There has long been an expectation that playwrights from the North of Ireland must engage with the Troubles. The best of this work has interrogated the causes and consequences of political violence on culture, society, and imagination in the North; however, the sense of obligation to engage with the conflict has inspired and enervated in equal measure. As early as 1972, Frank Ormsby published his ‘Write-an-Ulster-Play Kit’ in *The Honest Ulsterman*, signalling just how swiftly drama dealing with the conflict had ossified into stock characters and scenarios.\(^1\) It was certainly the case that stock characters, dialogue, and drama in the form of fatalistic tragedies, black comedies, thrillers, and sensationalized spectacle abounded in theatre as much as they did in fiction and film. Narratives of tribal revenge and thwarted romance also proliferated, as the dramaturgy of love-across-the-barricades and melodrama conveniently removed complex causes of political violence to present a murderous Manichaean struggle between good and evil; right and wrong; taigs and prods; ‘two men fighting over a field’—all of which, it could be argued, absolved the state from its responsibility whilst expropriating audiences of their political agency by presenting the ongoing conflict as inevitable and intractable.

While it is possible to identify the tropes that marbled three decades of drama from Northern Ireland, and this in turn provides a convenient shorthand to sift through what is a large body of work, as a taxonomic system it can be reductive. Such reductionism is compounded further by the fact that theatre in the North is so frequently siloed into single chapters.

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conflict drama

the Troubles (Northern Ireland's name for the conflict which began in the early 1970s and ended in the Good Friday Agreement of 1998) have been a major area of scholarly focus. The Troubles have been studied in a variety of ways, including through literary and dramatic works. The Troubles have been represented in a number of ways, including through theatre, film, and music. The Troubles have been a source of conflict and division, and have had a significant impact on the region. The Troubles have been a source of inspiration for many writers and artists, and have been the subject of a number of works of literature and drama.

In This Place

1969-1998: Sure Every Week Is Historic

The Troubles have been a source of conflict and division, and have had a significant impact on the region. The Troubles have been a source of inspiration for many writers and artists, and have been the subject of a number of works of literature and drama. The Troubles have been a source of conflict and division, and have had a significant impact on the region. The Troubles have been a source of inspiration for many writers and artists, and have been the subject of a number of works of literature and drama.
and unassimilability of sectarian division. By doing so, Pilkington argues, they absolve ‘the theatre spectator of all responsibility [as] this portrayal of the conflict in terms of an irresolvable social pathology tends to foreclose the possibility of its political solution.’ In many plays written by Northern authors, political violence dwells darkly in the wings, malevolently encircling the stage world, sometimes entering and interrupting, but mostly affecting action from offstage. Stewart Parker’s Pentecost (1987), set in the haunted sanctuary of a Belfast house during the civil unrest of the Ulster Workers’ Council strike of 1974, exemplifies this tradition. Indeed, the play might even stand as an appropriate metaphor for Belfast’s theatres, and notably the Lyric, which remained open during the darkest days of the Troubles in spite of the ongoing state of chaos that surrounded it. Given the brutal nature of the Troubles, it is unsurprising that theatre audiences sought some sort of release or relief from the conflict outside; however, it was precisely such middle-class escapism that is attacked in Bill Morrison’s Flying Blind (1977), which satirized those who wilfully sought to ignore the conflict. Set in a single suburban living room, its central character listens to Charlie Parker records on stereo headphones, avoiding what the play calls ‘the old, mindless, useless, sectarian conflict’ that is unseen off-stage.

Christopher Murray also identifies another common motif in Troubles drama: the ‘Romeo & Juliet types’. This recurrent narrative of the national romance is a weary familiar form that functions, as Joe Cleary observes, as an emotional, albeit enfeebled, allegorical appeal for political reconciliation. There are legions of examples of this sentimental tradition, from Wilson John Haire’s Bloom of the Diamond Stone (1973), Christina Reid’s Did You Hear the One about the Irishman? (1987), and Graham Reid’s Remembrance (1984). Thomas Kilroy even goes so far as to suggest that one of the classic plays of the Irish dramatic canon, Brian Friel’s Translations (1980), follows this narrative arc, pointing out that the characters Yolland and Maire resemble a Romeo-and-Juliet couple. Although this form has since faded into a clichéd convention, it is one that some playwrights in more recent work have sought to rehabilitate by reconfiguring the transgressive nature of a cross-community relationship so that it instead violates geographical, generational, and sexual boundaries as well as sectarian ones.

