

FORUM KRITIKA: RADICAL THEATRE AND IRELAND

SOCIALIST SHENANIGANS AND EMERALD EPIPHANIES: THE CASE OF MARGARETTA D'ARCY AND JOHN ARDEN

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Abstract

This essay explores the two meanings of “radical” – the popular one of “sharp-edged” or “extreme” and the original one of “rooted within the culture” – in relation to selected works of D’Arcy and Arden: *The Non-Stop Connolly Show* (1975), *Vandaleur’s Folly* (1978) and *The Little Gray Home in the West* (1978). Within the space of contradiction between these meanings, the paper considers such issues as the political function of the outsider, the rival claims of reform and revolution, relationships between text and means of production and between forms and audience ownership. The perennial question of the battle between republicanism and socialism frames much of the discourse. In concluding, the essay considers where these works stand in the aftermath of Thatcherism and the Celtic Tiger Economy, and whether there is any “radical” legacy left by these works in Irish theatre.

Keywords

Ireland, theatre and politics

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Margaretta D’Arcy and John Arden have been living and working in Ireland for thirty years and yet it remains a moot point whether Arden in particular can, in any sense, be considered an Irish playwright and theatre maker. *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth Century Irish Drama* does not include a single mention of either, even though its opening editorial statement informs the reader that “In addition to studies of individual playwrights the collection includes examination of the relationship between the theatre and its political context as this is inflected through its ideology, staging and programming” (back cover). Yet much of D’Arcy’s and Arden’s theatre writing and production activities

since they settled in the west of Ireland have been overtly concerned with that relationship. Fintan O'Toole has offered an explanation for this neglect, describing Arden as:

an interestingly displaced figure. He is the heir of the English literary dissident tradition of Blake and Shelley and yet he is now being framed in an Irish context which is quite different. The literary discourse in Ireland has been shaped by forces like land, Catholicism, and nationalism. None of which are really part of Arden's language. And it seems a pity that more is not made of the rich set of Irish historical and cultural resonances around the English language and the politics of the colony. But I suspect he might not really fit in either country as in England he is seen as a lost writer and over here he is still slightly exotic. (qtd. in Wroe)

Such a position presents serious difficulties for any consideration of radicalism in relation to D'Arcy's and Arden's contribution to theatre in Ireland. Their work at once qualifies under the popular definition of radical since it advocates social change through revolutionary action, as endorsed by Michael Etherton's unequivocal statement that "they not only write difficult and radical works: they see them into radical performance" (214) and is perhaps disqualified within the discourses of contemporary Irish studies, according to the original meaning of radical as "naturally inherent, essential, fundamental" ("Radical"). This paper will attempt to explore the reasons why this work has put down no roots in the soil of Irish culture and whether the political vision, as expressed through their plays, is one which is fundamentally foreign to the rooted discourses of Irish politics.

If only in terms of quantity, the six-part, twenty-six hour *Non-Stop Connolly Show* is D'Arcy's and Arden's largest claim to a place in Irish theatre. That the 1916 Irish revolutionary James Connolly was selected as the subject for this epic says much about not only the political affiliations of the playwrights but also about their self-perception of their situation within Irish culture. On one level Connolly is the obvious choice of writers committed to advocating for an all-Ireland socialist revolution. Of those who participated in the 1916 attempt to end British rule, Connolly alone had a social vision based upon a class analysis rather than one which, however democratic in intention, was, at its core, nationalist. As the authors make clear in the Preface which is included in all five parts of the published texts, their intention is to rehabilitate Connolly against the grain of revisionist histories that seek to erase any socialist legacy:

In Dublin our aim was primarily to counteract what one might term the “Conor Cruise O’Brien historical revisionism,” currently much in vogue in Irish intellectual circles, and closely associated with the policies of the Fine Gael-Labour Coalition government. (v)

In order to achieve this aim more effectively, it would have been necessary to connect Connolly more explicitly with the roots of an Irish peasant and working-class radicalism as manifested in both the pre-capitalist formations of Irish rural society and in the mobile proletariat of Irish labour unleashed by the Industrial Revolution on both sides of the Atlantic. David Lloyd’s analysis of Connolly’s connections to both these formations points the way to a possible, at least partial, resolution of the paradoxes of radicalism in a specifically Irish context for socialism:

As the long history of successive British attempts to impose “civility” on Ireland suggests, Irish cultural formations continued to be among the many resistances that capitalist colonialism had to overcome in the course of its becoming and, as Connolly seems to have grasped, the coercive force of that overcoming produced as its differential counterpart a persistent if apparently discontinuous set of counter-modern discourses and practices. (124)

It may be that, at some barely conscious level, the decision of D’Arcy and Arden to move to the west of Ireland and work in the local community can be read as an attempt to connect themselves to those same well-springs of resistance, singularly lacking in Britain in the 1970s. Ironically, like their subject himself, they found themselves to be out of time, rather than out of place; a vanguard cut off from the slowly advancing cohorts of Irish cultural studies where they might have received a more sympathetic hearing, by the clamorous modernist voices of nationalism and their revisionist allies among materialist historians.

