

## FORUM KRITIKA: RADICAL THEATRE AND IRELAND (PART 2)

### “TO SPEAK YOUR TRUTH”: DIALOGUES ON POLITICAL THEATRE AND THE TROUBLES

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#### Abstract

This essay is structured in two sections: At the outset, Bill McDonnell provides an overview of the broader political and cultural context which produced Belfast Community Theatre, and other significant grass-roots Republican community theatres from the 1970s. Together, and especially in the case of Republican theatre groups, the essay argues that they constitute the only radical theatres in post-1945 Britain and Ireland to meet Erwin Piscator’s stringent criteria for a political theatre. This is followed by a series of dialogues on theatre and the war in the north of Ireland, which take up the larger part of the essay. The dialogues took place over the period 1985-2000, and foreground the political and theatre philosophy of one of the pivotal figures in Republican cultural activism in West Belfast during the Troubles, Joe Reid, co-founder with Marie McKnight of Belfast Community Theatre (1984). These conversations are embedded in a personal and political relationship between McDonnell and Reid, mediated by a mutual commitment to political theatre and its role as part of a broader nexus of cultural activism.

#### Keywords

active Republicanism, Belfast Community Theatre, cultural activism, Northern Irish drama

#### About the authors

Bill McDonnell is a Senior Lecturer in Theatre at the University of Sheffield. Before joining the university, he spent twenty-five years in political and community-based theatre in Britain and the north of Ireland. He is the author of *Social Impact in UK Theatre* (2005) and *Theatres of the Troubles: Theatre, Resistance and Liberation in Ireland* (2008).

Joe Reid is a Principal Lecturer at Belfast Metropolitan College, and in the past thirty plus years has been involved in many major community initiatives within West Belfast, North of Ireland. He is fully committed to the belief that the arts have a major contribution to make in terms of providing a medium through which communities can articulate their experience, and develop and model out their vision for a just society. Joe was a founder member of Belfast Community Theatre.

When I was asked to contribute to this edition of *Kritika Kultura* on “Radical Theatre and Ireland,” the request presented itself as an opportunity to foreground the political and

theatre philosophy of one of the pivotal figures in Republican cultural activism in West Belfast during the Troubles, Joe Reid. Now a Principal Lecturer and Director of Curriculum Enhancement at Belfast Metropolitan College, Reid founded Belfast Community Theatre with Marie McKnight in 1984. We met in 1985, and over the following fifteen years engaged in a series of dialogues, formal and informal, on the role of theatre in the war in the north of Ireland. These conversations constituted part of a personal and political relationship which was mediated by a mutual commitment to political theatre and its role as part of a broader nexus of cultural activism. The dialogues, then, take up the larger part of this essay, but first I wish to set them in perspective by offering an overview of the broader political and cultural context which produced Belfast Community Theatre, and other significant grass-roots Republican community theatres.

### ACTIVE REPUBLICANISM AND CULTURAL ACTIVISM

In 1976, writing from the cages of Long Kesh prison, the future president of Sinn Féin, Gerry Adams, used his column in *Republican News/An Phoblacht* to call for the building of a community-based politics. On May 1, International Worker's Day, he wrote

Active Republicanism means hard work, action, example.... It means fighting ... There can be no question of that.... The enemy allows us no choice. It is an armed struggle because the enemy is armed. Because he protects and established his vested interests by force of arms. And that are we fighting for? Who are we fighting for? There is a lot of talk about 'The People' as if they are a thing ... The people are here, the people living all around us at the minute.... We fight for the homeless, for those with large families, for those without families at all. We fight for the people who find it hard to make ends meet, whether they be small farmers being pushed off the land by big ranchers or factory workers being sold out by their Trade Union leaderships. They are our fight and our fight must be based amongst them ... their enemy must therefore be our enemy, their needs must be our needs, our Republicanism must be their Republicanism. People's Republicanism. Active Republicanism.

Writing under the pseudonym "Brownie," Adams developed his vision of Republican activism in a series of articles in *Republican News/An Phoblacht* during the summer of 1976. The outcome of this call, which also came from other voices within the

community, was summed up by educationalist Fr Des Wilson, who spoke of the resistance of the Republican people to the British occupation of the north in this way:

One way to understand what happened in the north of Ireland is to think of a constant creation of alternatives by people in crisis. They created alternative education, alternative welfare, alternative theatre, broadcasting, theological and political discussion, public inquiries, and much else. They also created at various times alternative police and alternative armies. (78)

Wilson would contribute powerfully to this set of alternatives through the Springhill Education network, a grass-roots community education initiative. The community found its way to liberation pedagogy long before copies of Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and Ivan Illich's *De-Schooling Society* were defining new intellectual territory for Western educationalists. Writing in his autobiography Wilson remembers driving back from the Ulster People's College after a talk by Illich on the need for a radical pedagogy, led from below. "'Sure,' he remembers one member of the Springhill group remarking, 'we're we not doing that in Ballymurphy years ago?' 'Indeed we were,'" Wilson records himself replying, "'indeed we were'" (85).