Indeed, there was an ambitious attempt to redeem this trope through a logistically complex, site-specific staging of a literal cross-community wedding. The Wedding Community Play (1999) was performed across one of Belfast’s oxymoronically named ‘peace walls’, with audiences transported to terraced homes in both the nationalist enclave of Short Strand and its surrounding Protestant heartland of East Belfast; small audiences were then eavesdropped into even smaller groups to experience an immersive performance in which they were transported on the domestic tensions and sectarian suspicions that suffused the wedding preparations, before being bussed once more to a local church and nightclub for the wedding service and reception. Although community theatre in the North has been criticized

5 Pilkington, Theatre and State, 209.
7 Christopher Murray, Twentieth Century Irish Drama: Mirror up to Nation (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 192.
Hence, for community theatre, the broad question of the political repositioning of the play itself is simultaneously setting the stage for this group who was disenfranchised in the same battles as the professional theatre. If the latter reverts to the steady, well-grounded, familiar landscape of the play's" high-brow, satirical twenty-six-page libretto, then perhaps to both sides of the political spectrum, the playwright's themes is reduced to a single, Old Man, who appears from the outset exhausted, whose moral minuteness is poorly suited to the requirements of a complex political landscape in which No Exit is a concept as much more complicated and straightforward than elsewhere were exposed in McCafferty's study on political theatre and with the Nationalist identity which McCafferty even self-admittedly felt the play could set in the framework of a stiff and irrefutable, because it does away from the continuous rhetoric to focus on the_movie body of Creon to the exclusion of Oedipus' vision of Antigone (2001) which still connives to undermine the company. Over McCafferty's version of Antigone (2001) which skillfully stunts the company's political position, David Cram's, O'Callagh and the politics of overwriting in Community-Based Drama, in "C.G. from Troubles to Post-Conflict Theatre..."
Antigone's brothers. The Old Man's rough vernacular speech signifies his social position as altogether lower than the aristocratic class and caste of Creon and Antigone, and his frights the play with a class politics that contests the paternalistic precepts of Aristotle's Poetics, whereby only the high-born qualify as tragic. This crucial element leads to an extraordinary confrontation towards the end of the play when the ordinarily servile Old Man suddenly challenges Antigone, as she wallows in her grief, with the no less keenly felt loss of his beloved son, bellowing in her face: 'Yours is not the only grief!'

This is not to say, however, that playwrights prior to 1998 did not challenge the politics of cliché or the traps of convention in their work. Stewart Parker's Northern Star (1984), set in a crumbling cottage on the slopes of Cave Hill in the aftermath of the 1798 Rising, is an Irish history play like no other in that it both contains and critiques the Irish theatrical canon. Stylistically, it ventriloquizes the speech, setting, and style of several Irish playwrights from Sheridan to Beckett, whilst structurally the play is shaped according to the 'Seven Ages of Man', from Shakespeare's As You Like It. The play opens with the first age: that of Innocence (Sheridan), then proceeds to the second age, Idealism (Boucicault), followed by Cleverness (Wilde), Dialectics (Shaw), heroism (Synge), compromise (O'Casey), and knowledge (Behan and Beckett), each written in the distinctive style of the respective playwrights. This metatheatrical structure is integral to the meaning of the play. For example, the opening stage of Innocence aptly labels the naivety of Belfast's urbane intellectual classes who believed that the lofty French ideals of liberté, égalité, fraternité could be transplanted to Ireland where they could transcend territorial and tribal divisions. 'We were city boys. What did we know about two men fighting over a field?' says the play's protagonist, Henry Joy McCracken, at one point. By the Age of Knowledge, however, those sublime principles have been drowned in sectarian slaughter and military massacre. Thus, context and content are thematically connected. The Age of Knowledge plays out in prison and is written in the style of Behan, with explicit references to The Quare Fellow's setting and dialogue. Political history, theatrical tradition, personal biography, and the canon of Irish drama are thus compressed in Northern Star's cat's cradle of politics, historiography, and art.

