Addressing the legacy of inter-communal violence through drama: mainstream theatre and community drama

How to cite:


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Version: Version of Record

Link(s) to article on publisher’s website:
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Abstract

Professional theatre writing that explores the conflict has a long history in Ireland, from O’Casey to Mitchell by way of Thompson, Reid, Jones and Lynch. Many plays have radically reframed the public debate about conflict-related issues, challenging the certainties of community and identity. The binaries of the conflict have also been challenged through community and applied drama projects. The authors show that single-authored professional theatre continues to provide a critical mediation on our recent history; and that while they engage conflict issues ideologically, multi-authored and co-created applied theatre works challenge the issues structurally.

Notable applied theatre projects, such as the Derry Playhouse Theatre of Witness project, the work of writer/director John McCann at Tinderbox Theatre Company and the Derry Frontline projects have created innovative theatre productions with ordinary people that deal directly with the conflict. Theatre of Witness practitioners worked with those directly affected by conflict violence; the process involved participants working from personal testimony themed around specific events, creating a piece that was performed in the Playhouse. Tinderbox Theatre Company developed many community projects, such as Turning the Page, which were co-authored by those involved – participants from working-class Loyalist and Republican communities in Belfast who then performed the work. And at Derry Frontline extensive development workshops produced a core narrative and characters for a play that was then scripted by the company director, Dan Baron Cohen.

Ultimately we both celebrate the role of drama in promoting dialogue between one-time opposed communities and describe a fluid, changing and ongoing tradition of dialogue through drama.

KEYWORDS: drama, theatre, writing, cross-community, collaboration

The practice of applied theatre for conflict resolution

Irish theatre, from both north and south, has always tackled questions of identity and community. From Dion Boucicault, through Sean O’Casey and Sam Thompson to
the works of Martin Lynch, Marie Jones and Gary Mitchell, the plays of every historical period have concerned themselves with the major issues of our history. Ireland, being Ireland, these plays have inevitably involved inter-community violence. Through the seventies and eighties, as the conflict transformed communities in Northern Ireland, community theatre emerged as a means for ordinary people to mediate the critical issues affecting them. There is general agreement that these projects, though inevitably non-uniform, are defined by their focus on generating social change (Kershaw 1992; Taylor 2003; Nicholson 2005; Prentki and Preston 2009; Mackey 2016; Nicholson and Hughes 2016). Thus it can be argued that while the professional productions of the period engage conflict issues ideologically, applied theatre challenges the issues structurally. Inevitably, the conflict occupied a central thematic position and resulted in a uniquely inflected praxis. It is crucial to stress that community theatre in Northern Ireland morphed into something different to other regions. Definitions applicable to British community theatre are not adequate to account for developments in Ulster. For example, Owen Kelly describes the growth of community arts in Britain as a connection made between radical political movements and professional artists:

‘Firstly there was the passionate interest in creating new and liberatory forms of expression... Secondly there was the movement by groups of fine artists out of the galleries and into the streets. Thirdly there was the emergence of a new kind of political activist who believes that creativity was an essential tool in any kind of radical struggle’ (Kelly 1984, 11).

However the community sector in Northern Ireland was different in nature and the social and political context refracted the usual processes and results into something of a unique corpus.

The history. Theatre as reconciliation: The Jellicoe model

Community and applied theatre in Northern Ireland has always centred on the encounter. From early cross-community projects (Grant 1993) to the Theatre of Witness (Pfeiffer and Weiglhofer, 2020) the work has focused on presence and engagement with the other. Participants in these projects describe the transformative power of this encounter, from mutual fearfulness to acceptance, and ultimately friendship (ibid, 178).

A major turning point was Martin Lynch’s discovery of the Colway Trust projects (Jellicoe 1987). Lynch himself identifies the moment of inspiration:

‘I read a lot of Ann Jellicoe and I saw that she was hiring a professional writer and a professional director to work with community groups and I thought, “ah right, right... that must be what we do”’ (Interview with the researchers 2019).

