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Drama as Truth Commission: Reconciliation and Dealing with the Past in South African and Irish Theatre

Keywords: Conflict; Drama; Truth Commission; Ireland; South Africa; Reconciliation

Abstract: South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) is an internationally-regarded – if contested – touchstone for transitional justice, but it functioned above all as exemplary theatre, bringing together thousands of disparate voices. Like the theatrical space generally, it provided a forum for differing narratives about the past to be aired in post-Apartheid South Africa. In Ireland, on the other hand, there has not been – nor are we likely to see – any Truth Commission. It is this article's contention that drama is the nearest the society will get to exploring the past, with the theatre a safe space in which storytelling and debates *are* taking place beyond the impasse of the political culture. This article approaches this through four plays: Athol Fugard's *The Train Driver* and Owen McCafferty's *Quietly* (both 2012) and David Ireland's *Cyprus Avenue* and Mongiwekhaya's *I See You* (both 2016). All reflect complications of dialogue(s) taking place on the past, and themes of reconciliation, in their respective territories.

Though South African theatre continues to address contemporary political problems and movements, it is worth beginning by establishing the performative elements of the nation's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (Cole 2010). More than one observer found its sheer energy and unpredictability to be 'drama at its best' (Krog 1999, 353). Chairman Archbishop Desmond

Tutu, who embodied the Christian component of the proceedings, pointed out that while the translators involved may have been physically separated by speaking in glass booths on the edge of the hearing space, they were nonetheless overwhelmed by the demands of switching identity, speaking for victims, perpetrators, and for both in the first person (Tutu 2012, 232). With hearings conducted in multiple languages, translators were aware that their work involved a fusion of impersonations and sympathetic reflexes. This blurring of lines led to focus on the mental well-being of the translators themselves, especially when some began showing signs of Posttraumatic stress disorder (Krog 1999, 195). All contributed to a deeply dramatic atmosphere, already charged by the distresses arising from victims and perpetrators (including torturers) facing each other across tables, in front of a public audience that greeted the revelations. The theatrical dimensions did not end there, as the TRC's hearings involving children featured 'drawing, storytelling and sharing experiences with one another in a more creative and less objective form than a court hearing' (Hutchison 2005, 356). It was observed that these 'personal narratives' appeared less like a court room and more like South African protest theatre of the 1980s (Hutchison 2005, 356; see also Maponya 1995).

In 2013 the UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion of truth, justice, reparation and guarantees of non-recurrence referred to the importance of artistic interventions involving victims and civil society, which he said had 'the potential to extend the life of truth commissions' (2013, 25). Pablo De Greiff reported how cultural initiatives are 'particularly effective' when it comes to 'the transformations required to redress past and prevent future violations', allowing people to publicly tell their stories and be heard. Except, what happens when there has not been a truth commission in the first place? It is this article's thesis that if the Truth Commission appeared as drama in South Africa, then drama functions as a form of Truth

Commission in Ireland. Furthermore, drama continues to extend the life of the Truth Commission's work in post-apartheid South Africa.

Comparisons and Reconciliation

The attractiveness of comparisons of South Africa to Northern Ireland are not limited to fanciful parallels from Irish Republicans (Adams 1986, 131; Morrison 1999, 241). Many people are unaware that the 1998 Good Friday Agreement's famous cover image of a peaceful, nuclear family looking onward to the new dawn was in fact a photo of a sunset in South Africa (Lehner 2007, 57). Citizens who knew about such processes looked longingly to South Africa because it had undergone what was regarded as an effective, if flawed, mechanism for dealing with the past in the form of the TRC, which is regularly invoked as one means by which Northern Ireland might deal with the legacy of 'The Troubles' conflict, which lasted for three decades and claimed over 3,600 lives. This is problematic because despite the persistence of enormous social and economic problems in South Africa, the Apartheid regime's past was 'settled' in the sense that following the TRC, 'no one could honestly deny that apartheid was a monstrous crime' (Stevens 2004, 153). In Northern Ireland, on the other hand, history itself will always be 'hotly contested, our future uncertain' (Noble 2004). Nevertheless, the suggestion that 'cycles of political violence can indeed be broken and that there are alternatives to revenge and retributive justice' (Gobodo-Madikizela 2006, 126) remains, like the South African sunset on the front cover of the Good Friday Agreement, attractive to many across the northern part of Ireland.

Post-conflict societies usually emphasise 'reconciliation' when they deal with a violent and divisive past, but the idea, and word, should be re-evaluated because it has become so nebulously

defined, and for the simple reason that the political system of Northern Ireland is so prone to instability. The situation continues to deteriorate during the United Kingdom's vexed withdrawal from the European Union, the collapse of devolved power-sharing from late-2016 to January 2020, and increasing talk of a 'Border poll' referendum to unite the island. Culture and the arts in Ireland often reflect – and foreshadow – political currents in the society, and so it is worthwhile to consider a statement by former Provisional IRA volunteer Laurence McKeown, who has forged a promising career as a playwright. In a recent interview McKeown remarked that 'reconciliation' appears to him to have become 'meaningless' because it means 'anything to anybody' (Reinisch 2017, 236). Though a blunt assessment, it does capture the way the word is frequently used but often poorly-understood. After being staged in Belfast by Kabosh Theatre Company, McKeown's play *Those You Pass on the Street* (2014) toured to the National Arts Festival in Grahamstown, Eastern Cape, and it was his own awareness of South Africa that led him to quote former ANC activist and judge Albie Sachs: 'Why should we ask people to reconcile if there's never been conciliation in the first place?' (Reinisch 2017, 236).