However, Parker was less interested in the metanarrative of Irish history than in its marginalia. So, in Northern Star, the 1798 Rising is the frame, not the focus, of the play. Likewise, in his 1975 play Spokesong, the Home Rule crises, the First World War, and the Troubles are but backgrounds to what the play claims as the most important date in Irish history—1887—when Belfast-born John Dunlop invented the pneumatic tyre. Likewise, the Ulster Workers' Council strike of 1974 is the offstage context for Pentecost (1987), and the sinking of the Titanic is reduced to a subterranean SEX in his radio play The Iceberg ('5), which focuses instead on the purgatorial plight of two shipyard workers, Danny and Hugh, a Catholic and a Protestant, killed in the construction of Belfast's 'proudest offering to the Empire—and to the world!', whose ghosts wander Titanic's decks on her maiden voyage.

In what is surely the most evocative stage direction in all of Irish drama, Northern Star is set in 'Ireland, the continuous past'. Northern Star and Pentecost are history plays about the future. By the same token, Spokesong's environmental politics, and the character of Frank

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15 Stewart Parker, The Iceberg, Honest Ulsterman 50 (1975), 33.
16 Parker, Plays: 2, 3.
FROM TROUBLES TO POST-CONFLICT THEATRE

Stock's appeal for fleets of free bicycles to be supplied for the city, offers a prescient civic vision that has since materialized in many metropolitan capitals throughout Europe. Moreover, Northern Star's appeal for a shared and civic politics, Iceberg's history from below, and Pentecost's expressionistic imagining of the possibility of political compromise and accommodation collectively reveal Parker to be a visionary artist, capable of opening out new theatrical forms and ideas in a situation that impelled so many of his peers in the opposite direction.

Monica McWilliams, Struggling for Peace and Justice: Reflections on Women's Activism in Northern Ireland, Journal of Women's History 6, no. 4 (1995), 32.

Women's Troubles

Monica McWilliams, the founder of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition, draws attention to the vital contribution of women to the public sphere in Northern Ireland:

From the civil rights campaigns of the sixties, to the community projects and women's centres in the mid-1970s and 1980s, women in Northern Ireland have played a central role in the development of a collective consciousness of the possibilities of political action and community projects, and women's centres.

Monica McWilliams, the founder of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition, draws attention to the vital contribution of women to the public sphere in Northern Ireland:

FROM TROUBLES TO POST-CONFLICT THEATRE

WOMEN'S TROUBLES
Charabanc's work is not only significant for its feminist politics, connecting the personal with the political, and for its collective creation, but also for its decision to perform in community halls and centres across the sectarian divide, in rural and urban venues, North and South, and in working-class areas where live theatre had never been brought before. In pioneering this form of portable theatre, Charabanc set the scene for the later proliferation of community theatre groups.

The work of Charabanc is also significant for its trenchant engagement with class, and in the years since Lay Up Your Ends Northern Ireland's thriving community theatre sector has consistently engaged with class issues. The same has been true of some established playwrights like Graham Reid, Martin Lynch, and Robin Glendenning, who have all explored how both class and educational systems reproduce sectarian identities, while Marie Jones, Christina Reid, and Anne Devlin have interrogated the complex nexus of class and sectarian politics as it shapes gender roles and relations. Devlin's Ourselves Alone (1985) invokes the republican movement to accuse it of relegating and restricting women's agency in real social terms, while simultaneously elevating women as iconic symbols of struggle as Kathleen Ni Houlihan, Mother Ireland, or the grotesquely mutilated character of Aunt Cora, who has been blinded and maimed by a cause for which she's ceremonially, if cynically, wheeled out every Easter. Devlin dramatizes how these gender roles and relations are regulated by domestic violence—a taboo subject also broached by Graham Reid's poignant Remembrance (1984) and which has belatedly become a critical issue in the politics and theatre of post-conflict Northern Ireland. Indeed, it is possible now to look back to Northern theatre before 1998, and see in some work the prescient traces of concerns that will emerge more forcefully after the Good Friday Agreement, whether racism in Christina Reid's The Belle of Belfast City (1989), or sexual orientation in plays such Frank McGuinness's Carthaginians (1988). This work has collectively helped contribute to a new form of civic politics and performance that has been built on in the later work of Colin Bell, Tim Loane, and Theatre of Pluck, the North's only queer theatre company.