Lynch’s discovery of Ann Jellicoe can be fairly described as a watershed, both for Lynch
and for the sector in Northern Ireland as a whole. Based on his readings of Jellicoe, Lynch adopted and adapted her model for use with communities in Northern Ireland, first on *The Stone Chair*, a play developed with the community in the Short Strand in East Belfast and, subsequently, with Dock Ward Community Drama Project, Ballybeen Community Theatre and other projects – as a writer, facilitator and mentor, both on his own account, and, from 1993, as co-founder and first chair of the Community Arts Forum. Arguably, the pinnacle of this type of work was *The Wedding Community Play* in 1998, where all of the above-mentioned community theatre companies collaborated on a large-scale production that won plaudits, critical acclaim and the attention of funders and, importantly, policymakers.

**Cross-community theatre**

The ensuing period saw a rapid expansion of cross-community theatre projects – usefully described by David Grant in *Playing the Wild Card* (1993). As the unfolding policy of the UK governments of the eighties and nineties saw ‘normalisation’ as the key to resolving the Ulster conflict, funds were set aside for the promotion of community understanding; funding bodies included the Community Relations Council, the CCRU at Stormont, local council good relations funds, and Cultural Traditions funding through ACNI. This funding provided support for organisations working specifically within the community development field, such as Protestant and Catholic Encounter (PACE) and Northern Ireland Children’s Holiday Scheme (N.I.C.H.S.) (Grant 1993). Significantly though, the funds were also valuable revenue streams for the professional theatre sector; leading companies such as Big Telly, Replay and Tinderbox used these funds to commission professional writers to create plays on themes related to the conflict.

Much of this work occupied the space left by the community theatre sector: while organisations such as PACE, N.I. C. H. S. and Neighbourhood Open Workshops worked on cross-community themes, and community theatre groups focused on single identity projects that advocated for individual communities (such as The People’s Theatre in Ballymurphy, Dock Ward Community Drama Project in north Belfast, Ballybeen Community Theatre in East Belfast, and others). Derry Frontline projects (1988–1994) straddled the two forms, working with a largely nationalist/republican community, but developing plays, under the directorship of Dan Baron Cohen, that espoused non-sectarian values. The professional companies, by offering plays written by Stewart Parker, Maris Jones, Martin Lynch, Gary Mitchell, Robin Glendenning, Owen McCafferty and others were able to challenge what could be perceived as the certainties of work developed on behalf of individual, partisan communities.

**Post-1998**

Undoubtedly the most significant development in the theatre for reconciliation followed from the most important historical moment of the period: the signing of The
Belfast Agreement (popularly known as the Good Friday Agreement) in 1998, and the referenda that produced the current settlement. This was facilitated by the New Labour administration elected the year before, with a broad agenda of social inclusiveness that was supportive of the Arts, and that prioritised the use of Arts to develop communities (See Hamayon-Alfar 2011; Floyd O’Donnell et al. 2012). Martin Lynch describes it as a dream come true for the sector:

‘Tony Blair, and the Department of Culture in London and Belfast, started sending these dictats to the Arts Council that was the same as what we wanted. Ah, it was just fantastic.’ (Lynch, quoted in Floyd, O’Donnell et al. 2012.)

The social changes wrought by the settlement led to a diversification in the theatres that were developed, driven by a changed set of circumstances and the new themes that emerged. The growth in new communities from other parts of the world (see Shirlow 2014) resulted in new types of work that examined the migrant experience.

John McCann, as well as being a noted playwright, was Outreach Director of Tinderbox Theatre Company (2000–2008) and developed a number of projects with these ‘new’ communities, including Chaat Masala with the Indian community (2006), On Goy Lok Yip, with the Chinese Welfare Association (2007), and In the Land of Green Pasture, with NI Community For Refugees And Asylum Seekers (2007). Kabosh Theatre Company also commissioned work by a leading playwright, Rosemary Jenkinson. In 2016 her Lives in Translation dealt with the experience of migrant women. Sole Purpose in Derry has delivered a number of community projects with migrant communities, particularly Syrian refugees, and had a particular success with Did You Come By Boat? in 2010, written by Elly Omondi Odhiambo and Patricia Byrne. Perhaps the most active professional company in this area has been Terra Nova Productions, founded in 2007 by Canadian director Andrea Montgomery: all of the work delivered by this company is self-consciously cross-cultural. These have included large-scale Shakespeare productions, such as The Belfast Tempest (2016) and A Midsummer Night’s Dream (2019) as well as many pieces of new writing. Montgomery is herself a playwright of considerable substance and is renowned enough to have won the Nick Darke Award.