Springhill remains one of the most important, innovative, and radical education networks in Western Europe, its work an inspiration for many community education initiatives outside the north of Ireland. Fr Wilson would also contribute to what was a wider and vital nexus of Republican and Nationalist cultural activism during the Troubles, at the heart of which were the Republican community theatres. These included Wilson's *Belfast People's Theatre* (1973–1993), which explored in satirical reviews the intersection in community resistance of radical education practices, political activism, and liberation theology. *Belfast Community Theatre* (1983-1990), which shared both personnel and space with the People's Theatre, and which grew out of the Springhill Community Education network, created works which articulated a more consciously class-based, Marxian analysis. Their productions drew on the Irish theatre patrimony of Yeats, Synge, Gregory, and Beckett, as well as the European tradition of socialist theatre exemplified by the Workers' Theatre Movement, Piscator, Brecht, and Joan Littlewood's *Theatre Workshop*. For *Belfast Community Theatre*, theatre was part of a wider nexus of radical educational and cultural activism.

*DubbelJoint* (1991-2008) was the only professional theatre to evolve within the Republican heartlands of West Belfast. Founded by Pam Brighton, Shaun Connaughton and

Marie Jones, an important aspect of its work was its support for community-led theatres, and its admixture of professional and non-professional performers. Alongside its staging of new writings by the likes of Marie Jones, Peter Sheridan and Pearse Elliot, DubbelJoint played a significant role in the productions of *Binlids* and *Forced Upon Us*, two controversial productions created by *JustUs*, the Republican women's theatre group (1996-2000). Brighton also acted as a creative mentor to former IRA volunteers and playwrights Brian Campbell and Laurence McKeown between 2001 and 2007. Written post the Good Friday Agreement, Campbell and McKeown's texts, such as *The Laughter of Our Children*, *Voyage of No Return*, and *The Official Version* constituted part of Republicanism's broader ideological, cultural and political struggle to secure a united Ireland through democratic means. Alongside these more permanent groupings were the productions staged from 1987 as part of the *West Belfast Festival/ Féile an Phobail*.

While much of the community based political theatre was created in Belfast, *Derry Frontline* (1988–1992), founded by Jim Keys and Locky Morris, with support from Dan Baron Cohen, brought a critical focus in their productions on issues of gender, patriarchy and the Roman Catholic Church's ideological role in the war. One of the most politically significant theatrical interventions came from within the H-Blocks in works created by IRA/ Republican prisoners of war, which saw the uneven evolution of performance forms, from the early "commemorations," through the development of pageant dramas in the 1980s, to the work of the mid-nineties. This process culminated in the production *The Crime at Castlereagh*, a remarkable piece of political physical theatre, directed by Tom Magill, and based on Bobby Sands's epic trilogy, comprising *Crime at Castlereagh*, *Diplock Court*, and *Torture Mill – H Block*. The IRA's H Block theatres were part of the broader development of a theory and praxis of cultural struggle within the Republican movement in the period 1981–1997. They would also provide important material for the work of the community companies on the outside.

What the Republican community theatres were not was a coherent counter-institution, nor did their work always represent a conscious critique of bourgeois models of theatre making. Their power and relevance derived from their relationship to the Republican political and military struggle. In this sense, as I have written elsewhere, they constitute the single most important example of an authentically revolutionary theatre to be found in post-war Europe:

The Republican community theatres belonged to a movement whose goal was the overthrow of the Unionist state and the inauguration of a united Socialist

Ireland. Most, as we have seen, were directly or indirectly associated with the IRA/*Sinn Féin*. While their forms differed, they shared common values, and a common perception of theatre, of art, as inseparable from, indeed critical to, the achievement of a new form of society. They were the only radical theatres in post-1945 Britain and Ireland to meet Erwin Piscator's stringent criteria for a political theatre, which is to say that they demonstrated immediacy through the link to local events, authenticity through their class roots in socio-political reality, and above all, that they existed within, and were produced through, a revolutionary or insurrectionary moment (Willett 107-26). We can also identify a shift in the function and complexity of dramas over the course of the Troubles and its aftermath. There was a movement from celebration and justification, through reflection, to texts which offered a more nuanced and historically objective assessment. It is clear that such shifts are historical in character, and that certain texts become possible only at certain points in a movement's or society's development. The career and writings of Brian Campbell and Laurence McKeown offer an instance of this trajectory in the Peace Process. (McDonnell 221)