PERFORMING THE PEACE

One of the most distinctive, if debilitating, features of the otherwise successful peace process in the North is the fact that there is no state mechanism or apparatus in place to undertake any form of truth recovery, with the resulting vacuum unsatisfactorily filled by a welter of charitable, statutory, and community organizations. This political failure to deal with the past means that artists—particularly theatre artists—have had an enormously important role to play in the ongoing processes of conflict transformation. Even the most cursory inventory reveals a vast repertoire of work produced over the past decade or more. Some have been produced by local theatre companies in Belfast and Derry; some are authored by ex-combatants (Laurence McKeown, Robert Niblock, Brian Campbell, Sam Miller, Danny Morrison, Brenda Murphy), others by professional playwrights (Owen McCafferty, Martin Lynch, Gary Mitchell, Abbie Spallen, Damian Gorman, Tim Loane, Stacey Gregg, Rosemary Jenkinson, Dave Duggan, David Ireland, Marie Jones, Jimmy McAleavey). Yet more work has been commissioned by organizations actively involved in ongoing processes of conflict transformation and transitional justice (e.g. Healing Through Remembering, WAVE, Consultative...
The creation and deployment of post-conflict drama for neither require any preliminary

involvement in the possible emergence of post-conflict drama. For neither require any preliminary

preparation. Instead, the possible emergence of post-conflict drama is a new field of study where the old fields of study are nearly obsolete. The post-conflict drama is a new field of study where the old fields of study are nearly obsolete. The post-conflict drama is a new field of study where the old fields of study are nearly obsolete.
orthodoxies it has generated; along with Mitchell, Loane was one of the first playwrights to do so. Their intervention was all the more important given what many see as the mainstream media's unwillingness, in the interests of maintaining the equilibrium of the peace process, to investigate the causes and consequences of the past four decades of political violence. Indeed, Gary Mitchell claims: 'BBC Northern Ireland told me I wouldn't be working with them any more unless I wrote about the peace process and it would have to be positive.' In this context that Mitchell and Loane's plays are so important. Not only do they set out to 'rock the boat' by asking awkward questions, but they also offer difficult, dissident answers—something which imbues their work with an ethical aesthetic integrity. After all, as Stewart Parker observes, 'the easy answer constitutes an artistic abdication.'

**Re-inhabiting the Past**

'Plays and ghosts have a lot in common,' Stewart Parker once wrote. As if in confirmation, several site specific productions have directly engaged with Belfast's troubled past, if only to imagine its future, so that the narrative of the play is shared by the place of performance. One stunning example of this was Tinderbox and Field Day's co-production of Parker's *Northern Star* in Rosemary Street Presbyterian Church on the 1998 bicentenary of the United Irishmen's Rising. The Church itself was where Henry Joy McCracken worshipped, as did the Presbyterian founder of the United Irishmen, William Drennan, so the story of *Northern Star* was ghosted with its history and meaning. When the performance reached the final line of McCracken's unfinished speech beginning 'Citizens of Belfast ...', time and space collapsed as an audience was collectively hailed to remember the past and to continue its story.

Likewise, Tinderbox's *Convictions* (2000) ghosted the site specific setting of the dilapidated Crumlin Road Courthouse, the impact of which derived largely from the auratic experience of the place. Featuring seven short playlets, each named for an area in the building, written by different authors and performed in different spaces, *Convictions* transported small audiences to view these scenes in different sequences. For instance, Owen McCafferty's *Courtroom No. 1* hauntingly used the court as a purgatorial setting for a dialogue between a nameless victim of the Troubles and the disembodied voice of his unseen interrogator. The victim seeks answers in the vain hope of finding some form of closure or resolution to his plight; however, his hope for release or redemption is continually denied. Similarly, Daragh Carville's contribution was set in the Men's Toilets of its title, where a jaded photographer and PR man meet whilst above them the former courthouse is being launched as a tourist information centre and heritage site. Lamenting the days when Northern Ireland 'had an identity ... a brand', the photographer goes on to wonder:

**Photographer.** What if there were a way we could keep Northern Ireland in the public mind. Internationally, I mean? [...] Just the odd wee bomb ... Think of the

