troubles happened.

In addition to being distinctly Jewish, the characters were also distinctly immigrants – Siss was the only character to speak with a Northern Irish accent. Further, the remaining characters each spoke with a different accent: Lev's was Latvian, Hannah's was English, and Bill's was American. Thus, even within itself, the family represented a diverse range of national origins. The family's multi-nationality encouraged the audience to make connections to the many other immigrant groups present in the state. The treatment of immigrants in the North demonstrates that the two-communities model in Northern Ireland is more about ethnic affiliation than religion; most of the immigrants from Eastern Europe come from some kind of Christian background, yet they are not generally incorporated into the seemingly-appropriate community once they arrive in the North. Given the rise in immigration since the end of the Troubles and the relaxation of EU rules on travel and work between countries, many people in the North view immigration as a new phenomenon (the accepted wisdom has been that people leave Ireland, not come to it). *This Is What We Sang*, however, countered this narrative and insisted on including immigrants as an integral part of the state's history. This would have had a particularly timely resonance, since the play premiered less than six months after the attacks on the Romanian families discussed above.

⁴⁹ Kostick 40.

The play emphasized this long-standing presence of immigrants by showing the characters' experiences of the bombing of Belfast during World War II, a historical trauma that has been discussed far less than the Troubles. In spite of the fact that Belfast was an important manufacturing city (particularly for military transport and equipment), no effort was made to protect it from German bombing during the Blitz. As a result, when the city was bombed in April and May 1941, the effects were devastating. More than nine hundred people were killed, and many more were injured. Approximately half of the buildings in Belfast were damaged or destroyed. The raid on April 16, 1941 was the most deadly bombing attack on any UK city other than London.

During the years of the Troubles, the trauma of the Blitz was generally ignored in favor of discussing more immediate bombings. There have been several attempts to reintroduce this history since the peace process, however, including a number of books and a special exhibition at the Linen Hall Library. This resurgence of interest is presumably at least partially due to the fact that the bombing was a non-sectarian trauma, a moment when all the people of Belfast were in danger from a common enemy (although the lack of protection provided by the British does add a political element to these discussions). The sequences in which Siss recalled these events were the most tense and energized moments of the play. She remembered running through the streets fearing that her father had been caught in the bombing of the city center, and then discovering that, while he had not been hurt, his partner Benny had lost both his arms in the bombing (wounds that proved fatal). The language in these sections was visceral and evoked a trauma experienced by the whole city, not just its Jewish population.

In addition to being about the importance and experiences of Jewish immigrants, the production was also decidedly about Belfast. Like many of the plays discussed in this dissertation, it insisted on the specificity of Belfast geography – it gave street names and areas, assuming they would conjure specific pictures and memories for audiences.⁵⁰ The audience

⁵⁰ This element of the play was largely lost when it toured to New York, as most audience members were unfamiliar with Belfast (indeed, in this setting, the Jewish elements were far more familiar to most audience members).

learned that Siss was instrumental in raising money to build a new synagogue (the one, in fact, in which the production took place). Although these efforts were directly related to her Judaism, the new building also worked to literally change the landscape of Belfast, the only home she ever knew. Similarly, Lev described the sense of homecoming he felt when he arrived in Belfast:

What did I see when I arrived? I saw the docks of course and the shipyards. And I saw the Customs House. It had these gods carved on it and a man next to me: an educated man, he must have been, he picked them out and said they were the gods of Manufacture, Commerce, Industry and oy, Peace, Peace of course. So I thought great, this is what I want. A city whose gods are Manufacture, Commerce, Industry and Peace. This is a good sign.⁵¹

Lev's awareness of the irony of "peace" being a god of Belfast did not overshadow his feelings of connection to the city. This moment also served to remind the audience about the particular history of Belfast, which was industrial in a way unlike any other Irish city. Little could be further from the romantic view of Ireland as a land of cottages, pubs, and rolling fields. Lev's description of his first impressions of Belfast thus invoked the pride many residents (from both communities, although particularly unionists) feel for their unique city.

The emotional connection to the city was particularly strong for Siss, the only onstage character to be born in the North. Although Lev's business was presented as an integral part of Belfast commerce, it was Siss who truly emotionally identified with the city, for good or ill. She spoke of riding a bicycle around the city and joining the traditional Irish music scene, thus forging connections with non-Jewish communities. When recalling the bombing during World War II, she lamented: "Oh Belfast, Belfast. I mean, it's a hard town to be romantic about and a hard place to love, but by God when I saw her taken apart like that, oh it was terrible. [...] You know, maybe I should talk about that dreadful Hitler and the Holocaust and our people, and it was all that too, but for me it was watching fire in this lovely city where I danced and played and went to school."⁵² Siss's comments about Belfast being difficult to love would have resonated

⁵¹ Kostick 28.

⁵² Kostick 44.

particularly strongly after the violence and the hatred of the Troubles, but her love of the city seemed to be all the more fierce for this.

Finally, it is important to note that these identity positions as immigrants and members of a religious minority did not entirely structure the characters' lives. Indeed, one of the ways the play emphasized the family's position within Belfast society was by depicting them dealing with more universal interpersonal problems. This was most evident in the relationship between Hannah, Lev, and Siss. When he first introduced himself, Lev stated: "I left my children better than my father left me, is that not good? I left a son in New York and a son in Cleveland, (*hint of a pause*) and a daughter."⁵³ In Lalor Roddy's performance of Lev, the pause was more than a hint, and the words "and a daughter" seemed to be filled with a kind of regret or pensiveness. Although this only happened a few minutes into the play, Lev had already displayed himself to be opinionated and concerned with money as a marker of success. The audience was therefore likely to imagine that the seeming regret surrounding Siss was due to her gender (and perhaps the non-Jews might associate that with Lev's Judaism, and shake their heads reproachfully at a culture that is not as "forward thinking" as theirs). It was eventually revealed that this reticence came from the fact that she was not actually his biological daughter. Hannah slept with her brother-in-law Saul once after learning that Lev had had many mistresses throughout their marriage (Hannah had fallen in love with Saul when she first met him, but by then she was already engaged to Lev). Although Lev never knew who Siss's biological father was, he was certain that it could not be himself.

This plotline showed Lev as a flawed yet basically honorable man, and he (like the other characters in the play) maintained a quiet dignity throughout. He told the audience that his initial impulse was to cast Hannah aside and shame her, but he quickly realized that would be hypocritical given his own infidelities. Instead, he decided against either public or private recriminations. His relationship with Hannah (which had always been more companionate than

⁵³ Kostick 28.

romantic) did not change, and he treated Siss as his own child. Thus, his slight hesitation before calling her his daughter at the beginning of the play seemed to be a consideration and affirmation of the complexity of their relationship rather than disappointment with her or her gender. This reading was confirmed when, in his last spoken lines, Lev stated: “Oh yes, Sissy was my girl alright. And I loved her. I am Lev, and the great pride of my life is Sissy, my daughter, Ruth.”⁵⁴ While Lev was certainly a flawed character, he shone in this fierce defense of his relationship with his non-biological daughter.