This article does not contend, as McKeown would have it, that reconciliation is without meaning, but it does concur that the term means ponderously different things to different people. 'We need to be careful when we use the paradigm of healing, or too easily talk about reconciliation', wrote one former religious moderator and scholar, 'for it seems [that] post conflict situations are characterized by ethical unease' (Stevens 2004, 154; see also Dwyer 1999, 82–83, 98). The word can at least be reassessed, or even – in provocative Irish parlance – 'decommissioned' (the process whereby an armed group's weapons are handed over and put beyond use), because exploring the past and trying to make sense of it is a relentlessly complex and murky business, with no easy solutions. Discussions about the past seldom lead to

comfortable harmony or consensus. On the contrary, there tend to be conflicting narratives that often compete in the public, contemporary political arena. In Northern Ireland the past has ‘been used to maintain ethnic solidarity’ and ‘in ways that reinforce hostility between the two communities’ (McBride 2017, 14), with reconciliation doubly hard to achieve because Ulster Unionism and Irish Republicanism are diametrical ideologies, vying for zero sum victory against each other.

This does not mean that individual acts of reconciliation are absent. There is movement in Northern Ireland, occurring at community level, in universities and festivals, with literature and the arts often projecting and facilitating these crossings of boundaries. This article focuses on four plays and dramatists whose works reflect these differing imagined stories and meetings, and how the past is dealt with beyond a grossly impaired and dysfunctional political sphere. What unites all these works is their contravention of ‘coherent narratives and myths of “truth”, reconciliation or forgiveness’. In the estimation of one scholar, South African theatre provides ‘important counter-narratives to those metanarratives of the past’, suggesting ‘particular issues and memories continue to haunt South Africa because they have not been dealt with sufficiently in the TRC’ (Hutchison 2013, 90). The same can be said of Ireland’s lack of an official process to deal with the past, which finds redress in the counter-narratives (and diversity) of dramatic writing. Essentially, the frequent comparisons between Northern Ireland and South Africa (see McGarry 2004) are largely unconvincing and not properly thought out. This essay argues a more rigorous and perceptive comparison can be found in the theatre of each country. In such a space, not only can ‘the unsayable’ be said and investigated, something more profound is occurring. In the theatre the mind intuits ‘no danger from the alternative actions, thoughts and feelings being presented’, and while this is occasionally cited as a weakness, because what the audience sees

does not impact directly upon their lives, ‘It is precisely because theatre does not directly affect our normal lives that our minds allow us the thinking space to experience and consider the alternative stories and behaviours in front of us’ (Gordon 2010, 13–14).

Truth Commissioners

In Owen McCafferty’s *Quietly* (2012) two middle-aged men meet in a Belfast bar where forty years earlier a bombing killed six innocent Catholics. Though fictional, the play presents the kind of meeting which takes place in Northern Ireland beyond the immovable concrete of the deadlocked political culture (Parr 2017). Based on a real-life bombing on 2 May 1974, when a young Ulster Volunteer Force volunteer hurled a cannister bomb into the Rose & Crown bar on the lower Ormeau Road, *Quietly* played at the Abbey Theatre in November 2012, taking a further eighteen months to reach Belfast’s Lyric Theatre for a short run of performances. Its imagined scenario has two characters, Jimmy (a victim) and Ian (a perpetrator), bypassing the broken harrying of the political culture to seek their own moment of truth and reconciliation, exploring ‘the legacy of atrocity’ (O’Toole 2012, 46).¹ In imagining this meeting, McCafferty makes the most authentic (and in some ways political) of statements that the populace continue to live normal lives, get up to go to work, and deal with the city’s violent past on their own individual terms. The lack of an official process neglects the ‘Quiet conversations’, such as that which took place in the home of a Christian moderator between a man who lost his wife in the Shankill bombing of October 1993 and the leader of Sinn Féin, whose armed wing the Provisional IRA carried out the attack (Rowan 2015, 22–23). The man in question, Alan McBride, explained that the ‘private conversation’ was necessary because ‘if you’re trying to

build peace and promote tolerance, and trying to normalise this place again...I think meeting Gerry Adams, for me, was quite a significant step, and for others quite symbolic' (quoted in Rowan 2015, 25).

While many of the contemporary reviews focused on the quality of the performances and direction, most failed to grasp the play's socio-political significance as a reflection of a grass-roots reconciliation process taking place, inch-by-inch, every day. When asked about the play, McCafferty (1961–) confirmed that *Quietly*,

became about the notion of talking and listening and two people having different stories about the same thing. Politicians keep arguing about this notion of a truth and reconciliation committee. They keep saying that we're not ready for it, and it all sounds very immature – and I thought there's a possibility that because of that individuals might be getting on with the job on their own. So something was happening *quietly*. Politicians can't cure this: it's happening without them being involved, outside of that political claw (Interview with Owen McCafferty, Belfast, 28 March 2013).

As articulated by Patrick O'Kane, who starred in the original production, 'there is no genuine leadership from the top. People are having to go into quiet corners of pubs and sort it out for themselves' (*Irish Times*, 7 April 2014, 13). The play basically reflects a state whereby citizens deal with the limitations of a political culture in essentially personal, pragmatic ways. *Quietly* also presents a moment of unguarded reflection which is not occurring at macro-level, and precisely because the setting is so low-key, a microcosm of an apparently impossible larger

process, each man can open up without fear of retribution. The objectives are not friendship or forgiveness: ‘this is about admitting – here – now’ (McCafferty 2012, 36).

As Jimmy queries Ian on his account of the bombing, of arriving outside the bar and preparing to throw the incendiary device in, the process can therefore crystallize into honesty:

Jimmy when you opened the door what did ya see

Ian i can’t remember

Jimmy what did you fucking see

Ian fenian bastards – nothing but fenian bastards (McCafferty 2012, 40).