In all aspects, it is a workers’ story that D’Arcy and Arden are determined to present through the episodes selected for dramatisation, through decisions about the visual effect:

The backcloths are described in the text. The style we have in mind should be based on the formal emblematic tradition of trade union banners, and should be carried in bright colours with no attempt at impressionism or naturalistic

representation. The cloths should include appropriate slogans and captions (*Non-Stop* vii).

and through the choice of the Dublin venue, Liberty Hall; signifying both its importance in the life of Connolly and its iconic role as a rallying point for contemporary Irish trade unionism. However, there is another, unacknowledged level, on which the choice of Connolly is appealing to these playwrights. He is the rootless outsider who owes no dues to a particular community and for whom the search to belong is destined for failure, at least this side of the grave. His home town was Scotland's Victorian Edinburgh, where the tight-knit Irish ghetto was itself a community outside the mainstream and which he left at an early age in a quest for work and purpose in Ireland and America. As D'Arcy and Arden's *Non-Stop Connolly Show* illustrate, both senses of Connolly's radicalism meet in the employers' invocation against him:

I'm as Irish as the Cross of Cong:
I invoke the Pope the whole day long!
It is a sin to be a socialist:
The very word of the parish priest.
Stand firm for the faith and the ould Irish sod:
A vote for James Connolly is a vote against God! (58)

According to this trope Connolly is not really Irish as evidenced by his radical, political views which have somehow been born out of his detachment from any roots in the Irish soil and from the Catholic religion which has been nurtured over centuries by that soil, nor will he ever be unless his radicalism can be linked to pre-colonial, rural formations of the kind suggested by Lloyd. The title of the essay Arden wrote with D'Arcy about this project, "A Socialist Hero on the Stage" in his collection *To Present the Pretence*, contributes further to a feeling that Connolly never quite relates to the world around him, being more than human. The hero is a species once removed from humanity as Galileo tellingly observes in Brecht's play: "Unhappy the land where heroes are needed" (98). Connolly's political and personal agendas are beyond the pale until they can be, *post-mortem*, manipulated for admittance into an acceptable social history. Perhaps the same will be the case for D'Arcy and Arden with reference to theatrical history.

Arden's essay clarifies the playwrights' thematic intentions for the whole dramatic cycle and, in doing so, reminds us of the great weight of ambition that Connolly has to

carry through the play; an ambition which effectively separates him from the world he inhabits:

The Socialist parties in the early 1900s were comparatively obscure on the field of world affairs: but their purpose was nothing less than the turning of the whole world upside-down in the interest of the entire future of the human race – and in a few years they had done it: we were in no doubt that the drama to reflect this must be built on a traditionally heroic scale. (*To Present* 98)

It is this sense of Connolly, as the agent of chaos tearing up the familiar world, that is picked up in the line where the character Yeats quotes his own poem to describe the effect of Connolly upon the changing world: “Who is this dangerous man/Slouching, as it were, towards Bethlehem to be born?” (*Non-Stop* 20). The “rough beast” of “The Second Coming” recreated here as Connolly is the successor to Christ, the half-human creature who remakes the world. In echoing Yeats, the playwrights, consciously or otherwise, contribute to the removal of their hero from the orbit of human relations even as they promote his singleness of purpose in contrast to the compromises and class interests of Yeats and Maud Gonne who are aligned with those who cling to the contours of a familiar world in their desire to reform capitalism, rather than sweep it away. In “A Socialist Hero on the Stage,” D’Arcy and Arden are unequivocal in their analysis of the central issue with which they are dealing through the epic tale of Connolly’s life:

We found out very quickly that the essential Conflict of the fable, which ostensibly was that between Capital and Labour, seemed often lost in the tributary struggle between opposed factions of the latter: and that this struggle itself could time and again be summarised as the Fight between Revolution and Reform. (*To Present* 98)

The use of the word “fable” here is deceptive if we should be tempted into reading Brecht’s understanding of it. This is no fable along the lines of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* where a story is told to illustrate a point of political praxis but rather an epic tale, “series of digressive stage-presentations of the events of his time which influenced his political views and consequent actions.” The enemy is capitalism in the shape of the variously masked form of Grabitall who, Hydra-headed, plays off the reformist politicians

– liberal, nationalist, orange – against each other in order to secure the continuity of his business interests and the defeat of revolution in the shape of Connolly. The playwrights’ notion of a binary opposition between Reform and Revolution, conceived as personifications in the manner of a medieval morality play, is given unambiguous utterance in the mouth of the protagonist:

The one tune needful for the present day:
True revolution is the enemy of reform! (*Non-Stop* 59)

Where that “present day” is 1900, Connelly’s declamation carries a prophetic air and suggests that he was in tune with international movements even as he was impatient with their slowness to act, as Lenin’s comments on the premature nature of the Easter Rising tend to confirm. However, as Arden makes clear in *To Present the Pretence*, this is also the position of the playwrights in 1975. They are equally impatient. Although it is not helpful to judge them through the hindsight of the post-Thatcher, post-Celtic Tiger period and even if current events may lend relevance to revolutionary sentiments, there is a sense in the mid-seventies that Arden and D’Arcy have retreated back into history in search of a radicalism that is absent from their own time and the accompanying political analysis emphasises their detachment from contemporary realities; again radical in both senses. They share their hero’s single-minded socialist republicanism without regard for any impact which an altered historical context might have upon that discourse.

Vandaleur’s Folly, though written after *The Non-Stop Connolly Show*, offers a glimpse of the struggle between revolution and reform that Connolly was to inherit. Set firmly in the period of colonial Ireland, the playwrights present the Ralahine experiment as an example of a potentially revolutionary organisation undone by the reformist tendencies of its organisers, for although inspired by the ideals of cooperative reform, the organisers of Ralahine never desired revolutionary restructuring of society. Drawing on agrarian discontent, revolutionary nationalist groups thrived in rural Ireland throughout the 1800s. (See Fintan Lane’s *The Origins of Modern Irish Socialism, 1881-1896* for a detailed discussion of the historical context, 11-17.) In the rural Irish county of Clare, a landowner, John Vandaleur, conceived of the idea to set up an agrarian cooperative commune among his tenants to prevent them from being attracted to the nationalist revolutionary secret societies. Vandaleur asked help from John Edward Craig, who worked closely with Robert Owen in England, to oversee the Ralahine experiment. In the play, Craig, in a direct

address to the audience, provides an epitaph on the commune that sums up the view of the playwrights:

Ralahine had been an Irish point of interrogation erected amidst the wilderness of capitalist thought and feudal practice, challenging both in vain for an answer. (*Vandaleur's Folly* 96)

The challenge never quite escapes the colonial benevolence that ensures that capitalism does not come under threat. Instead it is of a piece with the aspirations of Robert Owen as analysed in the play by William Thompson: "Co-operation from above, extended to the people by the idealism of their controllers" (27). This exactly describes the position of Vandaleur who, both by class (landed gentry) and nationality (Anglo-Irish colonial), can never belong to the Irish land that absorbs his schemes and hopes. Unwittingly, he articulates the bewildered ambivalence of a situation which guarantees ultimate failure:

I have lived in this country all my life, as a gentleman. Philosophically scientifically endeavoured to lift up the poor people toward a condition of humanity. (61)

The principal strength of the play lies in the way the form provides the ideal complement to the content. Its subtitle is "An Anglo-Irish Melodrama" and it is melodrama which dictates both the structure of the tale and the manner of the characterisation. Most importantly, melodrama is the form associated with the depiction of Victorian reform, both on the stages of its theatre and in the pages of Dickens' novels. It is a form which highlights defects of character as the barrier to social progress, rather than revealing the deep structures of inequality. Its appeal is to innate goodness, not to a revolutionary call to arms. Arden is at his best when playing unconventionally with conventional forms; as in the scene where the typical melodrama of the duel is transformed in an instant to farce:

Vandaleur's pistol goes off, terrifying him. The bullet hits Baker-Fortescue across the midriff – his belt-buckle flies off and his trousers fall down. The Peasants cheer exuberantly. (72)

The subtlety of this formal switch is that it enables the audience to cheer the momentary triumph of Vandaleur until the shout sticks in our throats as we realise that

his agreement to submit to the gentleman's convention of the duel signals his fatal return to the colonial aristocracy, and doom for the Ralahine project. It is, in farcical mode, the equivalent of Connolly's heroic decision to throw in his lot with the nationalists, thereby signalling the beginning of the end of socialist aspirations in Ireland.

Arden demonstrated a similar lightness of formal touch for *The Non-Stop Connolly Show* by combining the two dominant forms of late medieval England – the Mystery cycles and the Morality plays; forms not rooted in Irish theatrical traditions. From the former the playwrights take the idea of a chronological series of incidents, structured allegorically into partially repeated cycles; the different phases of Connolly's life substituted for the books of the Old and New Testaments. From the latter comes the idea of abstract moral qualities presented as personifications with the one constant battle uniting the cycle being that between Good and Evil, Connolly and Grabitall. The lesser devils of Reform stimulate the actions of specific scenes. The essence of the Morality play, however, was the fall and redemption of Man; whereas Connolly, if he is the equivalent of Everyman, does not suffer from the doubts or temptations that might compromise his stance unless, that is, his final casting of the lot of the Citizen Army with the Irish Republican Brotherhood for the 1916 Easter Rising is deemed a fall from socialist grace.

