



The Contribution Playback Theatre Can Make To The Northern Ireland Situation

By Orla McKeagney

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The Tale of Two Islands

The close proximity of the islands of Ireland and Britain and the ease of travel by sea between them, has exerted an influence on the relationships between their inhabitants which can be traced back to the Stone Age. Unfortunately since then, these relationships have not always been harmonious, and numerous conflicts have occurred at various intervals down the ages.

While disputes of a sectarian nature are now seen by the outside world as being unique to life today in Northern Ireland, the fact that religion played a major role in much more widespread conflicts between the two islands is often overlooked, particularly by the British. Britain also likes to forget that, more than once, it played a major role in determining the sectarian nature of the problem. Furthermore, it is worth remembering that this Anglo Irish conflict was but a comparatively minor element in the much more widespread European wars between Protestantism and Catholicism as a result of the Reformation.

An Irish raid brings Christianity

Ironically perhaps, the arrival of Christianity in Ireland itself, was the outcome to a 5th Century minor skirmish between some inhabitants of both islands and would hardly have merited a mention in the annals of history, had the pagan Irish slave raiders not included amongst their captives, a Christian youth who would seek the consolation of his faith in dealing with the loneliness and homesickness he experienced so far away from his native Britain as he carried out the task of herding sheep on the slopes of an extinct volcano. The youth's fame would spread throughout the world thanks to the celebrations of his feast by Irish exiles on 17 March every year. While involved in prayer and meditation during lonely nights of slavery in the County Antrim hills in the northern part of Ireland, the young Patrick was told the means of escape to his British home by God, who then guided him to the priesthood in order to prepare him for the task of bringing the message of Christianity back to the land of his youthful misery.

The success of this missionary campaign in the country of his youthful slavery would for succeeding centuries earn for it the title of the "land of saints and scholars" as

Irish Christian learning and culture would be carried to the far ends of Europe by monks who had received their missionary zeal from his message.

Reformation and Wars

The adoption of the reformed religion by Britain following the death of the much married Henry VIII, whose marital ambitions had led to his break with Rome, resulted in alliances being formed with other Protestant countries by his successors, in order to protect themselves from those European countries which had persevered with Catholicism. Ireland, thus finding itself at odds with its nearest and more powerful neighbour in the larger European religious dispute, was seen by all of them as the ideal launching ground for an invasion of England. At various times from the 16th Century onwards, powerful Catholic nations such as Spain and France wishing to neutralise England's military and commercial influence in Europe, had no doubt but that Irish support would be an essential element in determining the successful outcome to invasion.

Being fully aware of the danger posed to their security by the hostile neighbouring Irish, several English monarchs tried military subjugation to eliminate the threat. The Irish, of course were unwilling to contemplate such a scenario, having their own ideas on the nature of the religious and political set best suited to the island of St Patrick. The nature of the terrain, particularly in the north where rivers, lakes and heavily wooded bogs served as natural fortifications, prevented the more powerfully equipped English forces from achieving the outright defeat of their troublesome neighbours.

At the start of the 15th Century, England's Elizabeth I decided that the threat posed to the safety of her Protestant realm by the independent minded Catholic Irish had to be dealt with once and for all, with total domination of the entire neighbouring island being seen as the only way her Protestant kingdom had to protect itself from an invasion by Spain through the back door. She suspected rightly that the major Catholic power was, at that time, in negotiation with Irish leaders to formulate a plan for an invasion from across the narrow Irish Sea. Her forces launched a comprehensive attack on the neighbouring island, and with an advance on three fronts by land and sea on the last outposts of resistance in the northern part of Ireland, eventually secured control of the entire island.

Rewarding Conquest

As a reward for the success of their military endeavours, Elizabeth's officers were granted ownership of vast tracts of the most fertile land of Ireland, on condition that these were to be tenanted by families from Britain whose loyalty to the reigning monarch and commitment to the Protestant religion would be beyond question. The

vast bulk of the new settlers were drawn from the troublesome warring factions which inhabited the territories on each side of the border between England and Scotland whose past marauding experience made them ideally equipped to deal with any resistance from the Irish farmers they would displace in their new territories. Additionally the English monarch appreciated the wisdom in killing two birds with the one stone as their transfer from their native home would, for the first time guarantee peace, in those counties that they left behind.

The Irish Catholic natives were the losers. Having borne the brunt of an invasion in which crop and home burning had created a death toll to match that recorded in battle, they were left leaderless by their military commanders' flight to seek further assistance from mainland Europe. In London's policy of ethnic cleansing, they found themselves dispatched to the higher and more barren contours, there to live or die depending on their ability to convert mountain and bog into sustenance.

Resistance

In an effort to regain some of their lost territories, the natives embarked on a rebellion against the new system in 1641. The outcome was failure and further seizure of some of the lands which had remained in native hands. Such was the good fortune of the Brooke family which would produce one of N Ireland's most long serving Prime Minister. He would be remembered more for his quip that he would not have a Catholic about his vast estate than for any act of statesmanship.