Siss’s gender may not have been important to Lev, but it was vital to the structure of the play and its position within Northern Irish theatre. Although Hannah and Bill were important characters, Lev and Siss were the ones who truly drove the play. Of these two, Siss was the true Northern Irish person, by virtue of both her birth in the state and the choices she made about her identity. She was the one who spoke on behalf of Belfast. As my introduction and the previous chapters have demonstrated, the story of Northern Ireland tends to be told from a male perspective. In spite of the fact that women were participants in the conflict, most narratives treat both the Troubles and the Peace Process as primarily the purview of men. When women are present, they are apolitical and confined to the private sphere like the wives in *The Chronicles of Long Kesh* (chapter three) or frame their desire for peace as a direct product of their identities as mothers like the Nobel-Prize-winning Peace Woman movement. Since the Troubles were largely absent from *This is What We Sang*, Siss’s position as a woman could do little to undercut the representation of women in relation to the conflict. It could, however, offer a corrective to more general narratives of women within the state. Since Siss was decidedly not a wife or mother, and, indeed, had never been in a romantic or sexual relationship, she remained largely outside these traditional narratives of femininity.⁵⁵ Thus, unlike many of the female characters in Northern Irish theatre (and in larger narratives within the state’s discourse), Siss’s

⁵⁴ Kostick 56.

⁵⁵ The possibility that she might be a lesbian was neither raised nor hinted at, but Siss also never revealed any significant attraction to a man to demonstrate that she was heterosexual.

story was not controlled by men who were the political actors. Her relationship to Belfast and its many communities existed in its own right, rather than being secondary to the private sphere of the home.

As the play ended, Bill offered a final reflection on the morality of his family: “Lev, Sissy, Hannah, Saul... who am I to judge. Do I have the right to say this was a good thing to do, this a bad? So and so is a good person, so and so was wicked. What can you say. They lived. They were here. They did the best they could do in the time they were in.”⁵⁶ If the production had a moral, this is it (although early in her first monologue, Siss refused to engage in such solemnity and flippantly insisted that the moral of her life would be “don’t smoke”).⁵⁷ The characters’ lives were shaped by their religion, their status as immigrants, their residence in Belfast, and their relationships with each other. They were not perfect, nor should they be expected to be. The play did argue that they were “just the same” as the Catholics and Protestants living in the North, but it did suggest that they had been just as important to the state’s life. Ideally, spectators would leave the play thinking that immigrants and members of religious minorities had made important contributions to the state in the past and would strengthen the shared society – that these groups should not merely be included for their own benefit or out of an abstract notion of fairness.

GOD’S COUNTRY AND BELFAST’S SEXUAL MINORITIES

Although *This Is What We Sang* made occasional references to bigotry against the Jewish community, these issues remained in the background. Siss remarked: “No, anti-Semitism wasn’t a big thing in my life.”⁵⁸ In contrast, prejudice was at the forefront of Colin Bell’s *God’s Country*, where it was presented as inextricably linked to the sectarian hatred present in Northern Ireland. Taking place over approximately twenty four hours, the play depicted the return of

⁵⁶ Kostick 58.

⁵⁷ Kostick 39.

⁵⁸ Kostick 40. This sentiment was echoed by many of the participants in Egan’s interviews. Although they pointed to moments of discrimination, they generally ascribed this to general sectarianism rather than anti-Semitism. For example, many found it difficult to get jobs in Protestant-controlled businesses because they weren’t Protestant. In these moments, they suggested, Jews and Catholics were subject to exactly the same discrimination.

Jamie Williamson (Paul Mallon), a thirty-year-old gay man, to his parents' home in an unnamed town near Belfast. Jamie had moved to London at seventeen when his parents kicked him out of their house. In this, his first return to Northern Ireland, he was accompanied by his English partner Jonathon (Patrick Buchanan). Jamie's parents, Patricia and Jim Williamson (Laura Hughes and Ivan Little), were unionist politicians with very conservative views; the play strongly suggested, although never explicitly stated, that they were members of the DUP.

The home to which Jamie returned was already deeply unsettled. A year prior to the play's action, Jim had a stroke that took him out of public life. Although Patricia claimed he was almost ready for a comeback, it became clear over the course of the play that his cognitive abilities had been too severely damaged for Patricia's claim of optimism to be realistic. Jamie's return coincided with two other major events: it was the evening of a gala event for the cystic fibrosis charity the Williamsons set up in memory of their other son, Glenn, as well as the night before the funeral of a young Catholic gay man who had been murdered by two Lithuanian men who believed he had flirted with them (I discuss the significance of the killers' nationality later in this section). At the gala, Patricia diverged from her prepared remarks and went on a homophobic tirade that sought to at least partially justify the killers' actions. The tension caused by these events exacerbated an already strained reunion, and Jamie was largely unable to reconcile with his parents. He did, however, decide to make a public stand against his mother. In an effort at damage control following her speech, she planned to lay a wreath at the site of the crime and offer belated condemnations. As the play ended, Jamie planned to attend the funeral, publically outing himself and highlighting Patricia's hypocrisy.

God's Country was first produced by Tinderbox under the direction of Des Kennedy, and opened September 30, 2010.⁵⁹ It was part of a series of three plays titled *True North*, which also included David Ireland's *Everything Between Us* and John McCann's *The Clean Room*. *True*

⁵⁹ My reading of the play is based on a video recording of the production as well as the unpublished script, both generously shared with me by Tinderbox. In analyzing the play, I also draw from my conversations with Tinderbox dramaturg Hanna Slättne and reviews of the play.

North was performed by a cast of six, each of whom appeared in two of the three plays. The title *True North* referenced the cardinal direction (as distinct from magnetic north or grid north), but more importantly suggested an opposition to some sort of “false” Northern Ireland. As a company dedicated to nurturing new and developing playwrights, Tinderbox is anxious not to limit themselves to plays about the Troubles (although, as the previous chapter’s discussion of *convictions* and *The Sign of the Whale* demonstrates, these themes are certainly still present in Tinderbox plays). This commitment was emphasized by the tagline on the play’s program and promotional fliers: “Three new dramas about life in Northern Ireland today.” Clearly, the company hoped that together the three plays would give a nuanced view of the issues beyond sectarianism facing the North in the twenty-first century.

Homophobia is certainly one such issue; members of both traditional communities tend to be socially conservative, and Northern Ireland is seen as the least welcoming part of the UK for GLBT people. Homosexuality is, however, becoming more accepted in the state; Belfast hosts a large Pride festival each summer, and protests against it have steeply declined since the first parade in 1991. As is often the case, this acclimatization has caused those who believe homosexuality to be immoral to become more vocal in their opposition (one might compare this to the increasingly reactionary actions of unionists who fear losing their privilege over Catholics). *God’s Country* offered a critique of the effects of this homophobia and the damage it does to Northern Ireland as a whole. To do so, the play painted a bleak picture of the experiences of gay people in Northern Ireland and crafted a complex but fundamentally condemnatory picture of those who foster homophobia in both their private and public lives.

God’s Country provided a detailed examination of the experience of emigration, which, as I have suggested, is a common trope in Irish literature. It is particularly prominent in depictions of societal “outsiders” during the Troubles. It was invoked in the *Wedding Community Play Project*, when the groom’s mother feared that the cross-community couple would be unsafe unless they left the North. Much 1980s and 1990s theatre by and about women depicted exile as the only way to escape both sectarian and patriarchal violence. For example,

Anne Devlin's *Ourselves Alone* (1985) and Charabanc Theatre's *Gold in the Streets* (1986) both presented moving to England as the best chance at happiness for female characters (although neither play dismissed the pain that this uprooting would cause). Since the peace process, however, this trend has largely disappeared; there is still a paucity of plays dealing with women's experiences in the North, but the ones that do exist are more likely to imagine satisfying lives for women who remain in the state.