The IRA's H Block theatres were a unique phenomenon, even within the wider perspective of twentieth-century colonial and post-colonial struggles. We can certainly find no comparable instances of an organic, working-class and revolutionary theatre on the British mainland in the post-war period. The documentation of this work by participants is also notable for its quality, range and depth. Both during the war and in the post-conflict period, Republicans and Nationalists have produced a remarkable range of pamphlets covering social and political issues and cultural production. One prodigious achievement has been the series of *Island Pamphlets*, edited by Michael Hall. Launched by the Farset Think Tank in 1993, the series was conceived as a means to "open up debate on historical, cultural, socio-economic, political, and other matters pertinent to Northern Irish society" (Hall 1). The pamphlets include, besides historiographical and theoretical writings, rare play scripts. Another manifestation are the theatre programmes, some of which are substantial acts of documentation, produced by the *West Belfast Festival/Féile an Phobail* and *Dubblejoint Theatre*, in which principal actors, both political and theatrical, have set down their reflections. Some programmes, for example the *Dubblejoint* production of *Des*, contain full scripts. In addition, the Republican movement produced a vast number of internal documents, as well as publications such as *An Glór Gafa/Captive Voice*, in which

both descriptive and theoretical writings co-exist. The production diaries of IRA POWs offer invaluable insights into political theatre making in the H-Blocks (Devenny et al).<sup>1</sup> These sources, written by participants in and witnesses of the Troubles do not exist in parallel with academic discourse, but are its very foundation: pre-exist it: validate it: call it into being. Scholarly commentary must begin from the ground of a rich indigenous and community-based historiographical project. The word history, as Foucault reminds us, derives from the Greek "histor," meaning to witness, "one who is there to see" (17).

## THE DIALOGUES

As noted, the dialogues constituted part of a personal and political relationship which was mediated by theatre, and in them, Reid reflects upon the specific work of Belfast Community Theatre, and on the wider role of theatre in liberation and resistance struggles. They touch at some length on two productions, *Sign on the Dotted Line* and *Eh Joe*. The latter was an adaptation (I use the term loosely) of Samuel Beckett's work, and was performed as a commentary on the Supergrass system, then operating as a critical element in the British state's counter-insurgency strategy.<sup>2</sup> *Sign on the Dotted Line*, which was developed from fragments of texts smuggled out from the H-Blocks, was a short, powerful, Brechtian drama, which used the interrogations of two West Belfast Nationalists as the lens through which the wider struggle was focused. One of the prisoners, Tony, is a vulnerable single man with no political affiliation who cares for his sick and ageing mother; the other, Patsy, also a mother, is a committed Republican activist. The dialogues have been edited to produce a single narrative which is a synthesis of several encounters, and of the views and analyses expressed within them.

MCDONNELL: The British Left often sees theatre, see the arts, cultural activism, as unimportant. Certainly it is felt to be less important than leafleting, or paper selling, or organization. What role do you see theatre playing within political movements?

REID: It covers it all. For the simple reason that the people involved in this group are also involved in community politics. We don't see it in isolation. It's part of the whole, of an ongoing politics. It must not be separate. To me it is just as important to get a show ready as it is to write a pamphlet. Because while writing the pamphlet you leave the very class ... the people you are supposed to be addressing, behind. You become obsessed with writing the pamphlet. Is the grammar right? Is the theoretical line right? Is the philosophical line

correct? And then, who will it offend? And I think this is where the whole movement ... the left ... have been misguided. Because they have allowed specific tasks to be isolated as separate movements – theatre – political activism – trade unionism – writing and agitating – and so on. But they are all part of the one movement, and all that that false division does is to mirror the sad fragmentation of the left. It's part of that arsenal that activists have to be free to reach into and to use. I still argue that theatre—and I've even problems with that word—that expression through theatre of our experience will set us free, and does set people free in a very real way.

MCDONNELL: How difficult has it been to establish theatre within the broader resistance?

REID: From 1969 some of us had been trying to wed theatre to the political struggle but events were such that we could never seem to convince people of the importance of theatre. That changed largely through the involvement that many of us had at community level.... We were able to use our positions in local groups, Tenant's Associations, to highlight the value of theatre as a social commentator. We felt the need to try and provide a counter-information activity which could not only increase the self-image of our community, but show the way in which the propaganda game works—hence our involvement in writers' workshops, production of pamphlets, of people's poetry, prose etc. We wanted to speak about life in the occupied counties from the perspective of our experience, to offer a vision of hope for the future, and to play our part in the struggle for human dignity, freedom, and justice. Theatre is the most powerful tool I know of ... the most powerful face to face act of defiance and resistance imaginable. Maybe just being at a performance could help them realize that they are a good people who have suffered through no fault of their own—people with the power to change the world. We must always work to help each other overcome that sense of utter powerlessness that we all feel from time to time. And theatre is alive, active, vital ... theatre is a weapon.