It has been observed that proper attempts at reconciliation ‘require management or, less contentiously, the facilitative efforts of a third party’. Truth commissions can play this role, as occasionally do priests, conflict mediation specialists, and diplomats (Dwyer 1999, 93). The vital third character of *Quietly* is a Polish barman called Robert, who is there simply listening to the encounter. Seemingly innocuous, he is in fact the crucial independent witness, unofficial but authentic truth commissioner, who must be present – in Jimmy’s words – ‘to pass the story on’ (McCafferty 2012, 53). Simply by listening to the conversation, Robert becomes a vital part of what both men are trying to achieve. Ian wants to talk in private, but Jimmy disagrees.

Jimmy i think it should be in the open – if this succeeds we will be seen as the first –

we will be held up as a beacon – a fucking nobel prize maybe – Robert will be
our committee – our truth an reconciliation committee – won't you Robert

When Robert insists he has no particular stake in the encounter and intends simply to watch the
football game playing out on television, the men are really ready to begin.

Jimmy it feels like we have been given the opportunity to examine ourselves – to come
to a conclusion – to get to the end – however the powers-that-be don't want that
because they might find out who they really are – and what fucking right
minded person wants that – you might have to examine all types of shite then –
which brings me to the truth and reconciliation committee – we have been told
we are not ready for that – not mature enough...and lo and behold – no one is
prepared to make the first move...the consequences of all this inactivity is that
this man – this man here – must act on his own – take the initiative – save his
soul and that – so yes to answer your question again – yes it must be in fuckin
public – the floor is yours (McCafferty 2012, 30–31)

Towards the end of *Quietly*, Jimmy says to Ian, 'We understand one another. That's enough',
while also warning him never to return to the bar or his life (McCafferty 2012, 51 & 53). This
chimes with the more profound and realizable of definitions of reconciliation, which refers to
'the facing of unwelcome truths so that inevitable and continuing conflicts and differences stand
at least within a single universe of comprehensibility' (Asmal 2011, 186). Despite this uneasy
moment of understanding, *Quietly* suggests, via the presence of Robert, that other problems are

building up in the society. As one door appears to tentatively close another opens, with intolerance directed to another group: migrants from Eastern Europe who have entered Ireland, north and south, since the mid-2000s. In the background to Ian and Jimmy's meeting is a real football international played in 2009 between Northern Ireland and Poland. After the Belfast men reach an unsentimental comprehension and leave in their respective directions, we hear '*kids in the street...beating on the window shutters*', shouting abuse: 'go back to where you come from and shite in the street you fucker – polish wanker – three-two – three-two' (McCafferty 2012, 55).² The final image is of Robert, baseball bat in hand, simply waiting – and so 'the sectarianism with which Ian and Jimmy grew up has found a new outlet in racist intolerance. The ripple effects of history roll on' (Meany 2012, 32).

It is a reference, once again, anchored in reality. In June 2009 a series of attacks took place in south and east Belfast on the city's small Roma community, hundreds of whom were forced from their homes. It later emerged 65 Roma fled out of Northern Ireland in the following weeks (*Irish News*, 27 June 2009, 11). This has also to be seen in light of ongoing and rising racist attacks since 2011, targeting Poles and other migrants in the same areas of Belfast (*Irish News*, 9 May 2014, 4; Gilligan 2017). 'We're not very good with foreigners' Jimmy observes early on, and, as McCafferty has inferred in press interviews, the relentless focus on the past can lead to a debilitating neglect of the present: 'We see these two men who are concentrating on a situation specific to us. I think we have a tendency to do that here. While we're busy concentrating on our own grief, we're maybe not so aware of other things creeping slowly into society' (McCafferty 2012, 18; quoted in *Irish News*, 3 April 2014, 35). Neither is hostility to Eastern European immigrants solely confined to the northern part of the island. Hostility to foreigners was thought to have been an inculcation of the British Empire, which appeared to encourage its own citizens

feel superior to other racial groups, but surveys have highlighted that anti-immigration attitudes in the Republic of Ireland appear to have worsened following the 2008 economic crash and the 2011 coalition government's austerity programme (*Irish Times*, 30 April 2015). Voluble anti-immigrant voices continue to receive mainstream Irish coverage, while a candidate in the 2018 Irish Presidential election received a substantial vote (23.3 per cent), finishing second after he voiced critical views of Irish Travellers (Loughlin & McConnell 2018). The burgeoning industry of scholarly literature on race in Ireland rather explodes the myth that the nation does not have a problem with racism, especially when it comes to Travellers and 'new migrants' (Fanning 2009; Fanning 2012; Garner 2013, 182–6).

The truth commissioner device has also appeared in the work Athol Fugard (1932–), South Africa's chief theatrical elder statesman. In 2010 Fugard delivered *The Train Driver*, which was first performed in Cape Town's Fugard Theatre before transferring to London's Hampstead Theatre later in the year. It is based on a real-life incident which happened on 8 December 2000 when a thirty-five year old African woman named Pumla Lolwana, from a squatter camp in Cape Town, pulled her three children to her side and stepped in front of an oncoming train on the railway tracks of the Cape Flats, on the outskirts of Cape Town. The play revolves around the character of Roelf Visagie – a white Afrikaner, with powerful hints of Fugard himself – who was the distraught driver of the train that pulverized the woman and her children. *The Train Driver* begins with the traumatized engineer arriving in a township graveyard in search of the final resting place of the woman he accidentally killed. He encounters Simon Hanabe, an old African gravedigger who 'puts the nameless ones in the grave' (Fugard 2010, 3). Initially wary of Roelf, Simon comes to be his listener: his truth commissioner. In the hopelessly despondent story of Pumla Lolwana, Fugard is saying, lies the tragedy of modern South Africa. Essentially, she was

a martyr for the despair and poverty created under apartheid that tragically perseveres, despite the transition to democracy and the removal of the white elite (Walder 2014). ‘What sort of despair must she have been suffering?’, questioned Fugard. ‘I cannot comprehend a darkness so deep that a human being can finally say there is no hope’ (*The Times – Saturday Review*, 6 November 2010, 4). Roelf directly echoes this quote from Fugard in the play when he says:

Roelf I don’t know what it is to live without hope, to give up.