Theatre of witness

While work with migrant communities provided a new strand for the professional theatre sector, the legacy of the conflict still preoccupied theatre makers, and the many unresolved issues fed the key themes for much of the work. While traditional forms continued to draw audiences, new forms began to emerge. For example, in 2009 Teya Sepinuck, a director from Philadelphia, initiated a project at the Derry Playhouse using her own process, Theatre of Witness, which uses the ‘process of telling life stories’ to create theatre (Pfeiffer and Weiglhofer 2020). Over a period of five years and
several projects, she worked with those directly affected by conflict violence: former combatants, security and police personnel, those who had been victims of the conflict and those who had lost loved ones. Working from personal testimony themed around specific events Sepinuck would craft a performance text. This would then be performed by the participants (see Sepinuck 2013; Grant and Jennings 2013). The plays were initially performed in Derry Playhouse and subsequently toured to Belfast and beyond. The demonstrable productiveness of the process proved influential: other directors and facilitators worked on parallel projects using the Theatre of Witness techniques. The process was not without its critics, however. Carole-Anne Upton challenged Sepinuck’s insistence on the truthfulness of the work:

‘The very claim to authenticity on the basis of non-performer status in the theatre is paradoxical if not outright disingenuous. Performance is constitutive of the reality of the performer. By virtue of repeating a rehearsed series of actions onstage before different audiences, real people become real actors (Upton 2011, 213).’

More explicitly, playwright Tim Loane memorably, if caustically and vituperatively, called it ‘Troubles porn’ (quoted in Jennings and Grant 2011,74). At the heart of both criticisms lies anxiety about the use and possible exploitation of ordinary people, non-professionals, giving accounts of traumatic experiences they have suffered. More generally, the possibility of such memory work resulting in re-traumatisation has been raised (Butterwick and Selman 2012; Miller 2018).

This legacy of work, despite these various controversies, did establish the Playhouse as a centre of theatre for reconciliation, and proved the viability of theatre as a medium for negotiating the legacy issues of the conflict, and in this it can be said to have enabled the development of new types of theatre as well as contributing to a realised peace. The second half of this essay examines a more recent production, *The Crack In Everything* (2018), written and directed by Jo Egan, also at Derry Playhouse, which pushed the possibilities of professional theatre as a means of mediating the legacy of conflict and moving forward.

**The plays of Jo Egan**

As a writer, director and facilitator, Jo Egan has originated some of the most lauded and noted applied theatre projects in Northern Ireland, while combining this with a career as a professional playwright. In 1999 she conceived the seminal *Wedding Community Play*, which was written by Martin Lynch and Marie Jones, about a mixed marriage (Moriarty 2004). The play was, up to that point, the most ambitious community theatre project undertaken with groups from Short Strand in East Belfast, Ballybeen, Dock Ward, Ardoyne’s Tongue in Cheek, the Shankill, Real World Disability Drama and Lettuce Hill from the Lower Falls all collaborating on the script ideas and working together on shaping the production. Significantly, the play was site specific:
audiences were bussed from the neutral city centre hub of the Community Arts Forum headquarters to the locations that served as sets. These included the Rosemary Street Presbyterian Church for the wedding, a riverside bar for the reception venue, and actual houses in Belfast’s Madrid Street and Templemore Avenue as the family homes (Cleveland 2008). Coming right in the midst of the emerging peace process, and only a short time after the Good Friday Agreement, it offered playgoers an opportunity to go into areas and homes in parts of Belfast that were only very recently inaccessible to those from one community or the other.

This combination of dramaturgical innovation, community engagement, inclusive process and professional production ethos served as a hallmark of Egan’s working method over the next two decades. Among the projects she developed thereafter, perhaps the most critically acclaimed was Crimea Square, which won the Audience Award at the Belfast Festival at Queen’s in 2013. Emerging out of writing workshops facilitated by Egan, a group of writers from the Shankill area of Belfast created a play from the history of the area, using dramatic forms to advocate for their community. Alison Jeffers (2016) has described this as a project unique in its nature: an exchange of the expertise of the theatre professional for the expertise of the local writer, where authorship and authority became vested in the community. In this sense the project was a perfect encapsulation of the notions of ‘barter’ that are fundamental to the theatre anthropology of Eugenio Barba. Simultaneously, Egan’s professional writing has been consistent with these values, using real experiences to elucidate and advocate on critical social issues – always with the determined aim of generating change.