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* Parker, *Plays*: 2, xiii.
Publicity...just like the old days...Put us back on the map. Make Belfast—a boom town again.27

carville's jaunty joke is itself an embryonic example of a kind of Ulster osthall, to borrow a word that emerged in the former East Germany: a sentimentalist belief in the 'good old bad old days' that has informed and inflected later work, such as Beano niblock's Reason to Believe (2009) and, arguably, martin Lynch's hugely successful History of the Troubles (Accordin' to my Da) (2002) and Chronicles of Long Kesh (2009), which repackage the Troubles as a long series of comic set pieces. Lynch's West Belfast war zone is inhabited entirely by lovable rogues, chancers, characters, where affable paramilitaries and unflappable communities endure and even enjoy everything the Troubles can throw at them. Some commentators regard such work as simplistic and trivial, but Lynch's plays are a serious comedy about two parallel conflicts: the Troubles as played out in the political arena, and the Troubles as experienced by the people on the ground. His work is a political theatre that aims to provoke and challenge the audience to think critically about the Troubles and their aftermath.
Whilst all the above plays represent very different responses to the legacy of the Troubles, most of them do not have the potential to play far beyond the North given the specificity of their humour, topicality, and subject matter. This is certainly not the case for the work of Owen McCafferty. McCafferty’s importance as a post conflict playwright lies in the fact that he writes about those who played no part in the conflict, the ordinary people living in extraordinary circumstances. This approach is what distinguishes Scenes from the Big Picture (2003) as one of the finest plays written by an Irish playwright in the past twenty years. Joycean in its ambition and vision, Scenes presents a prismatic perspective of an entire city in a single day as a collage of short scenes, flux, and fade to produce the eponymous ‘big picture’ of contemporary life in a modern city. Although setting the play in Belfast, McCafferty deliberately decontextualises the city, decoupling it from the overdetermined images of conflict that have served only to caricature the place. Certain incidents do elliptically invoke the recent past: an inherited allotment yields a secret cache of buried weapons and a drug dealer is kneecapped, but this is the historical backwash of the Troubles; it does not shape the narrative, for McCafferty seeks to stage a much more complex picture of a city emerging out of conflict.

Set in a rural border backwater and comprising monologues by three characters, Abbie Spallen’s Pumpgirl (2006) seems to have little in common with Scenes, but its portrait offers a fascinating counterpart to the other’s big picture. The play is set in the hinterland of rumour and ragwort of south Armagh, on the Northern side of the border and in the midst of republican fielddom of fuel smugglers that have left Pumpgirl’s petrol station ‘on it last legs’ ‘on the wrong side of a fluctuating exchange rate’. This is a landscape change utterly by demilitarisation as road blocks, border bases, and military watchtowers have been removed in what were the most striking materializations of the peace process. And yet, even though the topography of South Armagh is so deeply inscribed by the politics of conflict, Pumpgirl never directly references the Troubles, because the Troubles are over. The era no longer governs everyone’s lives, even though its legacy inscribes the very language and landscape of the play. The character of Hammy describes racing his motor cars ‘up b the new hotel that got bombed in ’94’, whilst the secluded scenic spot where Pumpgirl meet him for their trysts is where ‘two Prods were took and killed about fifteen years ago’. The elliptical presence of the past has an unsettling effect, instilling a haunting sense of how history, landscape, language, and memory have been mis-shaped by acts of political violence that have reinscribed the border areas with an altogether new form of dimnseanchas.

Bearing Witness

It has been observed that ‘the end of conflict is not the end of violence for women’. Pumpgirl’s story is beguilingly told in the voice of a young tomboy, whose decency and innocence makes her brutal gang rape all the more horrific. It also opens up a traumati

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9 Ibid., 16, 20.
The all-female cast of I Once Knew a Girl included, among others, a serving PSNI officer, a former IRA quartermaster, and Kathleen Gillespie, the widow of Patsy Gillespie, who had been vaporized in the first IRA proxy bomb along with five soldiers. This extract shows the devastating impact that women bore during the Troubles. The northern Irish theatre has begun to bring into the light, notably through a series of performances, stories that had been completely silenced throughout the Troubles. In this, the North is not unique. Many countries emerging out of conflict are confronted with the reality of epidemic levels of violence against women, masked by more public forms of violence. As Mary K. Meyer notes, "during the 1996-7 IRA ceasefire, reported incidents of violence against women increased. The reality of domestic violence is the hidden face of conflict." In this, theatre has begun to bring into the light the hidden, notably the way in which women were subject to violence and physical abuse.