MCDONNELL: Belfast Community Theatre created a significant body of political and community theatre in its time. How did the group first come together?

REID: Belfast Community Theatre came into existence through a play written by Jim McGlade, a play called *Oh, Gilbert!* It was a comic farce. And what brought the group together was that there was a member of the community who had written a play and wanted it performed. Coming from the political culture that we came from ... still come

from ... the answer was "why not?" It didn't matter who performed it, it didn't matter about the content, what mattered that was someone had written a play. Out of that came the nucleus came the group as such.

MCDONNELL: Now I think you did some important adaptations after that, of plays by Lady Gregory, for example. But your next major piece was *Sign on the Dotted Line*. What was the inspiration for that play?

REID: You need to put this in its political context because this was just after the Hunger Strikes, and after tremendous cultural and community trauma ... Things were very heightened ... emotions were still very heightened. It was then that material started coming out of the prisons ... It was smuggled out ... it was snippets ... fragments ... and those fragments contained outlines for a play. Broadly speaking it was about the process of interrogation. That material also coincided with the coming together of very politically motivated people.... At the core stood people who were very committed, very politically motivated, and who had, if you like, a particular vision of people's entitlement, people's rights. And although in the scheme of things people may argue the right to write a play is not a big right, to us it was a fundamental right, because it stood at the very core of the struggle that was going on in this country. And that was the right to be heard, and the right to speak your truth, speak your experience. And so *Sign on the Dotted Line* came out of that, and against that background of the Hunger Strikes. Also at that time there were very large scale arrests going on, and increasingly it was the young people being arrested, and they didn't know how to handle it. And so *Sign* also took on a teaching dimension. It was worked up over a period of weeks, and worked up very spontaneously. You've got to understand that the vast majority of the people involved in it had no background in theatre as such, and that was probably a strength. Because out of that there came a spontaneity, and came a willingness to experiment. Pieces were written up bit by bit. One scene that was written fairly early on was the plastic bullet scene, a very powerful scene. I wrote that in twenty minutes. And the reason we had no problem writing it up was because everything had been experienced ... we'd been there. So it wasn't as if we had to go to any sort of "Stanislavskian method": we were the method. We'd been there, and that was it. This was our experience. And the idea crept in ... the idea was there ... it may not have been explicit but certainly the idea was implicit ... that this was a part of a national liberation statement, if you want, that echoed across the world. It was not something that belonged solely to Ireland. It wasn't Irish. This was a human experience that happened to be happening in



Ireland. And so the link was made. Historically with a song like *The Auld Triangle* from Behan's play; that made the historical link. And Labi Siffre's song at the end: *Something Inside So Strong*, that made the contextual link to the present day.

MCDONNELL: Were there ideological differences in the group about the play's focus and content?

REID: Ideological differences? No, I think what came into play there were a set of human politics that transcended ideology. That isn't to say there aren't tensions. Of course there are. There's a lot of disagreements. We all feel very strongly about this. But ultimately we reach a consensus. There were a lot of victims in this play. The guy who was left with the pen in the blackout scene—whether he signed [a concocted confession] or not wasn't the issue. If he did he was a victim, if he didn't he was a victim. We were anxious not to dehumanize anyone: we were anxious not to criminalize people who were victims of oppression. Because someone who "signs on" themselves, or "signs on" other people ... they are victims. They've reached their breaking point: for some it was sooner rather than later. Now in this context to reach that breaking point was big time, serious stuff ... but there were a lot of people who reached that breaking point, and who acknowledged it, and they were not ostracized from the community. What I was anxious to do in *Sign* was to let people those know it's OK, but don't cut yourself off ... Even if you become the secret agent, if you like, part of this dominant invading power, of this culture of power ... don't kid yourself that you're not just a tool in there, you are. They now own you ... they own your soul, they own your spirit, and they control you ... and that's imperial possession as far as I was concerned. The issue of Pat was different. How was this going to end? Does she come away a sort of heroine who stands up against this terrible interrogation, psychological abuse, and walks free? That's too easy an option because that wasn't the experience. Usually if they didn't get you one way, they were going to get you another. What mattered was that you had something that could help you transcend it ... you knew that at the other side of that lay your comrades, lay people who had been through it and were waiting on you [i.e. in the prisons]. It was like another life within a life. All of those things were going on. It was very frenetic. It was very heavy.