Because you did, didn’t you? That is why you did what you did...it feels very urgent that I do something, because it feels like I am losing you...I’ve got a newspaper story here in my pocket which is all about me and you...There is one thing that always sort of upsets me in a special way when I read it...it’s where it says that ‘nobody claimed her’...Well, that is not the way it is any more because now I hold up my hand and say ‘I Claim Her’...me...Roelf Visagie...the driver of the train what killer her. (Fugard 2010, 32–33).

Critically, *The Train Driver*’s nobility is also its Achilles heel. Note, as with Owen McCafferty’s reference to ‘not being ready for that [the TRC]’, how identical Roelf’s language – and that of the play – is with Fugard’s interview preceding. In his passionate concern for the story, which Fugard digested from his then-home in San Diego, and in his sincere desire to ‘claim’ the victim, the train driver/proxy Fugard overrides the human tragedy of Pumla Lolwana. ‘It’s the emotional journey *I’ve* travelled in dealing with *my* inherited legacy of South African prejudice’, Fugard has commented (*The Guardian – The Guide*, 30 October 2010, 37, author’s emphasis). The white writer’s ego obliterating the profile of the black woman appears contrary to Fugard’s public pronouncements on the play; of his desire to highlight *her* story. Perhaps the

most profound comment on the play which exists on the record is from the American director Stephen Sachs, who has collaborated on several occasions with Fugard. Speaking to a South African newspaper before *The Train Driver* premiered in Cape Town, Fugard dictated a letter Sachs had sent to him:

“I read *The Train Driver* and understand why it so important to you, why it means so much to you. It is deeply personal...a kind of summation – a dramatic expression – of who you are, your life-long internal struggle, the long road you’ve travelled as an artist and a white man in South Africa. White guilt. White shame. Digging up the bones of the nameless black dead. Trying to make sense of it. Give it meaning. Understand it. To express and free oneself of the guilt and shame and responsibility. In *The Train Driver*, white anger turns into self-realisation and transformation. Realising he must ‘claim her’ as his own. Which is what you’ve done all your life. With all of your plays. (quoted in *The Sunday Independent* [South Africa], 21 February 2010, 25).

Though Sachs sees a continuity with previous plays, Fugard’s *Valley Song* (1994) envisioned a simpler, more balanced ‘symbol of reconciliation, bridging the colonial and post-colonial division between the races’ (Stanley 1999, 85). There remains something inherently merciless, despairing, but also honest about the final epilogue of *The Train Driver*. We learn that young hoods (*‘amaginsta’*) have attacked and killed Roelf with Hanabe’s spade, leading police to confiscate the item for investigation. Pumla and Roelf are in the ground, with the final words left to Hanabe:

Simon When they are gone Mr Mdoda tells me he is finished with me and that he will get somebody else to bury the new nameless one. So there it is. I haven't got a job and now also I haven't got a spade.

He stands there, his hands held out in a helpless gesture. (Fugard 2010, 39).

Hanabe's final despondent state may be a reflection on South Africa's longstanding economic 'Achilles Heel' of unemployment, with joblessness standing at over 27% at the turn of 2019, particularly afflicting young black men. We may even discern in Hanabe a harbinger of the Marikana miners of the Rustenburg municipality, victims of state police in August 2012; though his impotent exhaustion leaves no space for their militant rage – and unlike the Marikana miners who struck over a wage dispute, he has no job. A deeper reading of *The Train Driver* is that Roelf himself, as 'stand-in' for Fugard, represents the primary 'witness' (Rusch 2015, 77) of the piece. This reconfigures the play more convincingly, allowing Fugard to square his 'claim' of the tragic story of Pumla Lolwana with the craft of being a playwright; of listening to stories and presenting them in unique ways. This suggests that the writer himself/herself functions as a form of truth commissioner, even if they do not know it. Fugard has spoken passionately about this, stating that stages where his plays are performed represent the 'graves' of the people he writes about. On these stages: 'They are buried. They are named. They live. That is what a writer does. Rescues from oblivion the nameless, the unwanted, the homeless, the destitute' (*Falls the Shadow*, 2012).

In a lengthy exegesis on *The Train Driver*, Dennis Walder clarifies that the play resituates the graveyard in the outskirts of Port Elizabeth (where Fugard was born) rather than Cape Town,

where Pumla Lolwana met her disconsolate end. Walder interprets the staging of the play as ‘a more critical form of remembering than before’, with

the stubborn persistence of these categories at the edge of the metropolitan South African space, where identity is a question replete with melancholy, that is to say, with an unrelieved remembering that ceases only with death. This liminal space is where Roelf Visagie, the train driver of the play, comes in search of the woman he cannot help remembering, the woman who was the victim of his train as it hurtled down its predestined track like the juggernaut of apartheid history. There is a sense in which the driver is also a victim. (Walder 2014, 35).

Literary scholars have explored the overlaps between Visagie’s perspective and the play’s author, but they do not properly expand on how the above language relates to the TRC. Critical literature on the South African Truth Commission identifies that the main notion of justice for many ‘victims’, where injuries could be ‘assuaged through the courtroom’, was displaced by the TRC’s concept of ‘social justice’, and that several contributions to it ‘demonstrated that those commonly designated as “perpetrators” have also been victimised or have shown an alliance to the resistance’ (Stanley 2001, 527, 530). One man who lost his son in an ANC bomb was evidently a ‘victim’ of a kind, complicatedly regarding his boy as ‘a hero because he died for freedom for people’ – as in his son died in a good cause (Johan Smit, HRV Hearing, Johannesburg, 29 April 1996). Therefore, the ‘personal narratives indicate that the commonly identified stereotypes of groups in South Africa cannot be so readily accepted’ (Stanley 2001, 530). In this light Fugard can be seen to proffer, by default, a principal tale of white victimhood,

as opposed to the destroyed black African life he wanted the play to claim. In a strange sense Roelf himself is, to quote a famous earlier Fugard play, the historical detritus of ‘whiteman’s rubbish’ (Fugard 1973, 21).