The all-female cast of I Once Knew a Girl included, among others, a serving PSNI officer, a former IRA quartermaster, and Kathleen Gillespie, the widow of Patsy Gillespie, who had been vaporized in the first IRA proxy bomb along with five soldiers. This extraordinary production showed theatre’s capacity to participate in the wider political process. The performances of the all-female cast, who were themselves victims of violence, were more likely to report other women’s experiences. The performances of Theatre of Witness project, I Once Knew a Girl (2010), based in Derry, Theatre included women among its cast and crew. The all-female cast included, among others, a serving PSNI officer, a former IRA quartermaster, and Kathleen Gillespie, the widow of Patsy Gillespie, who had been vaporized in the first IRA proxy bomb along with five soldiers. This extraordinary production showed theatre’s capacity to participate in the wider political process.

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through its ability to manifest through performance what was hidden, in this case a shared experience of sexual and physical violence that crossed political and sectarian divides. Both the policewoman, Maria, and the IRA volunteer, Anne, had been exploited and abused by male figures of authority; moreover, each equally assumed that their suffering did not matter in the context of the ‘real’ violent struggle convulsing their respective communities. ‘I’ve been raped more than once,’ says Maria. ‘I never told anyone ‘cause compared to all the violence during the Troubles, I thought it was insignificant. But it wasn’t. It’s happened to too many of us.’ And from the opposite side of the conflict, Anne tells a similar story. Collectively, these testimonies also reveal how patriarchal organizations like the police and the IRA, operating in militarized masculinist culture of secrecy, institutionally reproduced sexual violence and colluded in the oppression of women, who now must struggle ‘to make public the private violence they experience’.

Like an earlier Theatre of Witness play, We Carried Your Secrets (2009), developed by victims and perpetrators of political violence, I Once Knew a Girl was followed by facilitated discussions between performers and audiences, which in itself ‘generated an extensive archive of reflective responses from many of those who saw it.’ A comparison might be drawn here with the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, of which Catherine Cole claimed that its efficacy as a spectacle came from the fact that ‘its public enactment was also about people speaking and being heard’. This is where the importance of the Theatre of Witness lies: its post-show discussions, generated by the performance, provided a public forum for civic debate. The ‘actors’ in these performances—individuals whose politics, memories, and identities were often violently opposed—also participated in the post-show discussions, just as they had shared stage space with one another. As a cast, their camaraderie and deep affection for one another was palpable, even though they remained deeply divided by their political convictions. For many, this in itself seemed indicative of the potential of theatre as a site for peace and reconciliation.

Peace and Reconciliation

If Troubles drama has been largely defined by the expectation that artists deal with the conflict, perhaps post-conflict theatre in the North can be similarly defined by an expectation that it should play some sort of role in the processes of truth and reconciliation. David Ireland’s Everything Between Us (2010), like David Park’s novel The Truth Commissioner, envisages how a notional Truth and Reconciliation Commission would pan out, with its

34 Teya Sepinuck, 'I Once Knew a Girl', directed by Teya Sepinuck (Derry: The Playhouse, 2010), unpublished script, 15. [The editors wish to thank Teya Sepinuck for providing us with the unpublished script to this play.]
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Public and participatory form – and this is an exchange and experience that theatre transacts all the time, and in a number of different guises (as with the Theatre of Witness): it is merely another component of the construction of our understanding of the nature of truth and reconciliation processes. "Black South African female Chair assaulted on the first day of hearings in a racist attack by an MLA’s sister. Derry playwright, Dave Duggan, opts for an alternative approach in A690 (2005), whose treatment of the supposition of a Truth Commission is handled in a metaphorical fashion, as the North’s body politic is cast in the form of a patient awaiting a medical procedure to have the truth cut out of him. Laurence McKeown and Brian Campbell’s A Cold House (2003), whose title is a reference to Unionist leader David Trimble’s Nobel speech in which he conceded unionism had since partition created a "cold house for Catholics", stages the almost insuperable difficulties of any such process, whereby truth lead only to recrimination as the cold house of a former RUC officer is repaired by a former republican prisoner, who arrives to fix the boiler.