Egan’s play, The Ritual of Life (2011), was created with oral testimony of nine working-class Protestant women from in and around Belfast, and intersected their accounts of their own - and their mothers’ and grandmothers’ - experiences to construct the text. Her 2014 play, Sweeties, was written from survivors’ experiences of child sexual abuse and was based on interviews with four women, purposely to interrogate the question of memory and the oppressions that come as a result of suppressing trauma. (The play may be seen as a useful counterpoint to the comparatively mainstream and arguably masculinist Arnold Wesker false memory syndrome play, Denial, from 1997 – a play which notoriously conveys scepticism about the efficacy of encouraging alleged victims of child abuse to recall or even invent experiences from their distant past). For Madame Geneva, which Egan produced through her own company Macha Productions, in 2017, she used historical records to address crises of poverty, prostitution and alcoholism in the eighteenth century, and the patriarchal strategies used by the men who governed the society to regulate alcohol use, prostitution and women’s bodies, resulting in the creation of the first Magdalene Laundries and homes for ‘fallen women’. Egan is also a teacher, running courses in playwriting and memory writing at the Crescent Arts Centre in Belfast. Through all these productions one can see a set of unifying preoccupations explored through a consistent praxis: using real accounts and memories to probe the past, with a view to effecting change in the present.
In interviews, Egan regularly references the work of psychologist Siobhan O’Neill who describes trauma as related to the function of memory. Egan describes interviewing O’Neill for *The Crack in Everything*:

‘She’s the major academic looking at the impact of trauma, how we need to integrate how we approach dealing with trauma into all our structures, everything, if Northern Ireland is ever to have a meaningful journey from The Troubles and we don’t want to embed the trauma for generations. So, she told me an extraordinary thing. She told me that trauma and post-traumatic stress is a fault with memory.’ (Personal interview, April 2020).

This concept of the corrupting and healing power of memory is the central idea in the play *The Crack in Everything*: it is her most thorough realisation of her practice as both a professional playwright and as an artist who uses theatre for reconciliation and healing. Developed as part of the Theatre and Peacebuilding Academy programme at Derry Playhouse, the play uses the accounts of six families whose children were killed during the Troubles. The project had its genesis in 2017 with an application by the North West Play Resource Centre, the parent company of Derry Playhouse, to the Peace IV Programme of the EU. The Special European Programmes body (SEUPB) approved funding for the Playhouse and its project partners of €859,069.50 to develop a three-year programme of projects designed to use theatre and arts for promoting conflict transformation and awarded a substantial grant for the purpose. Egan was the first playwright commissioned to deliver a project. This was initiated in March 2018.

While the Playhouse had garnered a well-deserved reputation for work that addressed legacy issues of the conflict through its programme of Theatre of Witness plays, Egan saw her work as significantly different, being a mediation by the theatre maker on the experiences of others. Where Theatre of Witness operated by asking participants to tell their stories, listen to each other’s stories and develop the ideas for the play communally, ultimately it remained a participant-focused process: those who took part in workshops also performed their stories on stage. The power of the form lay in the audience being in the presence of a person whose lived experiences formed the performance text, and thus witnessing a kind of sharing of personal truths. Egan’s process was interview-based. Over a period of months she recorded over thirty hours of material with members of the families of Henry Cunningham, Damien Harkin, Julie Livingstone, Kathryn Eakin, Annette McGavigan and Kathleen Feeney – the six children whose deaths were the subject of the play. Egan herself then shaped the performance text from these accounts. The cast was not comprised of those whose testimony was collected, but was a mix of professional actors, those connected with the families and others whose experiences had been similar (personal interview, April 2020). In this sense, *The Crack in Everything* differs from the Theatre of Witness projects. It was an authored professional production, with Egan as playwright. She also directed the shows, in November and December 2018, at the Playhouse in Derry, and the Brian Friel Theatre in Belfast.
The ideas
The notion of the artist as activist whose area of expertise is the imaginative realm draws on Jean Paul Lederach and his concept of the ‘moral imagination’. This comprises four different, but linked, frames that create the conditions to facilitate profound social change:

‘Stated simply, the moral imagination requires the capacity to imagine ourselves in a web of relationships that includes our enemies; the ability to sustain a paradoxical curiosity that embraces complexity without reliance on dualistic polarity; the fundamental belief in and pursuit of the creative act; and the acceptance of the inherent risk of stepping into the mystery of the unknown that lies beyond the far too familiar landscape of violence’ (Lederach 2005, 5).