Identity Politics

Disadvantaged white South Africans, often a subject for Fugard, are sometimes compared – mostly superficially – to Ulster Loyalists in Ireland (Parkinson 1998, 137; Reed 2015, 183–190). The profile of Roelf Visagie therefore offers an appropriate segue way into David Ireland’s 2016 play *Cyprus Avenue*. Cyprus Avenue is an exclusive street in east Belfast that was made legendary through Van Morrison’s song of the same name, which appeared on the album *Astral Weeks* (1969) and remains a touchstone of Belfast’s cultural geography for the same reason.

Morrison sings:

Well, I’m caught one more time

Up on Cyprus Avenue

I may go crazy

Before that mansion on the hill

These lyrics provide part of the clue for why Ireland lifts the title of this famous song for the play, which was commissioned by the Abbey Theatre and ran at the Royal Court (and prior to this at the Abbey itself) in April 2016. It concerns a Protestant east Belfast man named Eric Miller, memorably portrayed by Field Day founder Stephen Rea in the original production, who

is convinced that his baby granddaughter is the reincarnation of former Sinn Féin leader and Republican icon Gerry Adams. ‘WHAT THE FUCK IS THIS?’ he screams, holding the baby (Ireland 2016, 15–16). This becomes the vector through which to explore what Ireland clearly perceives as the psychotic, daft, and finally murderous psychology of modern Ulster Loyalism.

Eric’s manic insistence that his infant granddaughter is the former Sinn Féin leader is an initially amusing premise. One of the play’s strengths is its comic framing of the obsessive traits – and connected madness – of ideology, which certainly stretches to Ulster Unionism and Loyalism. Eric explains his fixation on the former Sinn Féin President:

Eric It is of course hard to imagine Gerry Adams without the beard. The Gerry Adams beard is part and parcel of the Gerry Adams persona. It symbolises his revolutionary ardour, his passion for constitutional change. And now as it whitens it cements his status as *eminence grise*, aging philosopher-king. But without the beard he’d look like she did to me. (Ireland 2016, 16).

He is so determined to believe his granddaughter is Gerry Adams that he draws a black felt-tip beard on the baby to remind him. Though this moment was greeted by the London Royal Court audience with awkward laughter, Ireland’s comic instinct does capture Loyalism’s tendency to go to extreme and absurd lengths to pursue a point. One example of this occurred during a BBC radio phone-in show, the *Nolan Show*, in 2015 on the familiar subject of bonfires, which take place every July in Northern Ireland as part of the Orange Order’s annual marching and parading season. A problem was arising where large bonfires constructed adjacent to houses in mainly working-class parts of east Belfast were harming the housing, with the heat getting so strong that

windows were in danger of melting and brickwork disintegrating (*Belfast Telegraph*, 11 July 2015, 10–11). One Loyalist rang into the popular *Nolan Show* to defend this situation, informing the host that Loyalists were within their rights to build the bonfires, and besides, the man suggested sincerely, ‘Why build houses beside bonfires in the first place?’ The stand-in BBC host, Chris Buckler, pointed out the ‘insanity’ of this view.³ Such is the kind of demented spirit that Ireland’s play, at its best, taps into.

This comic writing, quite common now in Irish theatre thanks to the influence of Martin McDonagh, is sharply drawn, but problems arise when the play starts attempting to be a serious critique of collective identity and, specifically, a deeply unfashionable group: working-class Ulster Loyalists. These are the same bracket and Northern Irish variant of those who vote for Donald Trump in the United States and Brexit in the UK. ‘Left behind’ by deindustrialisation and the British Labour and Democratic Parties, they are regarded as retreating into culture wars, identity politics, flags, and intransigence. Were *Cyprus Avenue* about any group other than Ulster Unionists and Loyalists – blacks, Jews, Irish, for instance – it would be regarded as a kind of racism and stigmatism. Eric articulates their insecurity and sense of social siege. ‘Without prejudice we’re nothing! If we don’t discriminate, we don’t survive!’ (Ireland 2016, 62), he insists, shortly before shooting his wife, breaking the neck of his daughter, and putting his baby granddaughter in a black bin bag and smashing her repeatedly against the floor. Though raised in Carrickfergus, County Antrim, Ireland (1976–) was born in Sandy Row, an overwhelmingly Loyalist part of Belfast and an area associated with Loyalist paramilitarism and the Orange Order. He recalled watching Orange marches and has suggested that his disposition towards violence in his plays emanated from the ‘deep impact’ of growing up during the Troubles (Lawson 2019).

In a conversation with the author after a performance of the play at the Royal Court on 16 April 2016, Stephen Rea made the intriguing admission that he insisted on playing Eric more ‘middle class’ than he was originally written. This is important because it has ramifications for the politics of the play: David Ireland originally wanted this to be *even more* critical of the working-class element of Unionism that Loyalism represents. Amidst long passages of anti-Catholic venom and bigoted bile (part of the real and insidious problem of sectarianism in Northern Ireland is that such bigotry is not vocalized so obviously), Eric is joined in one scene as he talks to himself on a park bench by another Loyalist named Slim, ‘angel of the UVF’ (Ireland 2016, 34), who may or may not be a figment of his imagination.