Mick Duke’s Revenge explores in lieu of justice how the possibility of reconciliation can be supplanted by the primal compulsion for vengeance. Set in the immediate aftermath of the North’s prisoner releases, whereby all paramilitaries had been freed from Maze/Londonderry, Revenge is staged in a strange kind of dreamscape in which the revenants,, who appear on-stage as ghostly shadings summoned forth, have the potential to bring the dead back to life. When a bomb goes off in a pub the evening of the wedding, the two former RUC officers are charged with the murder of a former republican prisoner. McKeown’s Revenge possesses a problematic audience, because where Revenge straightforwardly reveals the complicity of those responsible for the atrocity, McCafferty’s Quietly (2012), which is set in a pub on the Lower Ormeau Road, where the UVF have blown up a pub, is set in a pub of the same name, and is a post-conflict play that seeks to address a continuing trauma. McCafferty’s Quietly (2012), which is set in a pub on the Lower Ormeau Road, where the UVF have blown up a pub, is set in a pub of the same name, and is a post-conflict play that seeks to address a continuing trauma.

In Quietly, McCafferty reminds us of the redemptive possibilities of truth, and that the atrocity consists not only of the killing of the other, but of the killing of self by the perpetrator. The two former RUC officers, who appear on-stage as ghostly shadings summoned forth, have the potential to bring the dead back to life. When a bomb goes off in a pub the evening of the wedding, the two former RUC officers are charged with the murder of a former republican prisoner. McKeown’s Revenge possesses a problematic audience, because where Revenge straightforwardly reveals the complicity of those responsible for the atrocity, McCafferty’s Quietly stages such a confrontation, and McCafferty’s Quietly (2012), which is set in a pub on the Lower Ormeau Road, where the UVF have blown up a pub, is set in a pub of the same name, and is a post-conflict play that seeks to address a continuing trauma.

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At the start of the play, Jimmy cannot bring himself to listen to Ian’s account of his actions on that fateful day, constantly interrupting and correcting him, seeking to coerce his narrative into one that shores up his own:

**Jimmy.** just say what happened—simple enough isn’t it—the facts are the truth—

isn’t that why you’re here to tell the truth and be reconciled

**Ian.** no—and there’s more to the truth than facts.40

Ian’s retort that the facts alone are not sufficient are not the weasel words of someone trying to excuse his actions, nor are they an attempt to evade his responsibility; it is simply the view that truth is perspectival and positional. In the closing scene, Ian offers Jimmy his hand in a gesture which Jimmy eventually accepts, though with the admonition: ‘don’t ever come back here again.’ It is a gesture freighted with symbolism, as formal handshakes between public figures on opposite sides of the conflict have become markers of historical change. In Quietly, McCafferty has suggested that ‘there is no huge gesture about it, it is a male way [. . .] of ending something. It’s finished.’41 It is an uneasy, unsettling act. Both men have reached an understanding, and there is a reconciliation of sorts, but no expectation that they will meet one another again.

After Quietly opened in Dublin’s Peacock Theatre in 2013, McCafferty recalled being emotionally upset afterwards by its impact, belatedly realizing that, in many ways, he had written Quietly about his generation, about ‘the Belfast we grew up in and how it affected us’.42 As such, it seems the last in a cycle of plays (Mojo-Mickybo, 1998, Closing Time, 2002, Scenes from the Big Picture) that deal with Troubles and their aftermath; and though there may never be any clean break, this seems a sensibility that is shared in the work of a younger generation of writers like David Ireland, Rosemary Jenkinson, Lisa Magee, and Lucy Caldwell, Stacey Gregg, and Abbie Spallen.

### Continuity and Change

One striking new motif that can be traced through a wealth of new plays over the past decade has been the theme of change, specifically the transformation of Belfast. A slew of plays feature the returned émigré, usually someone who fled Belfast during the Troubles but who has now returned home to find a city they barely recognize. In the Kabosh Theatre Company’s site-specific Two Roads West (2009), an audience of four share a black taxi tour with a returned local who is re-familiarizing herself with a city in which she feels a stranger. Likewise, in McCafferty’s The Absence of Women (2010), two down-and-out navvies in a dead-end dosshouse discuss coming home to the city they have heard has been transformed. In Graham Reid’s Love Billy (2013), the eponymous hero (first made famous by Kenneth Branagh in the Billy television plays in 1982—4), is utterly discombobulated as he wanders around his old stomping ground, unable to find anything familiar from the old days.