The trope of migration for outsiders has not disappeared, however; if it was primarily deployed in relation to women in the 1980s and 1990s, it appears now in connection with gay men (as I discuss later, lesbians, bisexuals, and the transgendered remain largely absent from Northern Irish stages). This transition was particularly evident in Brenda Murphy's *A Night with George*, which premiered at the Féile an Phobail festival in 2010 and has enjoyed several revivals. In this one-woman production, Bridie Murphy (Donna O'Connor) told a cardboard cutout of George Clooney about the struggles in her life, particularly in her now-dissolved marriage to an IRA man (her experiences generally mirrored those of the wives in *Chronicles of Long Kesh*). The play took place the night before she planned to move, but in this case she was not leaving the North – she was moving in with her boyfriend. Thus her move represented her freedom to express her own sexual agency rather than yield to societal dictates.. Her gay son, however, had not experienced this freedom. Like Jamie, he had moved to London as a young adult. He built a happy “out” life there (Bridie described going to a gay club with him and singing Gloria Gaynor's “I Will Survive” in a moment of joy and liberation), but there was no suggestion that such a life could exist in Northern Ireland. While Bridie could now live happily in the North, her gay son could not. Indeed, the only play I have found in which an out gay man remains in the North is Frank McGuinness's *Carthaginians* (1988); it focuses on a small and largely isolated community that explicitly rejects the bigotry and misogyny of much of the North. It is unclear whether Dido, the gay male character, has any place in the larger society.

Structurally, however, Jamie's story was different than most representations of emigration and exile. Rather than either depicting the events that had caused him to leave

Northern Ireland in the first place or giving a cheerful look at his happier life in his new home, *God's Country* emphasized the ways he continued to be haunted by the traumatic events he had experienced during his childhood. He initially hoped to confront his parents for their cruel rejection, but was denied this satisfaction when it became clear that his father could not remember enough to understand him and his mother remained convinced of her own righteousness. Returning to Northern Ireland raised much of Jamie's suppressed pain, but this allowed him to deal with the trauma productively at last.

At first, it seemed that this resurfacing trauma would be enough to destroy Jamie and Jonathon's relationship. Jonathon could not understand why Jamie was unable to write off both Northern Ireland and his parents, and Jamie withdrew from him as if retreating into the closeted mindset of his youth. In the end, however, the experience allowed the two men to become closer than ever before. When Jamie wondered why Jonathon bothered with him, Jonathon replied: "I don't feel sorry for you, I love you. And you know why? It's cause you don't see how fucking incredible you are, how strong you are. You survived this hell-hole and you still don't see what you are. You know sometimes I think; please don't let Jamie know, not realise what he is; 'cause then you might not want me."⁶⁰ Hearing these words while in Northern Ireland helped Jamie release the self-disgust his parents instilled in him, and the scene ended with a heartfelt kiss between the two men. The fact that this took place in a public (albeit at that moment deserted) space proved that Jamie had indeed grown stronger and, unlike earlier in the play, did not feel the need to pass as straight while in the North.

Jamie was also able to address some of the guilt over his brother's death, which had haunted him and which was linked to their parents' homophobia. Glenn, who had suffered from cystic fibrosis, drowned while the two boys were on a boat in the nearby Strangford Lough; Jamie had watched his brother drown, unable to save him. The importance of this event to Jamie's life became clear in the production's first scene, a representation of a nightmare with

⁶⁰ Bell 60.

Jamie struggling through the water in a futile attempt to save Glenn (this scene is also noteworthy as the only non-realistic moment in the play). Near the end of the play, Jamie revealed that the boys had been on the lake that day in an attempt to run away after Patricia berated Jamie, telling him that no one would ever love him if he did not become more “manly.” Thus, Jamie’s trauma over Glenn’s death was inextricably linked to the trauma of his parents’ homophobic rejection.

Some of this healing was possible because Jamie was able to re-experience, in a sense, the circumstances of Glenn’s death, this time with a different outcome. He took his father out onto the Lough hoping that this would help Jim remember their history. Instead, they got into a fight, and Jim fell out of the boat. Jim, like Glenn, was in a weakened physical state, but this time Jamie was able to prevent the drowning. This was an important step for Jamie; he began to let go of the guilt he carried over the death of his brother, the only family member who truly supported him. The play expressed optimism for Jamie; he would return to London a happier and emotionally healthier man. The trauma Northern Ireland had inflicted on him would no longer haunt him. Thus, while *God’s Country* endorsed the logic of the emigration trope in which the outsider can only be happy way from the North, it also emphasized that emigration itself will rarely solve the exiles problems. These will linger, and must perhaps be addressed by reforging some ties with the abandoned country.

In contrast, the play offered little hope for those sexual minorities who remain in the North. The hate crime in which a gay man was murdered provided an extreme example of the damaging effects of homophobia on those who live in the North. The victim, Declan Campbell, had made an out life for himself in Northern Ireland in a way that Jamie could not, but his openness about his sexuality led to his death. The play gave little information about Declan’s life, so there were no stories of happiness or self-fulfillment to offset the horror of his death. Dramaturgically, Declan served more as a symbol than an offstage character. He was a martyr with no backstory; his death served to demonstrate the extremes of homophobia in the North and to act as a catalyst to bring forth Patricia’s homophobia. Similarly, the killers remained largely

ciphers; all the audience knew of them was that they were from Lithuania (and, as I discuss later, Patricia was the only character who seemed to find this worth mentioning). The killers' outsider status worked to alienate the violence from mainstream Northern Irish society, with complicated results. On the most basic level, it suggested that immigrants are inherently more violent and homophobic than the people of Northern Ireland. At the same time, moving the violence away from the center allowed the play, and presumably the audience, to focus on the damaging effects of less overt but still destructive forms of homophobia. While, presumably, few people in Northern Ireland would endorse the murder of a gay man, some would be likely to sympathize with Patricia's religious condemnation of homosexuality. By focusing on this latter form of homophobia and tying it to Declan's murder, the production asked audiences to acknowledge the harm done by all forms of bigotry.

Jamie and Declan were the only queer Northern Irish people mentioned in *God's Country*; this meant that the play neither imagined a Northern Irish GLBT community nor acknowledged the existence of lesbians, bisexuals, or the transgendered. This omission is characteristic of much Northern Irish theatre; a few plays feature gay male characters, but virtually none depict queer women or the transgendered. I have found only two exceptions, and in each of them the representation of these identity positions is ambiguous. In Christina Reid's *Clowns* (1996) a female character at one point hints that she might have been in love with her now-deceased female best friend. Damian Gorman's *Sleep Eat Party* (2009) featured a character who identified as male-to-female transgendered, but the Tinderbox production directed by Michael Duke undercut this identification. Here, the actor's presentation was entirely masculine (presumably at least partially because the actors each played several roles without costume changes). Similarly, the stage directions in the script use male pronouns for the character, Jo. While this could have the effect of asking audiences to think more broadly about gender identity and fluidity, it also would have made it easy for them to read Jo as a gay man. Thus, like *God's Country*, neither of these plays can be seen as offering a significant corrective to the narrow vision of queer identity represented within Northern Irish theatre.

This bleak depiction of the lives of GLBT people in the North was perhaps intentional; it put both the focus and the onus of solving the problem on those who perpetuated homophobia. They became directly responsible for the loss (either by death or emigration) of gay people in the North, and the play suggested that this would have negative effects on everyone in the shared society. This was particularly evident in the play's treatment of Patricia Williamson, whose private actions severely damaged her son while her public pronouncements sought to excuse, at least partially, those who had killed Declan. Indeed, Patricia was in many ways the most memorable character in the production. While Paul Mallon's portrayal of Jamie was relatively quiet, insecure, and soft-spoken, Laura Hughes's Patricia was charismatic and complicated.