Arden, throughout his career alive to the possibilities of neglected theatre forms, was well aware of the importance of formal choices for establishing the aesthetic through which meaning is communicated to audiences:

It is, as it were, the scenario for late-medieval morality play. Every time the Revolutionist Cause (Connolly's cause) gained ground, the Capitalist lost ground: whenever the Reformists succeeded in muffling a Revolutionary demand, Capitalism was made the more secure in its stronghold. It was this repetition of political theme that eventually decided us to write six plays about Connolly instead of just one, and to present them non-stop in one vast theatrical "event." (*To Present* 98-99)

Though the structure of the whole cycle can be read as a reworking of these ancient forms, the playwrights exploited a whole range of styles derived from both theatre and literature in the development of specific incidents. Much of the vitality and energy of the whole comes from the way in which verse and prose are modulated for the purposes of irony, satire, caricature and direct address as, for example, when one of the lesser devils, an employer, introduces himself through the form of the mummers play:

Here come I, McHook by name –
I had not thought to play this game. (*Vandaleur* 59)

This rich variety of forms shares a common theatrical purpose in enabling the actors to use them as vehicles through which action and attitude can be depicted emblematically without running any risk of seducing the audience into speculations of a naturalistic kind. The actors present their characters as a social “gest” in the manner of Brecht. But whereas Brecht would introduce complexity by presenting the character behaving differently according to the different demands of a changing social situation, there is a tendency here for characters to be remorselessly consistent throughout. This is, perhaps, to be expected of Grabitall, the arch fiend of Capital, who is essentially the same in all six parts, no matter how many masks he works through. I would argue, however, that, for the most part, this consistency of character is also true of the presentation of Connolly and results in a fundamental lack of interest in him through long passages of the action. He is almost always the hero and only rarely the man.

This may appear at first sight to be an unlikely criticism for a character whose life is depicted in twenty-six hours of performance during most of which he is on stage. There is, however, a clue to this flatness of characterisation in the original concept as revealed by the playwrights:

The great length of the cycle of plays, and their deliberately repetitive structure, made it possible to dramatise the contradictions and complexities so fully that we felt all the various objections that could be raised by particular factions might be answered by pointing to at least one of the episodes in the cycle and the argument implied by it. (126)

The writers work from a defensive position, picturing themselves fending off the sectarian axe-grinding of that spectrum of groups broadly defined as reformist. The verbal tonnage of *The Non-Stop Connolly Show* is devoted to ensuring that all arguments get an airing, rather than exposing Connolly himself to the demons of contradiction, self-doubt or ambiguity. The “little rhyme” created by the authors to keep their noses to the grind-stone:

My name it is James Connolly
I neither smoke nor drink:

Come to the theatre for twenty-six hours
And watch me sit and think. (*Non-Stop* 96)

discloses some of the limitations of his theatrical presence. His thoughts are offered at every twist and turn but they are often disembodied in the manner of an immense series of mini-manifestoes and take the spectator no further into the mind and imagination of Connolly than could have been achieved with half the quantity. The starting points for the creative process of bringing him to life on stage are primarily ideological and emblematic, rather than emanating from lived experiences and passions. Connolly, as conceived by D'Arcy and Arden, represents many things but in that process is often disabled from representing himself:

D'Arcy divined a basic image for his character on which we could build the play (neither of us can get down to writing dialogue unless we first have one basic image or analogy in our mind for the chief action of the story) – she saw him as “The Little Tailor” whom no one takes seriously, but who waddles on through the forest of giants, resourceful and cunning, and eventually succeeds in winning the hand of the princess. Connolly of course “failed”: but insofar as he had placed the Socialist vision firmly in the tradition of Irish revolution (hitherto a primarily nationalist concept) we regarded his life as a triumph: what he did can be built upon, and the principles he discerned need never be invalidated. We had now a degree of understanding, between us, as to the general shape and “flavour” of the play. (106-07)

Once more the initiating concept pays great structural dividends in the construction of the cycle but offers little by way of insight into the man who supplies the motive for the rich range of visual and verbal forms that drive it. A large part of the problem of Connolly's character development stems from the lack of relationships to underpin the dramatic action. For most of the cycle we witness him dealing with adversaries, employers and politicians, who stand in a fixed and known relationship to him. In other words he does not recreate himself as a reflection in the eyes of others in the way that most of us do. Lillie, his wife, though the source of occasional bouts of guilt or pangs of conscience, does not figure largely enough to perform this function. The one other character who has the potential to challenge Connolly to remake himself is the Irish union leader Jim Larkin. He takes a prominent role in Part 5 and threatens to hold a mirror up to Connolly as he challenges

him for leadership of the socialist movement. Whilst Larkin might seem to offer a way in to the social and cultural roots that elude Connolly, he shares the latter's tendency to think in abstractions on the grand scale, rather than anchor his rhetoric in the lived reality of working people, thus separating himself from those whom he would lead:

We who are born with the microbe of discontent in our blood must of necessity live the strenuous life, one day down in the depths of despondency, and the next day lifted up on the peak of Mount Optimism. (20)

Whilst the smoothness and ease of the rhetoric contrasts with Connolly's hesitant and deliberate delivery, there is a similar tendency to work on a scale too large to be encompassed by the lesser minds of their followers. The power struggle between them carries the dramatic potential to catch light as a conflagration of human interest and revelation of egotistical motives mixed in with the sacrifices made by both to the labour movement:

Larkin: The steam packet blacked!
 Repudiate my solemn act...?
 Jim Connolly, what the hell's been going on!
 What word had you from me to do this thing?
 You've thrown the whole contrivance out of true –
 The scabs in Dublin now have firearms, thanks to you – !

Connolly: All right: your turn has come: I must give ground:
 The floor is yours.
 So do you make your play, my brother,
 Make sure you win your own applause. (*Non-Stop* 82)

The playwrights do not change the style of the delivery for this exchange with the consequence that the protagonists skirt around each other like shadow boxers. The distance between the style and the character makes it impossible to feel from the audience that the whole trajectory of these two men's ambitions is at stake. Instead it is all part of the game with Larkin; just another giant of the forest over whom Connolly will ultimately triumph.

At other moments the epic register is appropriate and effective; a large language to suit the scale of events it is describing. When Connolly is left to his not so dark night of

the soul, pondering the action of the morrow like Richard III at Bosworth, the poetic style captures the nationalist revolutionary schoolteacher, Pádraic Pearse succinctly:

This poet possessed,
This fledgling schoolteacher quite lost
Between the broken eggshell of his safe and bourgeois past
And the new huge flapping flight he means to launch tomorrow – (68)

Soon after the argument between Larkin and Connolly, the pair are depicted on an empty stage prior to the passing of a funeral procession for a woman striker of the Connolly's Citizen Army, killed by a scab during the Great Lockout. (In Dublin, 1913, workers of the city's major tram and transport company were forbidden to join a workers' union. Suspected union workers throughout Dublin were locked out of their workplace and the resulting strike was supported by Jim Larkin and opposed by the city's major employers and the national police.) The play's pace quickens towards the climax of Part 5:

Connolly: They grunt and shout against us and they yell
 Like wolves and badgers of the dark wild wood –

Larkin: No, rabbits, lurking in their safe protective hole.

Connolly: We Irish workers must once more go down to hell –
 We eat no bread of common sacrifice and brotherhood
 But choke our tongues with dust of black betrayal.
 Dublin, defeated, now is left alone.

Larkin: Can we continue all upon our own?

Connolly: The red flag of the peoples of the world
 Has no room in it for a single patch of green...? (88)

Connolly's lines end with a question mark on which hangs the fate of his whole enterprise and the purpose of his existence. His mission is to bring an Irish socialist party into the international socialist movement. The emblem of the flag captures the ambivalence of the issue (the red symbolizing the international socialist movement and the green symbolizing

Ireland). On the one hand there is bitterness at the failure of the international movement, in particular the English Labour movement, to make intellectual space for the contextual specifics of Irish socialism, while on the other, if the purpose of the peoples' flag is to unite the workers of all nations, why should that purpose be compromised with a little patch of green? Ironically, it is Connolly himself, and behind him the playwrights, who insist upon the ultimate incompatibility of nationalism with socialism. No quantity of stirring speeches and powerful emblems can mask this contradiction.

The relationship of action to character lies at the heart of the problem of the audience reception of these plays. It is evident from the Preface included before each part of the cycle, that the playwrights have strict views on the playing style to be adopted throughout:

Essentially the plays need *speed* – and close attention to *rhythm*. Each scene or episode should be understood as a self-contained combination of voice, movement, colour and music, with a precise dramatic momentum of its own, which makes its point as sharply as possible, to be replaced by the next grouping. We would emphasise finally that the play will work only if the actors are more concerned with understanding the political arguments and implications of the story than with “creating character” in the normal theatrical sense. (*Non-Stop* vii)