Slim I love Cyprus Avenue. That’s my favourite street in Ulster. My favourite street in the world. Although I’ve never been outside Ulster, so to me Ulster is the world. (Ireland 2016, 49)

Slim casually chats to Eric about wanting to murder Catholics on an adjoining estate (Ireland 2016, 46, 50), as if this is a prevalent Protestant way of talking about the opposing community. However, the chief drawback of the play, aside from its underwritten female characters – the latter an appropriate detail given that *Cyprus Avenue* was one of the plays in the Abbey’s controversial 1916 programme that largely ignored women dramatists – is the affirmation of stereotypes and that condition whereby a playwright is telling certain audiences exactly what they want to hear about a now-maligned and marginalized group. It is an artistic vision that falters in both truth and reconciliation, though it nicely anticipated the hysterical revulsion levelled at the Democratic Unionist Party since it decided to prop-up Theresa May’s

Conservative UK government in June 2017 (Moriarty 2017), which appeared to resemble a strange form of anti-Irishness. Tellingly, when David Ireland was asked by an interviewer in the run-up to *Cyprus Avenue*'s premiere what he might have done if he was not a dramatist, he replied that he would have been a journalist 'like Julie Burchill or maybe even Katie Hopkins. I'd probably end up writing very controversial columns in the *Daily Mail*' (quoted in McCormack 2016). *Cyprus Avenue* accordingly trades in a fusillade of one-dimensional stereotypes, confirming the prejudices of its Dublin and London audiences, and leading to predictably ecstatic press notices and prizes from bewildered critics.⁴

On the play's run in New York from June to July 2018, Irish-American audiences, according to David Ireland, 'turned out in force and were completely horrified and confused by it. They really intensely hated it' (quoted in Lawson 2019). The reasons for this objection were not the portrayal of Unionists; their main problem was apparently Eric's racist slur (Ireland 2016, 7) against his black psychiatrist Bridget (played by Wunmi Bosaku in the original production) – one of the more perplexing devices in the play. Bridget nails Eric's Unionist misunderstanding that Britishness excludes people of colour, and in doing so crosses over into a relevant point about racial stereotypes. When Eric tells her that she is not British but African, she asks him what he thinks Africa is:

Eric Happy people dancing. Stupid people. Happy stupid people. Disorganised. Unable to obey basic instructions, form governments, administer law. Prone to committing genocide. Susceptible to famine. Likeable. Yes, likeable people. Lively and likeable. Wild with drink and dancing. Suspicious of outsiders and incomers. Superstitious. Wary of God. The gods. Unreasonable. Violent. Untamed. Mad. (Ireland 2016, 31)

Bridget points out that all the characteristics Eric ascribes to Africa, she could easily ascribe to Ireland 'before I came here'. Aside from the clichés of drinking and dancing,

Bridget Mad with religion. Violent.

Eric Yes. Yes.

Bridget Happy and stupid. Unreasonable.

Eric Yes, Bridget, but that's Fenians.

Bridget, of course, does not know what 'Fenians' are, so Eric explains they are Irish Catholics and that 'Protestants are the opposite of this'.

Bridget I think the point is, Eric, that all the characteristics you mention, whether we ascribe them to Irish people or Africans or 'Fenians', they're ultimately stereotypes. Identity is complex. Isn't it? My parents came to Britain from Nigeria. I don't think any of those stereotypes you listed of Africa, 'Africanness', apply to me or to my parents, or to anyone I know. (Ireland 2016, 32)

What is most fascinating about this exchange is that Ireland pinpoints through the character of Bridget that identity is indeed 'complex', but does not extend this to the group his play is about.

They are refused this ability in *Cyprus Avenue* because their most extreme adherents refuse it of others. It is, ironically, a play guilty of the thing it most seeks to impale: blanket stereotyping of whole groups of people.

If Ireland's *Cyprus Avenue* is the theatrical embodiment of a kind of debilitating identity politics, it is counterpointed in a South African equivalent by *I See You* (2016), written by Mongiwekhaya Mthombeni (1981–). Set on a Friday night in Johannesburg and based, like *Quietly* and *The Train Driver*, on a real-life incident (that in this case happened to its author), *I See You* is one of the most daring and exciting South African plays since the Truth Commission. Mongiwekhaya explained how a simple encounter between a South African police officer who had fought against the injustices of the apartheid system and a young mixed-race couple, Ben and Skinn, both of the 'born free' generation (i.e. post-1994), leads all to question their own identities:

The cop looks at these kids and realises they are not what he fought for – he was a part of pre-1994 – and these kids are not the ideal, the way they are isn't what he thinks they should be. In a way it's also just about dealing with the trauma that hasn't been dealt with. South Africans have been told that we are the rainbow nation and rainbows are pretty and shouldn't be questioned, shouldn't be interrogated. There's a whole bunch of people who had to do things and are still traumatised about it, and in a way they end up passing that on to the next generation because no one has actually wiped it clean. (quoted in *What's On Stage*, 1 March 2016).

As with David Ireland, Mongiwekhaya is a former actor, and – as with *Cyprus Avenue – I See You* also ran at London’s Royal Court in the Spring of 2016. Though the plays appear connected, there is no evidence that ‘the Court’ conceived of them as part of a season concerning identity. Their staging at around the same time (Ireland’s play immediately followed *I See You*) does however enhance their apparent similarity. Such was the overlap of productions, *I See You*’s original director Noma Dumezweni actually saw *Cyprus Avenue* and later commented that it was a comparable piece ‘about identity. Very similar themes to *I See You* for me, such as what happens to an individual when they’ve been fighting for a collective identity’ (quoted in *Cape Times*, 29 April 2016, 12). Except, *I See You* is an altogether more taut and radical reflection; one which ‘thrillingly offers language as the battleground of the new South Africa’, a kaleidoscopic examination of a country’s identity and its ‘unwieldy 11 official tongues’ (Mountford 2016, 27).

The Zulu greeting ‘sawubona’ translates as ‘I see you’, even though, as *I See You*’s original director observes, ‘people don’t actually see each other’ (Noma Dumezweni, quoted in Trueman 2016). The Zulu police officer who arrests Ben, a nineteen-year old Law student on a night out with a seventeen-year-old Afrikaner girl Skinn (who spends the rest of the play trying to track Ben down), phrases it thus:

Buthelezi I don’t need your sorries, white boy. Yes. You heard right. You know white people think we are the same? We both look black. But only one of us is black.