Patricia's persona and actions also mirrored those of a prominent Northern Irish politician, and this comparison would certainly have been clear to all local audience members. In June 2008, Iris Robinson (a DUP MLA, and wife of First Minister and DUP leader Peter Robinson) appeared on Stephen Nolan's radio show and railed against homosexuality, which she termed "an abomination." By arguing that the state had a duty to enforce "God's law," she made it clear that she was expressing her political as well as personal beliefs. She also advocated conversion therapy, even offering to supply the name of a therapist.⁶¹ The reaction to this appearance was mixed – the majority of people who expressed views on the Nolan show were uncomfortable with her harsh language, but fundamentally agreed with her that homosexuality was immoral. Iris Robinson's position as a moral authority was severely undermined, however, in January 2010, when it emerged that she had conducted an affair with a nineteen year-old man and used her political clout to help him obtain a government contract and funding for a café.⁶²

⁶¹ "Nolan – Best Calls," <http://www.bbc.co.uk/northernireland/nolan/phonecallarchive/>

⁶² Commentators quickly noticed and exploited the resonances between the scandal and the 1967 film *The Graduate*, in which an older woman named Mrs. Robinson has an affair with a much younger man. In the weeks following many made "Mrs. Robinson" jokes, and several people posted parodies of the Simon and Garfunkel song "Mrs. Robinson" specifically connecting the scandal to Iris Robinson's earlier comments about sexual immorality. Choice lines included Keith Law's "Heaven holds a place for those who pray / except the gays" and Abie Philbin Bowman's "So here's to you, Mrs. Robinson, a teenage lover's really quite a coup (woo hoo hoo) / Does that explain, Mrs. Robinson, why you said gays were worse than pedophiles?" (although, of course, Robinson's lover was over the age of consent, so the charge of pedophilia was hyperbolic). It is also worth noting that several of these songs are deeply misogynistic, especially regarding female sexual agency (these particular videos also tend to be less concerned with Robinson's comments on homosexuality).

Patricia Williamson in *God's Country* was not a thinly veiled version of Iris Robinson (in the style of a *roman á clef*), but the two women did have much in common. Both were politicians in their own right, but were married to more powerful men (the play hinted that, before his stroke, there had been hopes that Jim Williamson would become party leader). They were both uncompromising in expressing their conservative opinions. The play emphasized that Patricia should not be read as a stand in for Iris, however, with an early reference to the real scandal (if the world of the play included the actual Iris Robinson, Patricia Williamson could not also be Iris). In their first scene, Gillian (Claire Lamont), Patricia's political aide, tried to convince Patricia to condemn Declan Campbell's murder in her speech at the benefit, but Patricia resisted because she believed his death was a result of his immoral actions. Gillian reminded her of the potential divisiveness caused by overt homophobia merely with the phrase "Iris on Steven Nolan?"⁶³

This proved to have been a prophetic statement when Patricia diverged from her prepared speech at the banquet. Rather than offering a cheery but essentially vapid praise of families and progress, she condemned the "decay" that had caused Northern Ireland to become even a little tolerant of homosexuality. She contrasted the North with the "more moral" society of Lithuania that created Declan's killers: "Those young men in custody for his murder are from a country that holds Christianity in highest regard. They arrived in our community, seeking opportunity and found spiritual decay. Confused by what seemed acceptable, these men reacted violently with tragic consequences."⁶⁴ These statements caused an uproar similar to that created by Iris's comments on Nolan's show, and Gillian spent the rest of the play in damage-control mode, trying to find any way to minimize the political ramifications of Patricia's rebellion from the party line.

Patricia initially seemed unlikely to reproduce the second part of the Iris Robinson scandal, in which the woman's own behavior made her earlier moralizing seem hollow and

⁶³ Bell 10.

⁶⁴ Bell 32.

hypocritical. Patricia's devotion to her husband seemed unshaken, even after many years of marriage and one of acting as his caregiver. Yet the potential for a different, but still damaging revelation about Patricia's private life became clear as the play progressed and she interacted with her son. It emerged that she had hidden the fact that Jamie was gay, and furthermore had falsely claimed that he was a doctor to improve her family's image. Jamie made an explicit connection between Patricia's and Iris's clandestine behavior. In her only peace-making overture, Patricia offered to connect him with a therapist who would cure his homosexuality (Illustration 20). He responded: "Are you all working on commission? Did Iris pass on the number? (*Beat*) Now there's expensive shoes that need filling. Unless you're doing a line with a 19 year old too, oh no you've a homo son."⁶⁵ Although Patricia's sins were different from Iris's, the two women both projected images of conservative Christian morality to which they did not adhere. Although it was possible that Jamie's homosexuality would not hurt Patricia in the eyes of conservative Christians (particularly given the ferocity with which she had rejected him), her dishonesty certainly would. By connecting Patricia to a political scandal still prominent in the public mind, the play ensured that her bigotry would not be seen as an aberration. She was not only a bigot, but also a powerful bigot like many real-life Northern Irish politicians.

Hanna Slättne, the play's dramaturg, views the play as fundamentally about the potential for change in the DUP (and, to a lesser extent, all Northern Irish politics). The play suggested that the real-life DUP had the option of moving away from the politics of hatred and fear embodied by both Patricia Williamson and Iris Robinson, even if there was no evidence of such movement in the plot. Many hoped that the end of the Troubles would normalize politics in Northern Ireland and move them away from sectarianism. In many ways, Gillian represented the slick politics that one might see in the US or elsewhere in the UK. The speech she wrote for Patricia attempted to paint the party as hip and cutting edge: "'Interactive' is the key; we're now reaching new generations of voters through twitters, facebook and myspaces."⁶⁶ In the end,

⁶⁵ Bell 51.

⁶⁶ Bell 31.

however, these efforts proved superficial, and the play was pessimistic about the possibilities for change coming from within the party. The fact that Patricia's political career seemed to be in its decline might offer hope that she would be replaced by others who were more open to alternative sexualities, but the production discouraged such optimism.

God's Country suggested that this bigotry might still be central within a new generation of DUP members. Gillian and Jamie were the same age, but Gillian's beliefs mirrored Patricia's. While Gillian urged Patricia to take a more moderate public stance about homosexuality, her anxiety was based on managing the party's image in the wake of Declan's death, rather than her own moral convictions. Near the end of play Gillian demonstrated that she also was truly homophobic. In a showdown with Jonathon, she offered a diatribe worthy of Patricia, telling Jonathon that people like Jamie and himself "disgust decent folk."⁶⁷ Thus, Gillian and her generation did not represent any significant hope for a less homophobic DUP, only for one that was more careful to mask its homophobia in public.

Although deeply critical of the homophobia present in Northern Ireland, the play included several elements that complicated a simplistic reading of the North as "backward" or full of purely evil bigots. At first, the play suggested that London was a utopia for gays (particularly in contrast to Belfast). In the North, Jonathon was a fish out of water, unable to adapt his behavior and pass as straight. As he first entered the Williamson's house, Jonathon announced that he was harassed on the street because his bag was perceived as too feminine. While Jamie knew how to blend in, it seemed that Jonathon, as a Londoner, had never needed these skills. As the play continued, however, it became clear that homophobia was a significant part of the men's lives in London. Jamie reminded Jonathon of a man who was kicked to death in Trafalgar Square (presumably for being gay), and of the care they took not to seem "too gay" in certain circumstances. Near the end of the play, the audience learned that Jonathon was not "out" at work; as a science teacher at a girls' school, he feared that his students' parents would

⁶⁷ Bell 67.

react negatively if they knew about his sexuality. Thus, although the play primarily focused on homophobia in Northern Ireland, it emphasized that the North is not the only place where this is a problem.

