

2000

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Recommended Citation

Maguire, Tom, Binlids at the Boundaries of Being: A West Belfast Community Stages an Authentic Self, *Kunapipi*, 22(2), 2000.
Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol22/iss2/17>

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Abstract

Much work has been attempted to forge identities beyond the dominant topographies of the political divisions within Northern Ireland; divisions which are expressed most visibly in the so-called 'peace line', a fortified wall that separates communities in West Belfast. The dominant ideologies within the state of Northern Ireland, Britain and internationally, seek to emphasise commonality between communities as a means of diverting attention from the gulfs between them that have been and remain unresolved politically and structurally. In the face of such strategies, the staging of a play in 1997 devised within a Republican community in West Belfast might appear to be a perverse assertion of difference at grass-roots level. Binlids was a community play that explicitly attempted to replace dominant images imposed from without on that community with ones recognized as authentic within it. Lambasted by critics, politicians and state representatives, it was fêted within its own immediate community, thereby articulating the discrepancies between the different forces of social identity construction at work in Northern Ireland and other contested contexts.

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Much work has been attempted to forge identities beyond the dominant topographies of the political divisions within Northern Ireland; divisions which are expressed most visibly in the so-called 'peace line', a fortified wall that separates communities in West Belfast. The dominant ideologies within the state of Northern Ireland, Britain and internationally, seek to emphasise commonality between communities as a means of diverting attention from the gulfs between them that have been and remain unresolved politically and structurally. In the face of such strategies, the staging of a play in 1997 devised within a Republican community in West Belfast might appear to be a perverse assertion of difference at grass-roots level. *Binlids* was a community play that explicitly attempted to replace dominant images imposed from without on that community with ones recognized as authentic within it. Lambasted by critics, politicians and state representatives, it was fêted within its own immediate community, thereby articulating the discrepancies between the different forces of social identity construction at work in Northern Ireland and other contested contexts.

POSITIONING

As a native of Belfast with the characteristic twang of the city's accent, whenever I speak other English-speaking people from outside Northern Ireland almost instantly form an impression of who I am. This assumed identity is created from an association of the image they have of someone with my accent, the images they have of Northern Ireland and my apparent affiliations, often couched in a choice between either of the two sides they 'know' to be engaged in the conflict: Catholic/Nationalist/Republican versus Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist. It is arguable that the conflation of these terms is itself part of the problem, forming neat binary oppositions that disguise the complexity of the situation and how it is experienced. Fortunately for me, as an educated, middle-class university lecturer, it is relatively easy to redress the imbalances and injustices of the first impression, since one of the privileges I enjoy is the right to articulate freely my sense of self. This essay makes use of that privilege to discuss a theatrical production through which the

nationalist community of West Belfast dared to seize a public space in which to articulate a sense of their own identity for themselves. West Belfast is set apart from the rest of the city and the rest of Northern Ireland by a range of factors. These factors include the dominant images and processes of image making about Northern Ireland both within the media and in urban planning and promotion. This essay examines the ways in which the production responded to these dominant forms and processes in asserting the authenticity of its account, and finally, it examines how the play might actually be considered as part of a process towards peace, despite running contrary to many of the official strategies to resolve the conflict.

WEST BELFAST — A PLACE APART

As Anna-Kaisa Kuusisto notes, 'Primarily, the politics of place refers to the practices in which the images and sense of place is produced and reproduced. In place politics, identity, politics and place come together Power, especially hegemonic power, defines the content and boundaries of action and practices of politics of place' (Online). Nationalist West Belfast is one place in which hegemonic and counter-hegemonic power contend to renegotiate the boundaries of action. As a place it is defined and set apart by factors which are both natural and planned; socio-economic; cultural; and ultimately, political. Its positioning is articulated through physical boundaries: at its back to the west is Black Mountain; to the north the peace-line separating it from the Shankhill and other Loyalist areas; to the east the M1 motorway; and to the south the town of Lisburn and its green belt exclusion area. Some socio-economic characteristics of the area are that, in some wards nearly half the economically active workforce are unemployed; in Whiterock, 84 per cent of households are without a car; in Whiterock, Twinbrook and Upper Springfield wards between 11 and 13 per cent of households experience overcrowding; 95 per cent of houses in the Falls ward are not owned by the occupants; 5 out of the 10 most deprived wards in the city are concentrated in West Belfast (Murtagh 191).