Ben Why are you doing this?

Buthelezi The fact that you don't know why? That's all the reasons you need for being here. Focus. I fought for this country. And when it was won, the cowards who spent their lives trying to be white instead of fighting to remain true to their heritage, suddenly returned and gave it away again. (Mongiwekhaya 2016, 36)

Indeed Ben does not know his own Xhosa heritage, and Buthelezi is going to make an example out of him for it by accusing him of a crime he did not commit, drawing on police techniques to torture him.

Buthelezi You are Xhosa right? I don't think a Zulu man would forget his language but the Xhosa, who can say? Here is how it works: if you want me to stop, say: 'Officer Buthelezi I did not drink and drive. Please let me go.' I'm serious. You say that, I will stop and let you go.

Ben Officer Buthelezi, I did not –

Buthelezi *twists the cuffs again. Ben can't help himself and screams as he launches himself into the air.*

Buthelezi You are Xhosa, right? You must say it in Xhosa. (Mongiwekhaya 2016, 38).

'Apartheid...hasn't left', Ben winces shortly after the assault: 'Afrikaaners took off the uniform...you guys put it on' (40).

Aside from reflecting continual and very serious contemporary problems of police brutality in South Africa, the officer's name is important as it mirrors that of Zulu Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi, who in 1975 founded and has since led the Inkatha Freedom Party: a conservative, ethnic party exclusively supportive of Zulu rights and interests (see de Haas & Zulu 1994). Mongiwekhaya displays this mentality through Burthelezi by telling his story, via soliloquy – of training in the Soviet Union and Angola, crossing from Zambia through Rhodesia ‘to fight the war at home’, killing a stranger and paralysed in ‘silence’ after (Mongiwekhaya 2016, 57). Buthelezi's ethnic viewpoint and violent methods appear to mirror broader racial tensions in South Africa via serious xenophobic attacks, sparking up in Johannesburg in 2008 and 2015 (with 62 and 7 killings respectively), in violence that continues to the present day (*Daily Maverick*, 1 April 2019). One critic who reviewed *I See You* when it moved to Cape Town two months after its March 2016 premier at the Royal Court praised actor Desmond Dube for his portrayal of Buthelezi, who appeared sinister but also human, with no trace of caricature: ‘He marshalls his energy so that it seems he is always simmering, ready to explode, and we can't help but start to understand why’ (Smith 2016, 20). It is clear, after Frantz Fanon, that reservoirs of violence have stored up in many black South Africans during periods of colonization and Apartheid (Fanon 1967, 27–84), which – through men like Buthelezi, an employee of the state – are liable to surface at any time, often against other blacks. The TRC was envisioned as ‘a way of drawing a line’ that would consign violence to the past (Hassim 2018, 896), but this is the past the TRC could never really touch; or hope to ‘reconcile’ with.

Buthelezi's aggression – he is the kind of police officer who would not hesitate to open fire first and ask questions later – relates chiefly to his past: how having fought for the ANC, he feels abandoned and unrewarded by modern South Africa, despite his part in the struggle. For

different reasons, Ben and Buthelezi are paradoxically united in frustration at the ‘Rainbow nation’. What separates them is social class. Ben’s legal training and privileged background aligns him with the country’s expanding black middle-class, contrasting vastly to Buthelezi’s status.

Buthelezi Where do you stay, cheeseboy?⁵

Ben At Wits University.

Buthelezi At the University. I don’t even know someone from there. You know where I stay?

Ben No.

Buthelezi Alexandra township. Gomorrah. *Lapho kukhona Amagundene*. Where there’s all kinds of rodents. Do you know anyone from there?

Ben No. (Mongiwekhaya 2016, 27).

If Fugard’s *The Train Driver* ultimately reflects the poor white South African profile of a former South Africa, Mongiwekhaya – through Ben – catches a very modern generation of student militancy, aware of the ‘rights’ culture of the Republic bequeathed to them by Mandela and the new Constitution, but also extremely dissatisfied with the lack of overall progress more than two decades after the fall of Apartheid. Its young author remains clearly in touch with the crop of

aggressive student protests sweeping South African universities in the #Feesmustfall campaign (Gebrial 2018, 26–7).

The gulf in the play ultimately relates to a very Fanonesque clash between Buthelezi's black nationalism and Ben's cultural assimilation of white global influences. Ben tells him his African name 'Somandla', 'someone he used to be':

Buthelezi And so we finally come to it. Ben belongs to America. Somandla belongs to Africa. Or are you a soutie?

Ben A what?

Buthelezi A soutie. A man with one foot in Africa, the other in America and his privates cooling in the ocean. (*Laughs.*) Go back to your country, Ben. But if you're going to stay, then speak with the voice of Somandla. (Mongiwekhaya 2016, 58).

Though flawed, especially in the relatively lightweight romantic rapport between Ben and Skinn, Mongiwekhaya's knowledge of South African police violence, generational division, and grasp of black social class render *I See You* an important one in the landscape of modern South African theatre. And there is some form of reconciliation between Ben and Buthelezi, following the brutality, by the end. Ben survives the night to reunite with Skinn, content to re-introduce himself to her as his African name. In this moment he recognizes Buthelezi's experience and reconciles with it: 'Behind everything you think you are, there is the darkness and the silence' (Mongiwekhaya 2016, 71). He sees him.