Similarly, Patricia was a complicated character; the play contained moments that showed her as vulnerable and also a victim of Northern Ireland. Her husband's stroke had taken a toll on her; although she desperately tried to convince both herself and others that Jim was on his way to a full recovery, she knew that he was not. The combined stress of projecting a positive image to the world and acting as Jim's caretaker was evident. She also felt guilt over Glenn's cystic fibrosis. He was conceived before she and Jim were married, and the judgment of her family and neighbors helped convince her that this sin caused his illness. Offering some defense of Patricia to Jonathon, Jamie said "In her there's the person she couldn't be. She had to choose, to survive. They're all victims of this place."⁶⁸ In addition, Glenn's death in the Strangford Lough continued to haunt her and her family. This was symbolically represented in Ciaran Bagnall's set; it was primarily a simple living-room with a couch, table, and chair, but the hull of the boat lurked incongruously and ominously stage right (Illustration 21). Neither the fact that there were also homophobes in London nor that Patricia too had suffered excused the North's homophobia. These elements did, however, point to potential areas from which a more inclusive shared society might arise.

Like *This is What We Sang*, *God's Country* argued that those who do not fit easily into the two-communities model can play an important role in shaping a truly shared society for the benefit of all. *God's Country* suggested a connection between religion and violence; as with Iris Robinson, Patricia's homophobia was deeply tied to her Christianity. Similarly, Declan's death was performed as a gruesome ritual. Jamie told Jonathon: "See that rock sticking up there, the car lights catching it. That's the town rock. They'd leave their old dogs tied to it, for the tide to finish them off. That's where they stoned him, that's where they left him."⁶⁹ Both the act of

⁶⁸ Bell 58.

⁶⁹ Bell 59.

stoning and the use of this specific public place suggested the connection between violence and religion. This in turn emphasized the need for new ways of thinking that could move beyond interacting with “the other” through violence.

The play suggested that their marginalization might also give gay people a particular insight into and power against the two-communities model. Those who come from the two communities grew up as part of the conflict in Northern Ireland, but their own experiences have frequently distanced them from the “them versus us” logic that perpetuated it. As John Lyttle, the son of a prominent loyalist paramilitary member recalls: “Thank God I was gay. I was able to stand outside, live in parallel, and look in. I never bought it. When I heard garbage about Catholics, I thought, ‘Well, you’re saying it because they’re different, and I’m different, and you’re wrong about me so I’m guessing you’re wrong about Catholics.’”⁷⁰ For most of the play, Jamie showed no interest in turning this kind of observation on the divisions in Northern Ireland, but his eventual decision to stand witness at Declan’s funeral suggested that he had, to a certain extent, explicitly rejected sectarianism. Although Jamie did not seem to be religious, he was raised in a tradition in which attending Catholic mass was seen as a massive betrayal (as the charges brought against Orange Order members who attended Ronan Kerr’s funeral, discussed in the previous chapter, demonstrate). Thus, attending Declan’s funeral was not only a form of coming out, but also a cross-community show of solidarity. In this way, the play argued that the experiences of gay people would help build a stronger shared future for all the citizens of Northern Ireland.

Ideally, the play’s overall pessimism about Northern Ireland’s inhospitality to sexual minorities would have acted as a call for heterosexual audience members to work for change. If Slättne is correct that the play was primarily about a moment in which the DUP could have changed course, it was also a lament for the fact that they did not. It will be interesting to see how theatrical representations of the GLBT community evolve in the coming years (and, indeed,

⁷⁰ Quoted in Rolston, *Children of the Revolution* 29-30. Like Jamie in *God’s Country*, Lyttle moved to London when he was 18 and has lived there since.

whether characters from this community other than gay men are given a place on stage). There have been many legal steps to erase homophobia in the rest of the UK; gay men in England, Scotland, and Wales can now donate blood (Northern Ireland's Health Minister, Edwin Poots of the DUP, has refused to lift the ban). At the time of writing, Tory Prime Minister David Cameron is leading a push towards full same-sex marriage equality (although this change would not apply to the North unless it were specifically adopted by the devolved government at Stormont). Although Northern Ireland seems largely to be resisting these advances, incremental change is visible. One can hope that the theatre will play a part in this process, modeling ways that the GLBT community can be part of the shared society while maintaining their sexual and gender identities.

CONCLUSION

The process of creating a shared society is far more complicated than simply erasing the last remnants of distrust between Catholics and Protestants who have already committed to peace. These three productions show that there are many outsiders within the state, and that a truly strong Northern Ireland will find a way to incorporate and value them. The narratives of unity at the heart of the peace process must be broad and flexible enough to include the experiences of those with complicated relationships to the peace process and the two-communities model. During the Troubles and the first years of the peace process, most theatre created about the North was directly related to the Troubles or the tensions and divisions that caused it. As the people of the state have gained more faith that the peace will last, however, there has been a recent upswing in productions that tackle other issues.

This Is What We Sang and *God's Country* offered relatively unambiguous calls to action: they demanded recognition of the fact that gay people and religious and ethnic minorities have played and will continue to play important roles in the North. Although they did not offer easy solutions to the problems of bigotry and exclusion facing Northern Ireland (and *God's Country* remained relatively pessimistic about the North's ability to change), they did create spaces in

which these groups' stories could be heard. As the other chapters in this dissertation have argued, this may be one of the most important services theatre can provide to the peace process.

It is essential to note that the marginalization in *To Be Sure* functions differently from that of the other two plays. Whereas *This Is What We Sang* and *God's Country* condemned those people in power who keep the characters and the minority groups they represent marginalized, *To Be Sure* was far more ambivalent. Although dissident republicans are marginalized within the discourse of the state, they retain the power to do real harm (and, indeed, have exercised this power on numerous occasions). Thus, their experiences are very different from those of Jews or gay men. At the same time, the effects of this marginalization are similar; in all three cases, the othering has negative impacts on the communities in question and the shared society as a whole. *To Be Sure* did not naively suggest that merely reaching out to dissident republicans will erase the danger they present. It did, however, suggest that little good can come of treating them as entirely separate from the rest of society. In this way, the three plays share a common view of the ideal shared society, even though the specific experiences of and problems facing each community they discuss are radically different.

Northern Irish theatre, like Northern Ireland itself, is still in the early stages of figuring out how to understand and integrate those who do not comfortably fit into the "two-communities" model. The three productions discussed in this chapter showed that such work is beginning to take hold, but these plays remain in the minority. As I have demonstrated, there are still many lacunae in Belfast theatre, including representations of people of color and queer communities of all kinds. Hopefully this will change as playwrights continue to move into a "post-Troubles" mindset that both recognizes the lingering effects of the violence and acknowledges the many other factors that shape contemporary life in the state.



KABOSH

Illustration 19: The Belfast Synagogue with actors from *This is What We Sang*, 2009.
Photograph by Aidan Monaghan. ©Kabosh, www.kabosh.net. Used with permission.



Illustration 20: Laura Hughes, Ivan Little, and Paul Mallon in *God's Country*. Photograph by Neil Harrison. ©Tinderbox Theatre, 2010. Used with permission.



Illustration 21: Paul Mallon and Patrick Buchanan in *God's Country*. Photograph by Neil Harrison. ©Tinderbox Theatre, 2010. Used with permission.

Conclusion

Looking Forward: Staging the Shared Society in a Decade of Divisive Commemorations

The idea of stories [...] as weapons is a terrible idea, that my story ranges itself against your story, and nullifies your story or is better than your story or something like that. [...] I think we need to get to the idea that two things can stand together without destroying each other. [...] For example, the story of a victim, the story of somebody who committed an act of violence. The story of a nationalist, the story of a unionist. They can stand together, and then the question becomes: what does that mean? If nobody is going away, if all these stories are standing together, if we're not going to ask that they nullify each other, what does it mean?