This reads like a director's note to an Eisenstein film; an ambitious demand for a largely amateur set of performers working in a space not designed for performance. But aside from the scope of the ambition there is some confusion around the function of the audience in the theatrical event. If the performers are the ones who have their political consciousness raised through the process of rehearsing and performing, the instructions make sense and are achievable, somewhat in the manner of Brecht's *Lehrstücke* where he wrote of abolishing the bourgeois distinction between actor and audience. Everyone involved takes a role and there is, therefore, “in the normal theatrical sense” no audience. However, the audience who attended the cycle in Dublin's Liberty Hall were there as a “theatrical” audience, whether “normal” or not and as such, were entitled to be entertained by the plays. By entertained I mean having a sufficient engagement with the characters represented to care both intellectually and emotionally about what happens to them. D'Arcy and Arden, in their anxiety to avoid the creation of character, have not appreciated that character is the empathetic hook which draws the audience into and implicates them in the action. From this very implication political understanding can flow but without it the audience is left

watching shadow puppets darting across a cyclorama. The same problem is revisited in the 7:84 touring performance of *Vandaleur's Folly*. In the Preface to the printed text the playwrights write disparagingly of the acting company:

We discovered that socialist-minded actors of quality committed to placing their art at the service of their politics were more or less unavailable: they had all done their stint for 7:84 in the past and were physically unable to take any more ... So we ended up using "ordinary" actors with no particular political bent, who were not opposed to "socialism," and who were prepared to give it a try, after all, it was a job. (x)

This somewhat jaundiced view of the company who fell a long way short of the fierce Marxist ideologue, D'Arcy is, not surprisingly, challenged in John McGrath's own account of the production difficulties surrounding this play:

John wrote a draft of the play while Margaretta was in New York, and we were very excited about it. Margaretta came back and she went off with John to re-write what he had done. It was very long, but it was very exciting. It was called a melodrama and was written in this kind of rollicking doggerel that went along at a cracking pace. During the writing process the company was being put together. All were interviewed by 7:84, John and Margaretta ... When I saw it all the natural spontaneous contribution of the actors was being taken out and replaced by a kind of staccato, fast, rather flat delivery – nobody seemed to be able to pause to develop a moment or a character. As the awareness came that it was still very long, lots of cuts happened and I think a lot of cuts came at the wrong places and some of the most effective moments were cut in almost a masochistic way. It had the effect of hitting the audience repeatedly, like a boxer hitting a punch bag. The audiences got rapidly tired, though intrigued, then more tired and slightly bored, then more tired and a bit angry. By the end, most audiences were left indifferent, a great pity because I thought the play was good and the company were very talented. (107-08)

McGrath's analysis echoes the experience of *The Non-Stop Connolly Show* in that the actors are once more required to sacrifice performance skills to political education and,

ironically, the directorial functions undermined the innate possibilities of the scripts. It is once more a failure to bring education and entertainment into a dialectical relationship for either performers or audiences.

From the outset of Part 1 of *The Non-Stop Connolly Show* it is clear that we, as audience or reader (and there is, perhaps, insufficient distinction between the two categories here), are being presented with a play of ideas, rather than people. The running motif of the battle between Nationalism and Socialism is starkly laid out by two mouthpieces: the Nationalist Agitator and the Socialist Agitator who has the last word because he presents the thesis of the playwrights:

There are riots all over England because work is not to be had: there are riots all over Ireland because land is not to be had. Yet those over there who cannot find work are supposed to be the national enemy of those here who can't find land: and your Parnells and your Gladstones with their talk of Home Rule are in fact doing nothing other than confirming that supposition! They are dividing you, and they are ruling you: if you won't lie down to London, then you must lie down to the power of Dublin, and either way there's troops of soldier-boys in their red jackets to see you do. But if all of you were to determine to destroy capitalism once for all – take away its enormous power and the power of its lackey parliaments – then with what could we replace it? I'll give you the word – *socialism*! (24-5)

Here is the conceptual framework for the whole cycle, delivered in the manner of a political meeting; in other words without theatricality and yet as part of a theatre performance. My complaint is not that the discussion was irrelevant, staged as it was during the Irish Troubles, but that it is a thesis perhaps still fiercely relevant today which now only remains to be illustrated through twenty-six hours of performance. There is great dramatic potential for the contradictions between Nationalism and Socialism to be played out through the character of Connolly but because of the way he has been conceived by his authors, he is not allowed to deviate from certainty into complexity:

Milligan: Socialism in the north can never be republican.