The political separation of West Belfast lies in its nationalist constituency and the relationship between this and the states of Northern Ireland and Britain (Darby). This separation was made manifest in the concentration of hostile British military forces in the area from 1969. A complete investigation of the dynamics of separation or segregation (Boal) because of this distinctive constituency is not the scope of this essay. It is clear, however, that since 'boundaries are *relational* rather than absolute; that is, they mark the community *in relation to* other communities' (Cohen 58), many of the boundaries of nationalist West Belfast have marked it out at a disadvantage to other communities. Thus, while Catholics and Nationalists in Northern Ireland in general have been structurally disadvantaged (Ruane and Todd; Darby) within a state that has favoured the privileges of Protestants historically, those within West Belfast are among those

who have endured the greatest levels of disadvantage. I want now to examine the specific ways in which West Belfast has been further disadvantaged by the discourses which exercise hegemony over the representation of the conflict in Northern Ireland.

IMAGE AND IDENTITY — DOMINANT MODES

Representation of the conflict both within factual reporting and fictional representation has tended to partially represent or otherwise distort all forms of republicanism, a broad movement associated with violent struggle for a united Ireland. Militant republicans who support or engage in physical violence have been represented as ‘psychopathic, and their actions as incomprehensible’ (Edge 223), often reiterating an historically pervasive vision of the savage Irish. Alongside this, republicans have been silenced by their omission from the media, literally through the restrictions on the reporting of Sinn Fein, the political wing of the IRA, instituted in October 1988. The silencing of republicans has also been the result of more tacit censorship from at least the start of the most recent phase of the conflict (Moloney). As Lance Pettit’s survey of representations of the conflict in television drama demonstrates: ‘Little drama exists to explain how and why many “ordinary” people would join or support — even passively — paramilitary organisations involved in killings and punishment beatings’ (Online). The point is extended by Cornell:

[The] depiction of republicans as either criminal, psychopathic, or politically naïve has defined the wider nationalist community with which republicanism is frequently equated in these narratives, as well as others who explicitly identify themselves as Irish [D]rama has rarely proven more open to ‘alternative’ readings of events and issues, and on the subject of Northern Ireland it has maintained an antagonism toward ‘oppositional’ views. (198)

One of course has to acknowledge that a vibrant counter-culture has sprung into existence to fill the absences created by the dominant British media. As Dowler notes:

Group identity is reinforced through exclusive rituals which reincarnated resonant events and symbolic places from the past. Public demonstrations, political murals, anti-British graffiti and songs of resistance not only celebrate this community’s territorial boundaries, but also seem to inscribe into the landscape a homogenous discourse of resistance. (169)

To her list might be added the Irish language movements (although the relationship between official Irish language movements and republicanism are not straightforward (Rolston); newspapers engaged in counter-information such as *Republican News/An Phoblacht* and *The Andersonstown News*; and Gaelic Games (although again the relationship between the Gaelic Athletic Association and militant republicanism is not straightforward). As Lionel Pilkington argues, the

institutional theatres throughout Ireland ‘tend on the whole to portray the culture of republicanism as sentimental, sectarian, and crudely propagandistic’ (138), though he charts some earlier examples of republican theatrical interventions. He cites Lloyd’s assertion that ‘To the monopoly of violence claimed by the state corresponds the monopoly of representation claimed by the dominant culture’ (Lloyd qtd in Pilkington 134). For my own part having been brought up in a nationalist enclave in the north of Belfast, before attending university in Scotland and working in England, I found myself aligned with such negative views of militant republicanism.

The negative effects of the mis- and under-representation of republicanism within the media in general, have been exacerbated further by specific strategies to do with image making as a means of economic renewal. Attempts at rebuilding the economic infrastructure of Northern Ireland as a whole and Belfast in particular have ‘focused on expansion of the retail economy of the city, and latterly public pump primed office developments’ (Neill 67) through the creation of the appearance of a politically neutral Belfast city centre. The use of public-private partnerships has regenerated the central area by creating a sense of a more ‘normal’ context in which people can work and socialise. According to Neill, this normalisation has meant the development of a post-modern aesthetic in which a bland present replaces historical buildings and their connections with the past. The result is a wilful historical amnesia and selective representation of the present. As he states:

The key symbols of the new [City Centre Local Plan] plan for Belfast were normality, neutrality and consent In the plan Belfast city centre was harnessed as a symbol for a normal Northern Ireland The new city centre shops are marshalled like icons to oppose the array of images painted on the gable walls of housing areas in the city, which portray divisive symbols of the past. (Neill 58)

The inadequacies of this policy in the face of the political realities are made even clearer since:

It is arguable that ... the main beneficiaries of Belfast’s reimagining have been a relatively prosperous middle class [and] the inability of this strategy to deliver the qualitative change in the unemployment situation in West Belfast ... puts a serious class impediment on the possibility of mobilising consent behind a policy of planning for neutrality. (Neill 66)

The people of West Belfast are twice excluded therefore from the reimagining of Belfast: the political conflict in and through which they are situated either actively or merely because of where they live is deliberately ignored; and the economic plight of the mainly working class population has been subjugated to the interests of the middle classes as a strategy of economic renewal.

BINLIDS — THE BACKGROUND, PROCESS AND PRODUCTION

In the face of these strategies of image-making about the conflict in general and Belfast in particular, it is hardly surprising, then, that the excluded and silenced would eventually try to take control of their own image. The first substantial response was the inauguration of a West Belfast Community Festival, Féile an Phobail, in 1987. According to Festival Director, Catríona Ruane:

Féile an Phobail began as the direct response of the West Belfast community to the neglect and discrimination which the area suffered in terms of facilities and resources The dual purpose of Féile was to create from within West Belfast the resources and facilities which had been withheld from it and to take control of its own image-making — to create a showcase of creativity, talent and energy. (Online)

Part of the resources which Féile an Phobail made available were dramatic, firstly by hosting productions by local professional companies. In 1995, collaboration with one of these companies, DubbelJoint Productions, led to the development of a play devised by a group of women to celebrate International Women's Day, *Just a Prisoner's Wife*. Around this a new company was formed, JustUs Community Theatre, with the vision 'to empower our community to tell their own story, in their own words, through the medium of the dramatic arts' (JustUs Community Theatre 2). The company was awarded the Belfast City Council Best Arts Partnership Award for the collaboration with DubbelJoint on this project.

The company's second co-production with DubbelJoint was *Binlids — A Drama of West Belfast Resistance*, first staged as part of Féile and Phobail in 1997, before being revived in February 1998 and then transferring to New York in October of that year. The play was written jointly by four members of JustUs. It charts the experience of women in West Belfast through the 18 years following the introduction by the British government of internment without trial for those suspected of involvement in the paramilitary. The play's title evokes the lids of the metal bins or trash cans banged on the ground to warn of the arrival of British forces in an area. It is chronological in its structure, marking out critical incidents in the evolution of the community, pieced together with song and narration. In one key incident, excerpts from British and Irish newspapers condemning the barbarism of the community are read out, with the local women chanting in chorus 'That's not us, that's not us'. Like the *Living Newspaper* tradition in which it may be situated, the play is also stylistically diverse, combining documentary with naturalistic and expressionist treatments.

With the initiation of this second project, director Pam Brighton spent time with the core group of women talking through stories and together they worked out the main areas which they then set about researching. This research 'involved hundreds of interviews with individuals, or relatives of individuals, who would feature in the play, as well as collating articles and speeches to be used' (Scally 1998, 18). The play emerged from this process of research with some scenes being written beforehand and much of the second act being devised through

rehearsal. The final script included verbatim accounts, transcripts of political speeches, facts and figures, political songs from the period and choral chanting. Four professional male actors were brought in to augment the cast but the emphasis is on the experiences of women as mothers, daughters, sisters, soldiers and activists. Even with a large cast, several of the actors played more than one role. The play was mounted as a promenade performance with the audience surrounded by five stages between which the action switched. Sometimes this creates interactions between actors and spectators: implicating spectators as part of the scene, for example, when a British army snatch squad arrests a character and drags him through the audience. At other times the audience is situated as witnesses to the action: in one scene a group of British soldiers refuse to return a ball to a young boy playing football nearby, and eventually force him to say his prayers at gunpoint.