MCDONNELL: The two interrogations around which the play is constructed present the protagonists with very difficult choices. If Tony does not sign a false confession his mother will be brought in for interrogation and charged. If he does sign, he is implicating other

innocent people. If Patsy, who is an activist, doesn't sign, she will be imprisoned and her child will be left without a mother. But if she does sign then she is betraying her comrades, and abdicating her responsibility for the struggle for a united Ireland, for what she sees as a just future for her child. *Sign* was saying, was it, that you need both forms of love, of commitment—to family and to nation?—that either choice brought pain, that either choice was valid in human terms.

REID: Yes, your choice was valid, but based on the understanding that at given historical times you have no choice. So we dealt with that quite simply through the blackout. What would you do? That's basically what we're saying to the audience. I would like to think that there is no choice ... so that's where my own thinking would have conflicted with play's actions. Because I happen to believe that in showing love for your family, for example, you may have to appear un-loving in the short term. And I don't mean that in any macho way, but in political terms. So there's a terrible dilemma there. And the way it's dealt with is the blackout. And we were confronting our audiences with a woman doing this. Because there was the perception that this [the Republican movement] was a male preserve, and it wasn't. So it raised other issues within a revolutionary struggle. What is the place of women? How do we treat women?

MCDONNELL: *Sign* is very much about women within the struggle, about their double oppression.

REID: Of course, of course. We did involve women's groups. We had groups coming in to have a look at what we were doing, to critique it.

MCDONNELL: And was the script changed as a consequence of the feedback you received from those groups?

REID: In some cases it was, yes. I'm trying to remember specific incidences ... there was a scene around Patsy, when it seemed we were being a bit patronizing towards Patsy, you know. It was one of the women's groups I think who actually came in and was watching this, and discussed the issues around it: and as men we sat out of it: we sat on the periphery and learned from it.

MCDONNELL: This was a play produced by a community in all sorts of different and powerful ways. The theatre is created in a cell, a kitchen, a community space, a theatre and in one man's head: it arrives through the agency of cigarette papers smuggled in mouths from a prison, a tape recorder, paper and pen, debate and argument. It is begun by men, and taken forward with a deeper agenda by women. It is part reportage, part text, and part improvisation. A particular issue, interrogation, becomes a prism through which other experiences are refracted. So how was the final script put together practically? Was a full rehearsal taped?

REID: No. I rewrote the script every night. As soon as I came home I rewrote the script. You had a note on the script that said "Forget that, it didn't work!" and a whole lot of points. I had to bring my rewrite back, and we'd try that out. And that's the way it worked. There was a script. But even when the script was finished, it wasn't finished. It was being changed constantly ... we were redoing it and redoing it ... changing a word and changing a line.

MCDONNELL: At some point in the devising process, however, we have to say OK, we're going with this. How was that decision taken?

REID: Well, there was a deadline in a sense that we were asked to perform this. But you know we got the "Ah ha!" factor one night when we were doing it. It was uncanny. Everybody went quiet. People started crying. And there was dead silence. And we knew ... because it was like a mirror. The language was right ... and the phrasing was right ... and the echoes were right ... and the resonances were right ... and the movement was right ... and the lighting was right ... and thank god we had no money! Because we may have gone into elaborate lighting schemes. Yet the lights worked. It worked. And so it was right because it felt right. And everybody agreed it was right. We had reached consensus. Everybody agreed, "This is it. It's right."

MCDONNELL: The play's Narrator acts as the voice of History, of the people. She is a figure who coheres what are very disparate formal elements ... naturalism, expressionistic scenes, epic elements. For example, the beautiful poetic commentary in the strip-searching scene, which is set against the naturalism of the interrogations.

REID: The women in the play wrote those scenes. They sat down with women who had been through strip-searching. It wasn't about seeking "authenticity" ... it was about a lived

experience; what was there. And that was an incredible scene. The Narrator, by her or his nature, was a form of historical memory ... and that was the idea. And so it was stylistic "mish mash": that was out of necessity. There was no formula. We weren't concerned with abstract ideas of "form": what we were concerned with was getting the message across. What medium suited the message. That was the bottom line. And if it had have meant that we had to have a scene in it which was set in a traditional sort of drawing room, we would have had no problem using it. Now, we might have had a problem with the set! How do we carry it? But at the end of the day the message was important.

MCDONNELL: But the idea of the narrator came from where? From you?

REID: Yes, it did, yes.

MCDONNELL: What strikes me about the moment of '68 and the claim of the alternative political theatres to have invented new forms and processes, is that they denied a long radical tradition in the use of theatre in revolutionary struggle and popular resistance. This theatre too is part of a hidden history. Historical circumstances change, and so forms change ... but the idea of theatre as a weapon, to cite Augusto Boal, endures.