Connolly: Republicanism in the south can never be socialist. I've heard both notions *ad nauseam*. I don't believe either. (33)

The struggle with Nationalism is one which the audience is invited to undertake as part of its political education, rather than one which is allowed to play out through characterisation. The only appearance, for example, of Arthur Griffith, the Sinn Fein leader, comes in the form of a direct address to the audience in Part 5:

If ever Arthur Griffith becomes the ruler of this state
The like of Larkin will find his liberty
Within the hinge of a prison gate! (71)

While this may be read from our own times as a prescient insight into the reactionary attitudes and establishment posturing of contemporary Sinn Fein, within the cycle there is little dramatic pay-off because Griffith is never brought into the action. Therefore the possibilities and dangers of Nationalism in relation to the development of the Irish state are largely side-stepped in favour of the much easier debate between Republicanism and Socialism whose outcome is always recognised by the playwrights and is, therefore, devoid of tension:

Socialism in Ireland without Republicanism and Republicanism without
Socialism are mirror-image concepts like two lamp-posts in a bog – bright but
quite useless. (120)

Although the abduction of Connolly by the Nationalists in order to force a meeting with Pearse and his subsequent night of deliberation about whether to join forces with the nationalists might indicate a moment of interior debate about the nature of Irish Socialism, it is clear that Connolly's concerns are only tactical; only about whether the moment is right. Any notion that Connolly may have betrayed either his principles or the Citizen Army is counteracted by the warning he issues to the Army on the eve of the Rising:

Citizen Army – come here a moment. Whatever happens tomorrow, hold
onto your rifles. Those with whom we are fighting may stop before our goal
is reached: remember *we* are out for economic as well as political liberty. (92)

Any lasting claim for a place in the radical pantheon of Irish theatre for *The Non-Stop Connolly Show* does not rest upon its depictions of the machinations between the factions which came together for the 1916 Rising, nor even upon the formal choices made by the

playwrights, but upon its presentation of the battle between working people and capitalists. Capitalism's capacity to remake itself in order to maintain social inequality by securing the allegiance of the middle-classes is laid bare by Grabitall's monologue at the start of Part 3:

Lord Salisbury's Tory Government has a plan –
Lest separatism, independent aspirations, once again
Rear up their strength and break the empire's bond,
Coercion now is done with: we are *kind*...
More liberal than the Liberals – we will grant
Reform of land, local elections; oh we will freely plant
Hope of commercial growth to stultify
All racial disaffection amongst the middle class. (1)

"Hope of commercial growth" was the fuel that powered the global sweep of late twentieth-century neoliberalism, and its manifestation in Ireland as the Celtic Tiger economy. Did that period strengthen the position of Grabitall or provide the economic liberty for which Connolly fought until the end? Contemporary overtones increase in volume in Part 5 when the abstract manifestations of Grabitall give way to the concrete embodiment of Murphy (William Martin Murphy was the major employer and opponent to unionism during the Dublin Lockout) who bears an uncanny resemblance to present Irish multimillionaire businessman, Tony O'Reilly, with his control of media and tourism born of financial manipulation:

By knowing when to sell and when to buy
When to combine and when to destroy
I have enlarged myself into my present size.
Down any street in Dublin shoot your eyes:
Much, if not all, of what you see
In that august perspective belongs to me.
There is a tram, by electric current fed,
The hand of Murphy drew it from its shed:
There is a ragged man sells papers on the curb,
Printed by Murphy, filled with Murphy's word:
There is a huge hotel where men and women,
White-tied, bare-shouldered, champagne and diamonds gleaming,

In wine and waltz defeat their immortal souls:
Murphy supplies the bed, the liquor, and the lascivious bath ... (46)

Here, writ large, is the Edwardian equivalent of the “loads of money” culture we associate with the days of greed and excess so recently passed into history. Murphy epitomises the erosion of social justice into a world of have-everythings and have-nothings. Grabitall’s skills are not confined to financial dealings. He understands more sharply than the politicians where the danger to capital lies and thereby prepares the battle-ground of neoliberalism where the politicians are relegated to ventriloquist’s dummies in the hands of the capitalists. In terms of a legacy of radicalism, the question is: does Connolly’s story, in the hands of D’Arcy and Arden, offer insights into how an Irish working class might be forged which would be capable of resisting the depredations of neoliberalism? The ability to control the means of communication is identified as a core element in the strategy of building class-consciousness:

But third, and perhaps most perilous because of the place whence it issues –Liberty Hall, the home of Larkin, the home of syndicalism, the home of red revolution and destruction of all that is held most dear to the soul of the Catholic Gael – the third paper, Prime Minister, is James Connolly’s *Irish Worker* – the one rag responsible for every strike, every picket, every union agitation from the Dingle Peninsula to the top of Loch Foyle. (61)

In the debate with Pearse which precedes the 1916 Rising, Connolly makes clear to him that his objection to the Nationalists’ notion of one nation is that it retains the space in which capitalists can continue to work their exploitation at the expense of the rest:

Your word “nation” includes all, excludes none. “We can support ourselves,” said Wolfe Tone, “by the aid of that numerous and respectable class of the community, the men of no property.” “Merchants,” said Wolfe Tone, “make bad revolutionaries.” Company directors, says James Connolly, turn government into mass murder, religion into a confidence trick, and nationality into an increased margin of profit upon their books. Don’t you see, if you once permit their way of life its very existence, it will continue to amass power, and there will be nothing for anyone else except the servitude of that power? (75)