THE CRITICAL RECEPTION: A QUESTION OF AUTHENTICITY

The emphasis on research and careful documentation points to the attempt to present a more authentic story of the conflict in West Belfast and it is around this area of authenticity that the critical reception of the play is split. A number of reviews comment on the piece as authentic: ‘The overall effect was to convince the audience that this was that era being recreated all over again’ (Ó Liathain 31); and, ‘The sound effects — of bullets and beatings — are authentic enough to bring a chill to the summer air’, (McFadden 11), for example. Actress Bridie McMahon cautioned that ‘You must remember that we are dealing with real incidents which have left a mark on individuals and on the whole community It’s like your life flashing in front of you because all the scenes — and there are hundreds of them — are real events’ (McMillen 24). The director Pam Brighton stated that: ‘For myself, the actors, the technicians and those of us from outside West Belfast it was a rare experience where for the most part everything one was dealing with was the truth — something that had actually happened, something that had really been said’ (Online).

By contrast, criticisms of the play contest the partiality of the production. Ben Webster’s review in the nationalist (but resolutely not republican) Belfast-based *Irish News*, suggested that ‘Given their concern over media distortion, it is strange that the authors did not give equal treatment to their depiction of republican violence’ (5). This was echoed in other reviews including those in Irish-American newspapers: ‘No matter how justified the arguments may be, it is still just a noisy primitive commercial, overemphatically making its pitch’ (Marks, Online). Even positive reviews declare, for example, that there is ‘an unashamed political bias to *Binlids*’ (Marlow 41). I too took the view that the play was too one-sided on my first encounter with it and argued this position strongly in a public discussion with Pam Brighton. It was only on completing the research for this essay that I began to see ways in which my own view was the response of a cultural evolué

conditioned to seeing the circumstances of republicans as self-inflicted and their strategies of resistance as barbaric.

The tension between the experience of the play as authentic and the experience of it as partial is derived from different understandings of authenticity articulated as a relationship between reality or history and its representation. As Graham argues, 'Authenticity and claims to authenticity underlie the conceptual and cultural denial of dominance' (8). The issue is made more complex since, as Favorini points out, 'the writing of history, here instanced in docudrama, interpenetrates with the making of history, that is the political activity' (33). This was recognised by the company, as actress Niamh Flanagan stated 'We constantly have to keep proving that we're real and that what we're doing is authentic, and that we have a place in the scheme of things' (Hurley, Online).

There are at least three responses to the criticism of one-sidedness in the play. The first is that made by Pam Brighton in a published response to Webster's review:

Binlids is criticised for its one-sided approach, yet with all the resources at their disposal when have the media given us a play or film that whilst it attacks republicanism, carefully reminds itself about the nature and degree of its own brutalising behaviour ... *Binlids* was not seeking a balance within itself but seeking a balance in the overall perception of what makes West Belfast tick. (Online)

Here Brighton is articulating a wariness of the concept of any impartial history. As Favorini notes, 'De Certeau (7) reminds us, thinking of Machiavelli, that the calculus of relations discovered by the historian may be used at the will of the prince. If the historian can play the role ... of virtual prince, in educating and mobilising, so too may the documentarian' (Favorini 33). A second response may be to ask whether there is such an objective place from which to view the events in Northern Ireland, given the variety of parties implicated in the situation.

A third response focuses on the desirability of such partiality. The play is not concerned with the positivist enterprise of discovering an objectively-testable match between the totality of reality and the representation; rather, it is concerned with the preservation of the sources used as a recognition of the authority of ordinary people in remembering their own lives. It is in this sense that the work is authentic: 'Authenticity here ... becomes rooted in "the people" and in the bond between the self and the group; and additionally, authenticity relies on the ability to "utilise" and culturally employ such "loyalty"' (Graham 11). One of the singers, Terence O'Neill commented that 'A lot of effort was invested in getting the details right ... so we took the scenes out and tried them on people, to see if the way we got things was the way people remembered' (Hurley, Online). Pam Brighton stated that 'the play's premise was to remember and reconstruct the events that the people involved felt had most shaped their sense of themselves and their society over the past 30 years' (Online). The production's authenticity is therefore a way of

validating the experiences of different individuals within the context of a community, articulating for them the right to be heard.