Egan, in her accounts of her work, highlights the significance of both taking risks and the usefulness of ‘mess’. She argues that the writer/theatre maker is adept at making sense of the mess, of applying the imagination to things that seem without any coherent structure and using artistic forms to offer a moral order in place of violent disorder. In her reading of Lederach, his ideas are a development of W. B. Yeats’ ‘artistic imagination’. Her tender document for the Theatre and Peacebuilding Academy role that led to the play, The Crack in Everything, explicitly draws on this notion of the transformative power of the imagination with its opening quotation:

‘The Artistic Imagination is the way a country empowers and liberates itself.’ Historian, Roy Foster paraphrasing W. B. Yeats’ (Egan: Tender, National/ International Facilitator for The Playhouse 2017).

This process of engaging with the disorder of fractured memory is not without risks. Rolston and Hackett, addressing the thorny matter of memory in relation to victims and survivors of conflict, point out that: ‘storytelling is far from simple, uncomplicated and non-contentious’ (2009, 372). That said, they make a pressing case for processes that facilitate the mediation of memory in dealing with the legacy of the Northern Irish conflict. This, they say, operates as a means of liberation, provided that the telling of stories is about exercising agency, as well as healing trauma (ibid., 356). For Egan, the act of creating a play from the lived experiences of others involves offering a sense of meaning where none can be perceived - art filling the place that the agonistic mode has held. Victor Turner describes this process of social drama functioning as a means of resolution: ‘finding the apt occasion for the performance of a major ritual celebrating the values, common interests, and moral order of the widest recognized cultural and moral community, transcending the divisions of the local group’ (1982, 10). It is this act of public address that the work of Jo Egan, and of other artists operating in this area, does so powerfully. She describes this mediation of memory not as an imperative of dramaturgical technique:

‘If we wish to change the trauma impact on people, we need to revalue memory, we
need to help people to find a way to revalue memory, and that might be somebody writing a short story or a book or a one-person show... a piece of dance that resonates with them’ (Personal interview, April 2020).

Thus the work is a community-serving necessity, a sort of non-denominational version of religious catharsis, a moral and community ritual that transcends the merely aesthetic.

Conclusion
In the latter years of the conflict, and more particularly as the process of healing and transforming Northern Irish society follow on from the (comparative) peace engineered by politicians, the professional theatre sector has developed in relation to the needs of the society of which it is part. While the conflict was ongoing, theatre offered people an opportunity to advocate for their communities and their rights – and sometimes, to connect with others from other communities – with their own demands for rights. In Lederach’s terms, theatre has allowed for the individual to imagine themselves in the place of their enemies. Simultaneously, the professional theatre writer and the professional companies have offered more nuanced, reflective works that aim for a broader view of the conflict, and that propose a commonality of core values that can be shared, irrespective of community.

In the post-conflict period, there has been a perceived need for art, and particularly theatre, to operate as a means of addressing historic wrongs, to witness the past, and to act as a medium for negotiating memories of the conflict. This work is, excitingly, in an unresolved state of evolution, where the connection between the professional writer or director, and the victims of the Troubles offers the possibility of mediating the traumas resulting from ‘faults of memory’. Rolston and Hackett make the important point that: ‘At the individual level trauma and fear may lead to silence rather than speech, while at the social level there may not be spaces in which stories can be told and listened to sympathetically’ (2009, 356). In the absence of other modes of reconciliation, other fora for addressing our experience of conflict, the work of the theatre maker, and of all artists working in conflict transformation assume a particular importance. In Yeats’ words: ‘We make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry’ (Yeats 1917). To study this developing poetic/theatrical/community/performative is not just to look back and celebrate the role of drama in promoting dialogue between one-time opposed communities, but to engage with a fluid, changing, dynamic tradition of dialogue through drama that is unique to Ulster and to this particular peace process.
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Interviews

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