REID: Right. You take John McGrath. The guy is worthy of praise. But I always got the impression that McGrath was reacting to Raymond Williams. It was an intellectual process. Here's a form of theatre, and my form of theatre's better than your form of theatre! Form! Does the form of theatre serve the voice? That's the question. Does the form serve the voice? But you let the voice come first. You build the form around it.

MCDONNELL: You may be closer to Williams in the sense that Williams argued that form has to arise from the experience: experience predates and shapes form. Form is the experience. He also argued that theatre has to return to the streets, for its renewal, to the struggles of people.

REID: And Williams was right! And I know McGrath made a contribution. Though he was concerned primarily I think with form.

MCDONNELL: He was a writer.

REID: He was a writer. I wasn't a writer, I wasn't Raymond Williams. I was someone who had something to say. And that was it. And the people with me had something to say. Those intellectual debates ... I'm not decrying them ... I think they're important. But they were distant. The people they were talking about weren't hearing it! That's the point. The people we were about were coming in and saying, "Hold on a minute, what's going on here?" And that was the difference. There was an immediacy.

MCDONNELL: Williams also said "culture is ordinary," and in the same way theatre is ordinary. It's "the vocation of all," to use Boal's evocative term.

REID: And you don't need "theatres." This is your theatre! You don't need a "theatre."

MCDONNELL: I was struck by your response to Brecht. You didn't hold forth on Lehrstück and form in abstraction from struggle ... but looked for what is useable. You came away from Brecht with ideas that to you were live, immediate, and urgent. We see Brecht in elements of *Sign* because they were useful, and they were useful because they reflect a political philosophy and a philosophy of theatre which spoke directly to the Nationalist experience in that moment. At the same time, you also found in Samuel Beckett's work a useable inspiration. You did productions, or rather adaptations, of *Eh Joe* and *Not I*. Can you talk about those works?

REID: Yes, well. You know I happen to think that Beckett would have approved. But it wouldn't have mattered to me whether he approved or not because I'd no money and if he'd have sued he'd have got nothing! Anyway ... *Eh Joe* is a play about betrayal. We were in the Supergrass period. There was a lot of betrayal. I use that term guardedly. But it was an issue. And I thought that there were echoes in *Eh Joe*, the language in *Eh Joe*, we could tinker a bit with that. I liked it. You see I think Beckett had some very good things to say. People talked about Beckett in hushed tones. And I said, wait a wee minute, you know. So we took Beckett's text and we played about with it, and we got it right. And we put the characters on stage. We characterized the play, and moved it away from the highly stylized format it was in. We put real people on stage. We had a Joe who betrayed.

MCDONNELL: What you also did was insert a new section, a pastiche of Beckett's style, which dealt with the Supergrass issue.

REID: Yes. Here the female character was calling Joe to account. That was what we were trying to say to people. You are responsible for your actions. You cannot Pontius Pilate yourself. You may escape, but your escape is always going to be one of exile. If not physical exile, it's certainly going to be emotional exile because you've put a gap between you and your community which will never heal. And in the darkness of the night you hear "Eh, Joe?" You hear the accusing voice. *Not I* was again typical Beckett, highly stylized, and it was just a bit of fun. We put the character in a bed and we wheeled it on and we turned it into a Laurel and Hardy sort of pastiche, and created a bit of fun about it. But we tried to raise serious issues. It seemed to sit well with *Eh Joe* because they were both about isolation. And also it's about recognising that Beckett was good at saying what he said. So, take it, use it!

MCDONNELL: How did audiences at the Belfast Festival respond?

REID: Well, they didn't, you see. That's the problem. We raised a few hackles. The establishment was not happy.

MCDONNELL: What about local people?

REID: Oh, local people thought it was brilliant, because the issues were real, you know. And they got into the language. Isn't this language marvellous! Who could have taught them that? No English teacher could have got that across. I don't want to get into the whole politics of Beckett here. It was a means to an end. Things were used. All that mattered was the end.

MCDONNELL: How did Sinn Féin view the theatre? Because here you are in a highly politicized community, and with a very focused party linked to that struggle, directing that struggle.

REID: I think it opened their eyes to the potential of theatre, definitely. At the same time they were also very supportive. Not because of the content ... this is a hard one to get across ... not because it was sympathetic to an issue that they themselves were concerned with. But by virtue of the fact that people were finding a voice through theatre ... they saw that. You see, people talk about Sinn Féin as a political party, but what you've got to remember when you talk about community, and this distinct political party Sinn Féin, is

that the political aspirations there were communal. I would have found it pretty hard to produce a play that didn't deal, instinctively, with the issues that *Sign* dealt with.

MCDONNELL: Was there never any moment when Sinn Féin said: "Look, you're criticizing us, you're criticizing the military struggle"?