-- Playwright Damian Gorman¹

As the plays discussed in this dissertation demonstrate, the tensions that led to and prolonged the Northern Irish Troubles linger. The people of the state still experience trauma and suspicion of both the “other community” and outsiders. In their own way, each of the productions I have examined worked to address these problems, and in doing so began to offer an answer to Damian Gorman’s questions. At their core, they all acknowledged both that the differences between groups and individuals in the state exist and that these differences have significant implications for ideology and worldview. The productions accepted that, in Gorman’s words, “nobody is going away” and that any attempt to imagine a new state must recognize the fact. Having established this, they then were able to build on a solid foundation and address the issues that continue to impede the development of truly inclusive narratives of unity in Northern Ireland.

As these productions also illustrate, however, the particular form these issues have taken has shifted over the years since the GFA. The earliest and latest plays I discuss, *The Wedding*

¹ *Arts Extra Podcast*, September 16, 2011.

Community Play Project and *National Anthem* respectively, both addressed the ongoing separation of Catholics and Protestants. They approached it from contexts eleven years apart, however. Staged in 1999, *The Wedding Community Play Project* reflected both the optimism and anxiety of the years immediately following the GFA. In some ways, it seemed that the state was headed into a new future that would be bright and free from the antagonisms of the past. While people of the North knew that all problems had not yet been solved, it appeared that solutions were within reach. These feelings were reflected in *The Wedding Community Play Project's* emphasis in similarity; many hoped that past divisions could be overcome simply by members of the two communities getting to know each other as individuals. At the same time, many feared that the violence was paused rather than completed. The state had seen the failure of one lengthy ceasefire (1994-1996) and thus knew that even a year of peace was no guarantee against future conflict.

In contrast, by the time *National Anthem* was staged in 2010, the ceasefires seemed fairly certain to hold; the community support that had allowed paramilitaries to operate for the thirty years of the Troubles was no longer in evidence. Although the dissidents continued to present a threat, it seemed unlikely they could even begin to reach the scale of violent destruction seen during the Troubles. In spite of this change, however, *National Anthem* reflected the more cynical, disillusioned feelings of many in the state. The optimism of 1998 and 1999 had faded, leaving the people of the North with the feeling that progress in the state had stalled. Although they now had a devolved government, the enforced coalition put in place by the St Andrews agreement ensured that political processes would frequently be stuck in deadlock. In particular, many felt that those in government could not put aside their differences to deal with the impact of the world-wide economic downturn, and that the people of Northern Ireland (particularly the working class) were suffering as a result. The imagined celebration of Northern Ireland at the center of *National Anthem* reflected a growing feeling that the apparent successes of the peace process were being used to paper over a fundamentally dysfunctional state.

Unpredictable factors such as economic climate and dissident activity are likely to shape Northern Ireland's public discourse in years to come. The theatre of the state is closely tied to its political climate, and will no doubt offer valuable commentary on these events as they develop. Other challenges facing the people of Northern Ireland are easier to foresee, however. In particular, the decade between 2012 and 2022 will see the centenaries of many events central to the sectarian narratives that the peace process narratives of unity have worked to eclipse. These events include the launch of the Belfast-built Titanic and the signing of the Ulster Covenant in 1912, the Easter Rising and the Battle of the Somme (in which many Northerners died) in 1916, and, perhaps most importantly, the events leading up to Partition and the creation of the Irish Free State in 1922.

It is inevitable that these events will be celebrated by at least one of the two communities, and that these commemorations will work to reconnect their communities with the idea that they and their political goals have a long and heroic history. These will likely act as *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory), Pierre Nora's term for the locations and events we invest with cultural meaning and memory. One of the ironies of *lieux de mémoire* is that their creation is a tacit acknowledgement that a society is already beginning to forget the ideas they seek to enshrine. Nora emphasizes that *lieux de mémoire* arise "at a particular historical moment, a turning point where consciousness of a break with the past is bound up with the sense that memory has been torn-but torn in such a way as to pose the problem of the embodiment of memory in certain sites where a sense of historical continuity persists. There are *lieux de mémoire*, sites of memory, because there are no longer *milieux de mémoire*, real environments of memory."² As this dissertation has demonstrated, many people on both sides of the community fear that the narratives of unity at the center of the peace process are eroding their own identities and cultures, whether these affiliations are based in sectarian identification or personal experience. Both Des O'Hare and Gary Miller in *National Anthem* worried that the performances around the festivities

² Nora 7.

would ignore key events in Northern Ireland's past, while in *To Be Sure*, Marian Powers constructed an elaborate commemoration of the Easter Rising at least partially as a sign of defiance towards her neighbors, who she felt had forgotten the meaning of republican history. In this final section of my dissertation, I will explore the role theatre played in the Belfast celebrations of the Titanic and use these observations to suggest some ways that performance might complicate the *lieux de mémoire* that will presumably be embodied by the commemorations of these other important events.

Many commentators within the state have anxiously noted that the centenaries in the coming decade have the potential to undermine the narratives of unity the peace process has been struggling to enshrine. For example, on April 15, 2012, Mike Philpott hosted a discussion about the Belfast celebrations of the Titanic's centenary on BBC Radio Ulster's *Sunday Sequence* show, which focuses on the ethical and spiritual issues facing the state.³ He asked Dr. Leon Litvak (Reader in English at Queens University), Peter McBride (chair of the victims' organization Journey Towards Healing), and Danny Morrison (republican playwright and chair of the Feile an Phobail festival in West Belfast) to comment on what the events around the launching of the famous ship might signal for the decade of commemoration facing the state. As they debated the successes and failures of the celebrations, at the center of which was the opening of a £100 million Titanic Museum, McBride argued:

We have a shared narrative around this – there is a shared sense of meaning and significance. Now clearly it's different for different people – so for some people it's a very personal thing, that they had members of their families who died in that tragedy, and for the rest of us it may just be a simple sense of pride or connection with this global phenomenon. But the point I suppose is that, in terms of remembering, it is now safe to do so, and there is also a shared narrative about what happened on Titanic, which can be talked about by all sections of the community and there is no real difference in terms – with a few exceptions – there's no real difference in terms of the narrative around what happened.

Although McBride's vision of the Titanic allowed for slight variations based on personal experience, he maintained that, unlike many events in Northern Ireland, it could be talked about

³ The show is then podcast under the title *Everyday Ethics*, which is how I accessed it.

because there was no real disagreement about its significance. Morrison, speaking from an explicitly republican point of view, offered a more ambivalent response, noting that both the Titanic and the shipyards that built it carry sectarian resonances. Similarly, none of the commentators went into detail on the possible implications of celebrating (as opposed to commemorating) an event that resulted in massive losses of life.⁴

Certainly, the Titanic celebrations created a successful event out of a historical moment about which many feel ambivalent. If the Titanic is generally an ambiguous symbol – representing a combination of hubris, human endeavor, and nature’s cruelty – it is all the more complicated for the people of Belfast. The Titanic was built in Belfast and was one of the major achievements of the successful ship-building industry. Before it sank, it offered a symbol of Belfast’s industrial prowess and position as a city to be reckoned with internationally. After it sank, it became a traumatic wound on the city’s psyche. Although none of the “ordinary” workers had taken part in the decisions that caused the tragic loss of life (particularly the insufficient number of lifeboats), many felt that they had been publically shamed and were, in a way, responsible for the deaths.