Conclusion

One of the dramatists discussed in this article claims that ‘Theatre does something to society...it’s all about talking, not bombs or bullets, and the change to a democratic SA [South Africa] owes a lot to theatre – which is all about dialogue’ (Athol Fugard, quoted in *Business Day*, 18 February 2010, 13). This is more than a little grandiose. The plays addressed in this article are themselves unlikely to change the societies in which they appear. As Seamus Heaney once wisely remarked of his association with Field Day Theatre Company, ‘drama comes to be a factor in the re-reading and rewriting of history, a way of reshaping the audience in posterity, if not in the stalls’ (*Irish Times*, 5 November 1990, 10). Similarly, care and stringency should be taken with how reconciliation is envisioned and assessed. As presented by Owen McCafferty’s *Quietly* and Athol Fugard’s *The Train Driver*, movement occurs through individuals rather than communities, and even then, the resulting ‘peace’ is very often uneasy. The late Irish civil servant and writer Maurice Hayes once said that there was no transferable reconciliation model which could be adopted to the local situation in Northern Ireland. Instead:

Whatever does emerge must be custom-built and must evolve from the variables of culture and history. The likelihood is not of a single great initiative, but a variety of small individualised initiatives as communities come to terms with the past and reach towards a shared understanding of where society must go in the future – which might be the most we can hope for by way of reconciliation. (2013, 175)

This sense of smaller initiatives and the hurdles of an overly-legalistic approach to the past combine with the recognition once made by Antjie Krog that the South African TRC would be wise to seek truth, and truth as opposed to justice or reparation (as it ultimately did): ‘If it sees truth as the widest possible compilation of people’s perceptions, stories, myths and experiences, it will have chosen to restore memory and foster a new humanity, and perhaps that is justice in its deepest sense’ (1999, 23). Once again this involves a myriad of different truths and memories, many of which clash with one another. Drama remains the ‘safe’ space where narratives ‘recognizable as shared, lived experience’ can be presented, ‘while being distanced by an apparently fictional space, and mediated by performers’ (Hutchison 2005, 357).

Powerful theatre that the process was, the TRC was questioned for its concrete delivery on reconciliation, even by its supporters (Krog 1999, 448). For this reason Zakes Mda’s view that drama and other cultural avenues ‘expose the shortcomings of reconciliation as espoused by our political leaders’ is relevant (2003, ix). In contrast to the cliché that the arts and drama are mere ‘fiction’ and ‘make believe’, Mda suggests that there are certain problematic issues which politicians trumpet rhetorically, without properly addressing, which artists are better equipped to probe. It is, after all, necessary for nations to move beyond the grievances, pieties, and divisions of the past – and if the political sphere has to move on with actual government (or not, as is so often the way in Northern Ireland’s case), it is also true that conversations on the past will still take place, as with Owen McCafferty’s *Quietly*, in other more supple parts of the society, between individuals and beyond the official political culture. In Northern Ireland (and, lesserly, South Africa), the political process is immovable and tainted, possibly beyond repair – and the crucial thing to convey is that the dominant political actors have prospered within this. A

longstanding feeling among many community workers, who have toiled for decades at the interfaces, is that politicians are behind the people on the ground, and that the Northern Ireland ‘peace process’ has been undercut by the ‘political process’ (Blood 2007, 192–3). This explains in part why the society moves *despite* the broken political system.

At community level groups step in to enable ‘people deal with their past from counselling to archiving experiences – the stories are being told’ (Hamber 1999, 118). Narratives in this storytelling process are frequently irreconcilable, but writers, and especially dramatists, join community groups in telling (and probing) the stories when politicians fail. Even a problematic piece like *Cyprus Avenue* conveys some universal story. David Ireland himself said that the Royal Court revived the play for another London run in the spring of 2019 because its ‘relevance’ had increased compared to when he originally wrote it back in 2012, when ‘the union [the UK] didn’t feel like a big subject’. Now, with the constitutional wheels turning in Ireland, not to mention a flamboyant populist in the White House (since 2016), and Right-wing nationalist or authoritarian leaders in power in South America, Europe and Asia, ‘it feels as if the whole world is becoming like Northern Ireland in the 1970s and 80s!’ (Ireland, quoted in Lawson 2019). A strong feature of modern UK politics in particular, guided by Brexit, is the way ‘in which Britain has become partially Ulsterised, its politics disfigured by visceral tribal divisions’ (Kidd and McBride 2019). In South Africa, prominent scholars feel the need to publish books addressing – and defending – democracy itself, such are recent political trends and stakes in the country (Friedman 2018). Though initial optimism greeted Cyril Ramaphosa’s accession to the Presidency in February 2018, the comparative innocence of the period of the TRC and Mandela’s 1994 electoral triumph has given way to new flux. ‘No one’s born free anymore’, Ben says to his young Afrikaans friend in *I See You* (Mongiwekhaya 2016, 51). In

polarized societies, where divided communities have little opportunity to interact, this drama also provides an antidote in its ‘controlled way of [audiences] experiencing not only their own lives but also what it must be like to be a member of another group’ (Harris 1987, 213). We briefly experience being in the shoes of the unemployed, former combatants, ‘victims’, students, and migrants, among other ordinary lives attempting to negotiate the legacy of the past.

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¹ McCafferty followed it up with a low-key companion piece called *Fire Below (A War of Words)*, which premiered at the Lyric Theatre Belfast in October 2017 (McCafferty 2017). This play introduced women into the vista and was a subtle critique of the archetypal Lyric theatre-goer, puncturing middle-class liability for the Troubles and a snobbery which gives way to the same sectarian tensions as found in the working-classes.

² 'Three two' (3–2) was the real final score of the 2009 game – a Northern Ireland win.

³ This exchange is available on *Youtube* at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h9K_hMsrwRA.

⁴ The play won Ireland the James Tait Black Prize for drama and Best New Play (of 2016) at the 20th annual *Irish Times* theatre awards. For examples of sterling reviews see Billington 2016 and Crawley 2016.

⁵ The character of another policeman Masinga explains the connotations of 'cheeseboy', which is of a young man 'who grows up with cheese in the house...a house with money'.