REID: No. No. I mean there were disagreements! People said when they saw *Sign*, "Oh, you could have done this or that." But we said, we welcome your comments, but that's not we set out to do. We weren't spokespeople for Sinn Féin. I come from this community ... what's regarded as a Sinn Féin community ... but that doesn't mean to say that my politics are Sinn Féin politics. There were parallels, sure. But no way would my politics have been dictated to. And this was down to a number of reasons. One was that the people involved in the theatre had respect ... they'd been committed community activists for years ... they were also people who, when they wanted to say something, they'd say it. So, there was no negative comment from Sinn Féin. Personally I would have had nothing to do with it if that had been the case, and neither would a lot of people involved with it. Because at the end of the day it was about our right to say something—the next week it could be, "Well, hold on here, we have a problem here with the politics of Sinn Féin."

MCDONNELL: It seemed to me, nonetheless, that there were certain things that were kept in the family. That if there was a certain criticism of aspects of what Sinn Féin were doing, what the IRA were doing, that would be dealt with, but not in a public arena. In other words, the theatre would not ever destabilize the movement.

REID: Well, we weren't going to become political pawns for the establishment or for anyone else. In such a highly politicized situation anything you do has consequences. We could manage *Sign* within our own community, within our own politics. I certainly wasn't going to give any ammunition to anyone. No way! It's a no-go area, because quite simply my loyalty is to this community. This community is not perfect, but I want to be part of the solution to its problems. I'm not going to lend, ammunition to any outside bourgeois, imperialist forces ... I'm using clichés I know ... but you know what I'm saying ... to help those people hammer us. We'd had enough of being hammered. The boot was on our neck. And you had to get people standing up first, and starting to push that boot off. The wider issues can be dealt with.

MCDONNELL: After *Sign* you seemed to move into a different area of work. *Ecce Homo* was an example of that.

REID: Yes. We started to look at issues that people wanted to explore within the group ... and the gay rights issue was one of them. And out of that came *Ecce Homo*. *Ecce Homo* was never produced, and never will be. And maybe that doesn't matter. We were in a heavily politicized situation. How do we treat people inside this politicized situation? Within this "family"? I have a right within the "family" to ask those questions. So, how can we on the one hand have the *Rights of Man*, and yet not seriously consider how we demand those rights? And out of that came *Ecce Homo*. It was also an attempt to highlight what I still regard as the oppressive nature, the insensitive nature, of organized religion. And it was also a chance to look at attitudes. My own! Other people's. So *Ecce Homo* was worked up collectively, but I wrote it. It drew on stuff from all over the world. From you.

MCDONNELL: So, you went into rehearsals with *Ecce Homo* ... and what happened?

REID: It just never happened. I don't know why ... maybe it wasn't ready. I never analysed it. Rehearsals went very well. Some scenes were working, some weren't. And I was seeing the *Sign* thing coming back again were we were going to have to rework. Basically you've got to remember that you were in a political situation where activists were caught up in many situations. So what happened then was that something took over, and you were pulled away ... and so you never got the chance to stay with the theatre always ... you had to prioritize. And maybe *Ecce Homo* didn't have the same priority. And I hold my hands up ... mea culpa ... you know. That doesn't mean to say it doesn't have a job for the future. I don't know. But I reckon it was probably one of the best things we've ever put together.

MCDONNELL: My perception, writing about you, is that Belfast Community Theatre's work came to an end at that point. And that the reason it did was that creating theatre is a struggle, is a struggle within the struggle if you like, because other things like your family, or immediate campaigns, events on the streets, the war, take priority, or at that moment are the more immediate priority. And, paradoxically, and this is what I find powerful about your work—that while theatre is an organic part of cultural resistance, it isn't always the form that will be used.



REID: I could reach into it tomorrow, pick it up again. Hopefully I will do in the near future. It's not the be all and end all. But to me it comes close to being the be all and end all as a means of expression, as a means of empowerment. And there was a philosophy at work there ... we met people ... yourself, people from England, Scotland from all over the world ... so it wasn't a theatre hammered out of insularity. It was a theatre hammered out of an awareness that the plastic bullet that was fired here today could be fired in Sheffield in the morning, could be fired in Scotland next year; that the judicial tactics that they used here could be used in Sheffield in the morning.

MCDONNELL: And they were—during the Miners' strike for instance.

REID: Of course they were. So there was no insularity there. It was prophetic in many ways.

MCDONNELL: This was one of the powerful tensions at work in the war I think. Here you had a community which was ghettoized, fenced in—geographically, politically, ideologically—and yet, paradoxically, and this was the case with the Miners' strike, it was precisely that which offered it its international character, which allowed you to draw on other liberation and neo-colonial struggles, to create an awareness of these broader historical developments.