PARTIALITY AS PEACE-MAKING

This celebration of partiality is problematic for two of the main strategies used to resolve the conflict in Northern Ireland. The first strategy, that of assimilation (Darby 150), has sought to emphasise or create commonality between individuals from the communities in conflict as a means of diverting attention from the differences between the groups that have yet to be or cannot be resolved politically and structurally. A second strategy of pluralism (Darby 150), has sought to equate cultural 'traditions' as essentially and symmetrically divided and to achieve mutual understanding and 'parity of esteem' for each tradition. It might therefore be seen as unhelpful within the process towards peace to emphasise the ways in which a community has suffered through its isolation and to celebrate distinctive political and cultural traditions that demand a particular rather than a balanced response.

Rolston has attacked the strategy of pluralism since 'it proves inadequate to explain an important element in state cultural policy which derives ultimately from its differential relationship with Irish nationalism on the one hand, and Ulster unionism on the other. An adequate assessment of policy must acknowledge the history and effects of colonialism' (272). On the basis of his argument, I contend that the play had an important role in the process of peace making for this community at the precise point of its staging in 1997. This was the moment when fresh negotiations were being initiated by Sinn Féin with the Ulster Unionists and the British government in anticipation of the declaration of a second cease-fire by the Provisional IRA. The production invoked a number of important processes for its audiences. The first of these is the opportunity to confront those events which had conditioned the community's internalised sense of self without necessarily being acknowledged as such at the time. One of the actor's, Máiréad Uí Adhnaill, commented that, 'My mother came to the dress rehearsal. She said that it wasn't that you had forgotten any of these things, but when she was living through it there was always another crisis. You went through internment because there was something else happening after that, and now all of a sudden it was back in your face' (Scally 18). Being able to externalise these experiences is important, as Day comments in relation to Playback Theatre, 'without the chance to speak and externalise the insights that emerge from our angle of vision, we are unable to experience our own positioning, far less to make any sort of comparison or negotiation with other people who are positioned differently' (85).

Secondly, this re-experiencing of the past has the potential to be therapeutic, a possibility explicitly invoked in the programme for the New York production. According to Senator Tom Hayden's 'Preface':

In a single phrase, *Binlids* is a catharsis of the oppressed: a theatrical outcry of raw humanity The residents of West Belfast, in the face of the oblivion planned for them, show all the signs of becoming a 'risen people'. Now they return to Manhattan with *Binlids*, a therapeutic re-enactment carrying a needed message from the human spirit to a jaded world. (5)

This is remarked in several of the reviews of the production which recognise both the passions employed by the actors and roused within the audience, and the possibility of catharsis as a result:

Passion and fury are the hallmarks of this production; passion because all the elements of the drama are combined in a powerful expression of real genuine feelings; the fury vented during *Binlids* seems like the inevitable unburdening of anger after a long and frustrating confinement. (Ó Liatháin 31)

Thirdly, by demonstrating the ways in which the community has evolved in response to its changing context, there is a differentiation between the past and the present. This is a way of demonstrating both that the present is not inevitable, but the result of specific historical processes, and that the present moment is not the same as the past and therefore presents an opportunity for doing things differently. By demonstrating the changes within the community and in the community's relationships with external communities, it demonstrates the possibility that the conflict is the product of specific historical circumstances which now can be changed.

CONCLUSIONS

Binlids therefore can be seen as an exercise in counter-hegemony in its image making. It resists the marginalising discourses of both the media and the planners. It recognises as authoritative the ordinary people who have been made extraordinary by the conflict in which they are situated and gives voice to their experiences. In doing so, it emphasises their separation and celebrates it as a way of putting the past in context. It contributes to the processes of peace making by enabling the community to move beyond past imperatives and to engage in new relationships with other communities. This role in the peace process is summed up in the words of Sinn Féin leader, Gerry Adams:

It appears to me that part of the process of creating peace includes, and needs, people reclaiming their own stories and telling their own tales. This has to be a fundamental part of any healing process. Getting others to listen then becomes the other part. The sum total of all the parts — all the stories and the understanding of the stories in their totality — is what peace and the makings of peace are all about. (7)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Donna, Anne-Marie, Brenda and the other members of JustUs for their help in researching this article and to acknowledge the value that I have found in the CAIN Web Service (Conflict Archive on the Internet) hosted by the University of Ulster and available at <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/>.

This is a revised version of a paper which was presented at the Image into Identity conference, University of Hull, September 14–17, 2000.

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