When Connolly knows that the game is up and that the Rising is destined to fail, he determines upon an emblematic act of defiance: to fly the flag of socialism (the Plough and the Stars) from the bastion of capitalism:

Take the Plough and the Stars, make a dash across the street: and hang it on
Murphy's hotel. (100)

The antagonist in all these plays is the figure who represents capital: Grabitall/Murphy here and the two incarnations of Baker-Fortescue in *Vandaleur's Folly* and *The Little Gray Home in the West*. The ancient antagonisms of sectarianism merely mask the real operations of power:

Baker-Fortescue: King Billy and the Pope now both inhabit
 The yielding mattress of your Wall Street whore –
 (*The Little Gray* 25)

The days of the absentee English landlord may be numbered but his power is only usurped by “the filthy modern tide” of Irish business in the character of Tim Hagan, inheritor of the Tiger economy and Irish nationalist politics:

Padraic: Remember his business interests
 By politics are reinforced –
 He's a climbing lad and a grasping lad
 And a power in the Fianna Fail! (*The Little Gray* 34)

This is the consequence of socialism's defeat at the hands of nationalism as predicted by Connolly. Politics is now, and will remain, the hand-maiden of neoliberal economics with the politicians merely acting as the agents of business. There is, in effect, no political opposition to free market capitalism.

The full significance of Connolly in the minds of D'Arcy and Arden is revealed in the epitaph which they give him to speak over himself immediately after he is shot by a British army firing squad sitting down (he was badly injured and could not stand):

We were the first to roll away the stone
From the leprous wall of the whitened tomb

We were the first to show the dark deep hole within
Could be thrown open to the living sun.
We were the first to feel their loaded gun
That would prevent us doing it any more –
Or so they hoped. We were the first. We shall not be the last.
This was not history. It has not passed. (*Non-Stop* 106)

The timing of the 1916 Easter Rising and the overt reference to Christ's tomb are employed to suggest that Connolly's life is the spark for a continual resurrection of insurrection until such time as the socialist cause has triumphed. In one sense the playwrights are justified in this assertion: Connolly has not been forgotten and there are the statues and the history books to prove it. But his life and struggle were not immune from history and some elements have passed. The process of rewriting Connolly in ways that suit a particular Irish story began even in the moment of his martyrdom, ably assisted by the pen of W.B. Yeats:

I write it out in a verse –
MacDonagh and MacBride
And Connolly and Pearse
Now and in time to be,
Wherever green is worn,
Are changed, changed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born. ("Easter 1916" 205)

And thus is Connolly swept up into the pantheon of the Nationalists and wrapped in a green shroud. His earlier question about whether the red flag might have room for a patch of green has been turned on its head and the lingering question for a radical legacy is now whether the green flag has any room for a patch of red. The birth of this "terrible beauty" also marks the "lingering dissolution" of Connolly's vision through the Irish Civil War and on to contemporary Ireland. As Samuel Beckett might have expressed it in *Waiting For Godot*:

Astride of a grave and a difficult birth. Down in the hole, lingeringly, the
grave-digger puts on the forceps. We have time to grow old. (90-1)

I began by considering Connolly and his creators as outsiders, at once both radical and rootless, and therefore vulnerable to leaving no lasting impression upon the political landscape. These reflections have led me to wonder whether the theatre of D'Arcy and Arden conforms closely to the demands of radicalism in both these senses. Perhaps by definition the radical is always entering from beyond the pale, trailing ideas easily labelled foreign and dangerous. Perhaps, too, it is always the fate of the radical to seek (in vain?) for a place to put down roots and to leave her signpost in a place from where the generations to come can plot their course. D'Arcy's and Arden's contribution to theatre in Ireland is, therefore, marked through and through with the ambivalent badge of radicalism. Like their socialist hero whom they honour in their major work, they search for a radical discourse which is embedded in both the soil of the land and in the lives of those who work in its fields and factories, welding from the specifics of the Irish colonial experience a socialism capable of resisting colonial capitalism and its current neoliberal manifestations:

it seems probable that Connolly, who in his own life traversed more than once the circuits of the North Atlantic and engaged in the myriad forms of labour that the migratory Irish took on, had reason to assert the radical potential of an Irish working class forged in the crucible of colonial capitalist dislocation. Far from fetishizing some originary Gaelic tradition, fixed in the irrecoverable past, his work begins the crucial task of mapping the interface between colonial modernity and the counter- modern formations that emerge in relation to it. (Lloyd, et. al. 126)

Just as the whirligig of time may be bringing around a reconsideration of the radical potential of Connolly's life and work as a "counter-modern" formation, so too it may be that, in time to come, the counter-modern tide will sweep the Irish theatre of Arden and D'Arcy to prominence as an example of the radical in the discourses of Irish culture.

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