REID: I would agree with that. We were always anxious not to allow the struggle to become isolated. The key to the whole experience for me had to do with my own humanity—the big struggle was not to allow myself to be dehumanized. And that meant that I had to, for my own integrity, keep looking outside, and to keep looking right across the communities, and to keep looking at the class I come from. And not to swallow the guff that ... things like, working-class politics are dead! I hear this—"There's no longer any class politics." There is! And I don't live in a time warp. Class is a reality. "Imperialism is old hat." It's not! It's alive and well, thank you. And we developed a self confidence about that. That it didn't matter what the trendy left thought. It didn't matter what the chic radicals said. Didn't matter at all! I knew that class experience was a real experience, and that it existed, and so there was self-confidence there.

MCDONNELL: We're in the middle of the "peace process." It's a time of transition, and of tremendous difficulties and challenges. What is the role of theatre in this moment?

REID: I think first we need to ask the question—what does the peace mean? What does it mean in bread and butter political terms? What does it mean in terms of non-sectarian working-class politics? That's one set of questions that need to be asked. I think theatre's a big role to play in this whole police debate; a major role. There are bridges of understanding that need to be built, and theatre's a big role to play there; but a theatre of challenge, not a theatre of the forelock. Not a theatre of "Let's get a group of Protestants, let's get a group of Catholics, and we'll all sit down and we'll come up with nice sketches about our experiences and understanding." We've got to challenge each other's experiences. I think also that Ireland is emerging as a very self-confident economy, and we need to challenge the basis of that. Because it doesn't matter what colour the flag is, if there's still a boot on my neck—an economic boot, a military boot—I don't care. I happen to believe anyway that in any situation the working class are going to get screwed. I think theatre's a major role to play in the debate within Republican politics, and I'm using Republican in the widest political context and sense here—as a set of social values and rights. There's a lot of talk in the nine counties of "the constitution": theatre needs to look at that. What do we mean by "constitution"? What has worked in the American constitution? What about the English radical tradition? Theatre's a role there—to start and make links; so theatre has a broader role to play, and a more critical role to play. But at the same time it's got to be hammered out from a focal point of being here; made by people who've a right to ask those questions. There are two types of people: there are those who think they have a right, and those who have a right. This community has a right to ask those questions of itself. And in asking those questions we may turn round to someone and say ... in London or Sheffield ... and say "What's been your experience?" In Scotland ... South Africa ... Eastern Europe ... what's been your experience? And draw on that to inform the theatre. You see it's the same as adapting the Beckett pieces. You reach out, and take what's good, what you want, but always bearing in mind that the core is your own experience. That requires self-confidence. It requires group confidence, and theatre has that role.

MCDONNELL: When we first met I recall you saying of the working class estates in England, "We have all the problems you have got, and we've got an imperial war on top." So even when the war is over, and it won't be finally over until the causes of the conflict are removed, you're left with the war on poverty, unemployment, ill-health, deep psychological and emotional pain, and so on.

REID: When we were meeting working-class people from England, from Scotland ... there were no barriers; because the shared experience was one of oppression. Theatre started to allow people, the whole political activism that developed here through struggle from 1966, actually empowered people to speak ... and so they started to seize anything that would give them a voice, and theatre was another voice. We weren't the first or only in any shape or form. You had people like Des [Wilson] doing it in a terrific way, poking fun at the establishment. That was the People's Theatre. It's not about political orthodoxy, or ideological orthodoxy - the correct method. Everyone's a right to be heard. And sometimes that's painful ... but they have that right. And so Belfast Community Theatre was a moment ... was an experience ... one that is still alive because it's alive in everybody who was involved in creating it.

#### ENDNOTE

When the colloquium which was the basis for this collection of essays was mooted, it was suggested that the words "Ireland," "radical" and "theatre" did not sit readily together. Yet, while this may be true of the mainstream, the fact is that Ireland, among all of its many rich contributions to global culture, stands also, through the aegis of the Troubles and its community theatres, as the locus of one of the most significant periods in post-war European political theatre history.

## NOTES

- 1 Many of these sources can be found in the Northern Ireland Political Collection and the Theatre and Performing Arts archive, both held at the Linen Hall Library in Belfast.
- 2 The IRA and the loyalist paramilitaries had always been vulnerable to informers, and the period after 1981 was to see, in the words of one of the more famous of them, Sean O'Callaghan, informing turned into a "full blown system, and one of the main weapons in the state's armoury against the terrorist organizations" (177). The Supergrass system proved a double-edged sword for the state. The unreliability of witnesses and the tendency for many to recant at the last minute, citing brutality as the reason for making their confessions, was to render it unworkable. Nonetheless it created (and this was a key counter-insurgency aim) a climate of profound suspicion and "blind panic" within Republicanism.

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