Similarly, the Titanic is an ambiguously sectarian symbol. The shipyards are generally considered to have been the domain of Protestants exclusively, and as such, unionists are much more likely to identify with the ship than nationalists. Many murals in Protestant areas feature the ship (particularly now that explicitly sectarian and paramilitary murals are being phased out). As a bus tour I was on in 2010 passed one of these murals, the guide shared an old (or so he claimed) Belfast joke with us: “While the Protestants were at the shipyard building the Titanic, the Catholics were up the Falls building the iceberg.” In actual fact, Catholics were not excluded from the shipyards when the Titanic was built. Although Protestants would have dominated the shipyards, it was not until 1920 that Catholics were forcibly excluded. It would thus be possible

⁴ While there were individual events which acted as commemoration, the overwhelming tone of the Titanic festivities was one of pride in Belfast’s industry and ship-building prowess. Major events included fireworks and a large rock concert hosted by MTV.

to view the Titanic as one of the last great achievements of a (relatively) non-sectarian industry. This is not how the Titanic is remembered among most Catholics, however. The violence of their expulsion from the shipyards has understandably tainted their memory of the entire industry. As a result of these different sectarian meanings, the Titanic occupied a complicated place in the Belfast public imagination in the years leading up to its centenary.

These divisions were generally minimized in the discussion of the festivities – while commentators like McBride emphasized unity around the event, skeptics like Morrison expressed their discomfort rarely and in surprisingly gentle terms. It seems likely that a significant reason for this discretion was the commercial and tourist opportunities the Titanic festivities presented. The Titanic is an object of international fascination (thanks in no small part to the 1997 James Cameron film), and in recent years Belfast has tried to ally itself with that sense of mythic, larger-than-life adventure. The most obvious effort has been the building of the new Titanic Museum, whose opening coincided with the centenary of the launch. This building makes a significant change to the Belfast cityscape; at its tallest, it rises 38.5 meters, and its exterior façade is set at an angle and covered with polished aluminum plates to create the impression of a ship's sparkling prow. This museum (and the smaller developments that accompany it) is designed to draw on the global interest in the Titanic that already exists; from a more local point of view, however, it also provides an activity for visitors besides the "Troubles Tourism" that has been both financially beneficial and emotionally unsettling to many within the city. Thus, whether or not the people of Belfast felt a real connection to a shared narrative of the Titanic, it was in their financial interest (particularly in these strained economic times) to keep dissent out of the public sphere.

This anxiety and discomfort around the meaning of the Titanic was present at the centenary, however, even if it was not largely recognized. In particular, the many theatrical performances that accompanied the festivities provided an outlet for more complicated feelings than the pride and non-specific sadness for those who died that were embodied by larger events. These plays approached the Titanic from a number of perspectives, but all in some way

embodied the tensions between loss and love, pride and shame. In each case, the narrative of the Titanic was ambivalent, and this meaning becomes more complex when the plays are read together. The productions that surrounded the celebrations offered thoughtful, poignant explorations of the role the Titanic has played in the Belfast imagination. While they acknowledged the international importance of the event (for example, relatively few people from Northern Ireland traveled on the ship, so the local death count was relatively low), they explored the particular meanings the ship and the time in which it was built have for the people of Belfast. Two plays offered particularly useful reminders: Rosemary Jenkinson's *White Star of the North*, a relatively realistic play that contrasted the anguish of ship's loss with the high emotions that motivated the signing of the Ulster Covenant, and Jimmy McAleavy's *Titans*, a more allegorical work that transformed the levels of the museum into levels of purgatory and in doing so reminded audiences that the trauma of the sinking extended beyond sadness at the loss of life.

Titans was directed by Paula McFetridge and produced by Kabosh; in keeping with the company's mission, it was a site-specific production staged within the new Titanic Museum. The backdrop for the performance was thus the museum's attempt to recapture the feeling of the Titanic in factual and frequently realistic ways (many parts of the museum are direct replicas of the rooms of the ship).⁵ In contrast, much as he had done with *Sign of the Whale* (discussed in chapter three), McAleavy abandoned both realism and linear narrative in order to focus on people's affective response to a historical moment. In performance, the mysterious Preacher led the audience through the museum on a quest to cross the line between life and death (Illustration 22). Along the path, they met ghosts of those who had been employed on the Titanic but had not died on it: ship owner J Bruce Ismay, stewardess Violet Jessop, and shipyard worker John Quinn, who had found a job on the Titanic but was fired in Southampton when someone recognized him

⁵ There was a certain amount of public dismay when the museum's directors announced that the replica of the grand ballroom staircase would be in a section of the museum reserved for corporate events. Until it was prominently featured in Cameron's film *Titanic*, this bit of architecture would have had little or no public recognition. The fact that many felt that visiting this staircase (and presumably reenacting the characters' steps) was central to their process of memorializing the Titanic points to the ways that performance has shaped the ship's legacy.

as the organizer of a strike three years before. As these characters struggled with their survivors' guilt, they each gave a different picture of the Titanic: Ismay's was one of reversal of fortune from triumph to tragedy, Jessop's was one of the horror of lives lost in the sinking, and Quinn's was one of defiant pride in the workers who built the ship.

It emerged that the most conflicted and traumatized character, however, was the Preacher. While he had initially presented himself as simply a guide steeped in mysticism and perhaps not fully human, he eventually revealed that he too had narrowly missed death on the Titanic. He had been supposed to sail on it, but postponed his voyage in order to be inducted into the Ancient Hermetic Order of Shipwrights, a secret brotherhood for those who worked in the shipyards (where he was a chaplain). His wife and daughter, however, sailed on the Titanic as planned and did not make it onto a lifeboat. His quest to cross into the afterlife was personal and rooted in his own guilt rather than loftier spiritual motivations.

Jenkinson's *White Star of the North* took a different stylistic approach to the events but offered similar ambivalence. Produced at the Lyric Theatre, it depicted the experiences of a brother and sister who sailed on the Titanic, and suggested that Northern Irish Protestant's shame about the sinking haunted them as they signed the Ulster Covenant. Crawford and Evelyn Massey were both running from events in Northern Ireland. Crawford had become involved in the Ulster Volunteer Force and their father Robert hoped to keep him safe from violence by sending him to the United States. Evelyn had been married to a Catholic man; when the marriage broke up due to their religious differences, he and his family prevented her from seeing their daughter. She therefore struggled with her guilt over the abandonment of her child.⁶ When the Titanic sank, Evelyn refused to leave her room and drowned. Crawford, meanwhile, put on her coat and hat and was mistaken for a woman, which meant he was put on a lifeboat. He claimed that this

⁶ Once again, Evelyn is the only female character in the play, and her primary struggle relates to her role as a mother. She is more complicated and developed than many of the mothers I have previously discussed, however. Jenkinson uses the loss of the daughter to explore the limitations placed on women in early-twentieth-century Northern Ireland and as a catalyst for the exploration of trauma. Although the loss of her daughter is the root of much of her suffering, she is primarily depicted as a brave and complicated woman battling mental illness

impersonation was unintentional (he said he already had her coat and hat and used them to keep warm, and that he hadn't realize he had been mistaken for a woman until he was already in the lifeboat). In the play's final moments, however, he confessed that he had simply wanted to live. When he returned to Belfast, he tried to rejoin the UVF but was rejected; everyone viewed him as a coward because of his behavior on the Titanic. In the end, his father Robert signed the Covenant on Crawford's behalf, in spite of Robert's hostility to the document's politics. Through Robert, the play suggested that Crawford's actions and his desire to live were understandable; in that way, the play cast doubt on the morality of those who rejected him.

Although the plays were stylistically very different, they offered similar approaches to the loss of the Titanic; they put the disaster in terms of individual characters' stories and experiences. In doing so, they drew on "universal" human emotions like love and shame and asked audiences to identify with the characters based on these presumed shared experiences. They did not, however, rely on simplistic neo-liberal narratives that everyone in the North is fundamentally the same. Each production insisted on the individuality and specificity of their characters. These were shaped both by the characters' sectarian identities and their personal experiences, and the plays made no effort to claim that their stories were somehow representative of those who were involved with the Titanic. The characters frequently defied the stereotypes imposed by their gender, profession, or sectarian identification. Robert Massey was a Protestant with little interest in the politics of national sovereignty; John Quinn was a Catholic who worked in the shipyards (and whose expulsion was based on his politics rather than his religion); Evelyn Massey was a Protestant woman who married a Catholic man, and whose strength was not enough to save her from falling into deep depression.