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40 Ibid., 35.
41 Ibid., 51.
42 Owen McCafferty in conversation with the author, 8 May 2014.
Looking after an elderly father who refuses to accept or to acknowledge his child’s
play takes the form of a monologue about a middle-aged transgendered woman, Pauline,
who makes the decision to stage Transcends at Tesco in the same all the more resonant. The
piece is a resonant symbol of post-conflict reconciliation of the city in some respects, this
is a central part of the post-conflict regeneration of the city. In 2009, An Antichristian Impression
was being performed at the Lyric, The New MAC venue

After this exchange, the Troubles are not mentioned again. In its understated way, this

MARTHA. Why? STEVIE. What are you talking about? Martha. I’m so sick of talking about it and hearing about it.


I don’t. I don’t understand it. I don’t understand how.

You can we stop talking about it now? (She slams her head in disbelief and looks to him for an answer.)

I don’t. I don’t understand it. I don’t understand how.

You seem so normal—and you and your family!—I mean I know we’re only just met;

stupidly stopped: [.] And I listen to you and—I mean I know we’re only just met.


Martha. I don’t understand it. I don’t understand how could have happened.

Troubles is a combination of inference, politics, and curiosity.

Trouble is not necessarily political. It is a political play. A political play should take place in the
been kick in the teeth which is precisely what the Troubles are about. The

lament a little more about each other. With Martha the introspection is palpable, and the
of the story remains true.

(pause)

In 2009, An Antichristian Impression was being performed at the Lyric, The New MAC venue.

When we met, I thought why do you do all this. I couldn’t imagine how you do any of this.

I thought I know you were normal. How you manage. I mean I know we’re only just met.

You seem so normal—and you and your family!—I mean I know we’re only just met.

MARTHA. The Troubles. How we can start talking about it.

STEVIE. Why.

MARTHA. Why.

STEVIE. Why.

MARTHA. Why.

STEVIE. Why.

MARTHA. Why.

STEVIE. Why.

MARTHA. Why.

STEVIE. Why.
transformation, pointedly using her birthname, 'Paul', whilst scorning her appearance and identity. Tuesdays was performed in the MAC's ground floor exhibition space, the rear wall of which is wholly made of glass facing onto the busy passageway that leads in the new piazza style courtyard at the front of the building, surrounded on all sides by fashionable restaurants and bars. Peter Quigley played Pauline from the street outside whilst the small audience watched from within the theatre into which sound was broadcast, so that the solid glass wall constituted a transparent, impermeable fourth wall. It was a stunningly simple yet complex staging, leaving Quigley to negotiate his character performance among the 'civilians' passing through, many of whom reacted with amusement, curiosity, or fright. All of this inflected Pauline's narrative of having to endure daily a heteronormative society which reacts to and rejects her appearance and identity, as where her own father maligns her even as she carries out her kindly ministrations. Pauline bears all with good grace, but an encounter while carrying out the most mundane task - shopping at Tesco's with her father upsets her, and in an emotional outburst, performs right up against the glass wall, Pauline poignantly pleads for tolerance. I am a woman and I go with my father on Tuesdays to Tesco's [...] My name is Pauline. [...] It's all quite normal.

In post-conflict Northern Ireland, far too much emphasis remains on the politics of orange and green, rather than the grey areas in between or the positions of the LGBT community, women, and immigrants, all of whom get short shrift. Since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, the North's peace process has placed enormous political capital on ensuring the 'normalization' of politics, culture, and society, as signalling a successful post-conflict evolution from war to peace. A byword for demilitarization, decommissioning, and the stability of democratic structures, alongside the massive inward investment and regeneration of the North's economy, 'normalization', as Theatre of Pluck reminds us, is a heteronormative process that is an inadequate metric of political progress. If Can't Forget About You suggests we should learn to stop talking about the past, Theatre of Pluck suggests some of the things that we should learn to begin discussing.