The playwrights also refused to remove the Titanic from its historical context. In *White Star of the North*, Crawford's complicated relationship with unionism allowed Jenkinson to explore the anxiety and insecurity of both Crawford and the nascent movement. Similarly, in *Titans*, John Quinn situated the building of the Titanic within the labor movement in the shipyards. He pointed to the non-sectarian nature of these early protests, and in many ways his

scene was a lament for the possibilities that were lost when the working classes in both communities decided to focus on national identity over economic issues.

While the remaining centenaries in this decade mark more divisive events than the Titanic, the ethos the Titanic productions could certainly be used to create events which both provide cross-community appeal and ask audiences to view the events in more nuanced ways. This role of theatre may be particularly important because of the ways performance will inevitably be used to reinforce sectarian narratives around these events. This was certainly the case for the centenary of the signing of the Ulster Covenant in September 2012. The largest events were, in keeping with unionist tradition, parades. These actually passed off with remarkably little fuss – in many of the parades earlier in the summer, band members and spectators had acted disrespectfully towards Catholic areas. In the most notable of the summer clashes, a loyalist band played sectarian songs while stopped in front of the Catholic St Patrick’s Church in Belfast. The conflict was compounded when organizers of subsequent parades resisted calls to reroute and avoid the church. Perhaps partly because of this negative attention, the organizers were particularly careful to police the behaviors of the paraders during the Covenant celebrations.

Other events also used performance to invoke the spirit of ancestors who had been willing to go to war to keep Northern Ireland part of the United Kingdom. One BBC News photo, for example, shows a contemporary unionist signing a replica of the Covenant, while a mannequin of Edward Carson, unionist hero and first signatory of the Covenant, watches over.⁷ Although I was unable to locate any responses to this particular event, it is not difficult to read it as an aggressive action against nationalists. Assuming those who signed it did so sincerely, they promised to use “all means which may be found necessary to defeat the present conspiracy to set up a Home Rule Parliament in Ireland.”⁸ This appears to be a rejection of the commitment to

⁷ “BBC News – Ulster Covenant Commemoration in Pictures” <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-19769794>

⁸ “The Ulster Covenant,” <http://www.historyjournal.ie/archives/war-in-ulster/142-the-ulster-covenant.html>

democratic self-determination for Northern Ireland enshrined in the GFA. In reenacting the signing, they also cast themselves as their deeply sectarian ancestors who would for many decades actively work to exclude Catholics from public life and power. As these events demonstrate, performance in Northern Ireland can and frequently does undermine the unified imagined community that the peace process is trying to create.

It seems inevitable that performance, in some form, will play a central role in the celebrations around the Easter Rising, the Battle of the Somme, and the events leading up to partition. There will certainly be parades, speeches, and moments of silence that reinforce the celebrating community's narrative of the event. Hopefully there will also be opportunities for the presentation of other narratives, as there were with the Titanic celebrations. While Litvak and McBride claimed that the Titanic had a "shared meaning" for the people of Belfast, they offered at best an oversimplification. As the plays performed around the centenary showed, the Titanic has many meanings, both rooted in sectarianism and personal experience. The remaining events in the "decade of commemoration" are tied even more strongly to sectarian narratives than the Titanic. If the people of Belfast can take on the Titanic model of having a number of performances that offer different, compassionate perspectives on the events depicted, they may be able to transform the meanings of these historical events in some small way.

History and its narratives remain divisive aspects of life in Northern Ireland, and they have significant effects on how people imagine the "shared future." The plays produced around the Titanic, like most of the plays in this dissertation, fulfilled Gorman's call for stories standing together and advocated for compassionate spaces in which audiences could listen to a multitude of stories without forcing them to unite into one narrative. In this way, they begin to offer an answer to Gorman's final question. They offered small glimpses into a Northern Ireland in which stories of many people, regardless of sectarian identity, race, religion, gender and sexuality can be treated as equally valuable.



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Illustration 22: Vincent Higgins as the Preacher in *Titans*, 2012. Photograph by Neil Harrison. © Kabosh, www.kabosh.net. Used with permission.

Glossary

Constitutional Question – The debate about whether Northern Ireland should be part of the United Kingdom or the Republic of Ireland.

Dissidents – Those who reject the validity of the Good Friday Agreement. It is generally used to refer to republicans who still support or engage in political violence, including groups like the Real IRA and the Continuity IRA.

DUP – Democratic Unionist Party. Largest unionist party in Northern Ireland. Politically to the right of either the Progressive Unionist Party or the Ulster Unionist Party.

GFA – Good Friday Agreement, formally called the Belfast Agreement. The 1998 agreement that ended the violence of the Troubles.

IRA – Irish Republican Army. There have been many groups that operated under this name, and the term may be used to refer to them collectively or to refer to the largest or most active group. For example, within the context of the Troubles, it generally refers to the Provisional IRA.

Loyalism – The more extreme portion of unionism, which contained most unionist paramilitaries.

McGuinness, Martin – Deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland, member of Sinn Féin.

MLA – Member of the Legislative Assembly. Someone who sits on the devolved Northern Irish parliament at Stormont in Belfast.

MP – Member of Parliament. Term for someone who sits on the UK parliament in London.

Nationalism – The belief that Northern Ireland should be part of the Republic of Ireland. Nationalists are typically Catholic.

Official IRA – The original Irish Republican Army. They gained the name “Official” in 1969 when the Provisional IRA was formed as a splinter group. Renounced violence in 1972.

Provisional IRA – Formed after a schism with the Official IRA in 1969. The largest and most active republican group during the Troubles. Renounced violence following the GFA in 1998.

PSNI – Police Service of Northern Ireland. The current police force, which replaced the RUC in 2001 with the goal of being more politically neutral and fostering better relationships with nationalists.

PUP – Progressive Unionist Party. One of the smallest of the major unionist parties. Unlike the DUP and the UUP, it espouses socially liberal policies. Linked with the UVF.

Republicanism - The more extreme portion of nationalism, which contained most nationalist paramilitaries.

Robinson, Peter – First Minister of Northern Ireland, member of the Democratic Unionist Party

RUC – Royal Ulster Constabulary. Northern Ireland’s police force from partition on 1921 through its dissolution in 2001. It was replaced by the PSNI, which was designed to be more politically neutral than the predominantly-unionist RUC.

SDLP – Social Democrat and Labour Party. The second largest nationalist party in Northern Ireland. It tends to be more moderate than Sinn Féin, and never endorsed violence.

Sinn Féin – The largest nationalist party in Northern Ireland. It started as the political wing of the Provisional IRA, and many of its leaders are suspected to have been important members in the IRA

Stormont – The building in which the Northern Irish Legislative Assembly sits, also a common name for that body.

Troubles, the – The period of violence in Northern Ireland from roughly 1969 to 1998, in which more than 3,600 people were killed.

UDA – Ulster Defense Association. A loyalist paramilitary organization.

Unionism - The belief that Northern Ireland should remain part of the United Kingdom. Nationalists are typically Catholic.

UUP – Ulster Unionist Party. Now the second largest unionist party in Northern Ireland, it was the strongest political force in the state between partition and the Troubles. It is traditionally more moderate than the DUP.

UVF – Ulster Volunteer Force. A loyalist paramilitary organization.

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