In the ensuing centuries yet further native rebellions to better the existence of the dispossessed majority were doomed to suffer a similar fate, again to be followed by further subjugation, aimed primarily at the extinction of the native language, religion and culture.

A further rebellion in 1798 which differed from previous attempts in that it sought to establish an alliance between the native Catholics and Presbyterian planters, the latter having been similarly victimised by the English established church and political system, was also ruthlessly quashed with much bloodshed, after which Ireland was brought even more closely under English control, to be ruled directly from London.

Although the section of the population to suffer most from several famines which decimated their numbers and caused mass movements of population to the new countries on the American continent, the native Irish regularly continued to instigate uprisings against what they considered to be an indifferent, uncaring, alien administration in London. The outcome in all instances was defeat.

Resistance to Home Rule

Eventually, towards the end of the 19th Century, chiefly as a result of parliamentary action by the Irish political representatives at Westminster, the English administration decided to concede a limited form of devolution to its island neighbour. This development did not appeal to the descendants of the original Protestant planters who wished to maintain the position of advantage they had enjoyed over the bulk of the native population for so long. Although spread throughout all of Ireland, they were most densely concentrated in the nine counties of the northern province of Ulster. Indeed so great was their fear of becoming subservient to a Catholic majority in the island, that they imported arms from Germany to prepare a military resistance to the British Government should it continue with its policy of granting home rule. Shortly afterwards, representatives of the native Catholic population adopted a similar tactic, in their case the importation of arms was in preparation for military resistance should the government renege on its proposals to allow the Irish the promised devolution.

A rebellion against British control, did in fact break out in Dublin in 1916 at a time when it was considered opportune with Britain's involvement in World War I in resistance to German imperialism. Following yet another defeat, the rebellion's chief instigators were executed, while those belonging to the lower ranks were imprisoned.

Faced with a seemingly impossible task of reconciling the conflicting aspirations, within the country, partition was imposed by Westminster in 1922. Twenty six counties were granted a limited form of independence from Britain, with a government to be located in Dublin, while the remaining six Protestant dominated were to remain British with its parliament in Belfast enjoying a considerable degree of control over local affairs.

While the new administration in the north enjoyed the support of more than 60% of the population, the remainder, almost entirely Catholic, were unhappy with the arrangement, since their preference was for independence from England for the entire country. The chief outcome of the new arrangement was to concentrate into these six counties the historic quarrel which had previously dominated the entire thirty two of the island. The situation was made worse by the majority (Protestant and in favour of maintaining the union with Britain and, so termed Unionist) being allowed total control over government, without there ever being a possibility for a change in political control. Lord Craigavon, the first Prime Ministers of N Ireland described the administration as "a Protestant Parliament for a Protestant people". The native Irish in the new state found themselves in a permanent position of disadvantage, were they were to be subjected to fifty years of discrimination in jobs, housing and educational advance. For many of them the only hope of a better existence lay in emigration.

The N Ireland Civil Rights Movement

For a period of fifty years, Catholic disenchantment was relatively subdued until it was concluded that the discriminatory system that treated a growing 35% of the

population as second class citizens could no longer be tolerated in the 20th Century. At the same time a militant section of the Protestant majority was unwilling to contemplate any diminution of its absolute control. Street protests by Catholic demonstrators adopting the Civil Rights tactics of Martin Luther King, met with a violent response from militant opponents and the local security forces. Eventually a small section of the Catholic population resorted to the traditional methods of violent rebellion. This was matched by state violence and paramilitary retaliation from a section of the Unionist population which adopted similar tactics to those who opposition to the system took the form of killing and bombing.

Conflict and a New Definition of Relationships

To the world at large it was easy to conclude that the latest form of conflict in an area the size of the English county of Yorkshire had all the appearance of a religious war. Those who have to live there, while accepting that the protagonists are almost exclusively recruited from the Protestant and Catholic communities, and that religious bigotry helps to fan the flames of sectarianism as is the case in the divided former Yugoslavia, appreciate the centuries old origins of the native and planter quarrel, and so accord to it, its conflicting political realities. While until fairly recently, the violent and political extreme elements have refused to accept the necessity of political accommodation, in May of this year, more than 70% of N Ireland's voters have opted for a new era of mutual understanding which would take into account the multifaceted relationships involved. Thus there is now a consensus that the totality of relationships between the two factions in N Ireland, both parts of Ireland and the two neighbouring islands must be confronted so that some agreement on non-violent way forward can be arrived at.

As a first step both sovereign governments are following a common incremental approach. They have a joint formula for links between the divided parts of Ireland, and have stated their intention to facilitate the coming together of the two groupings within N Ireland itself. One common factor, that of membership of the European Community, has been highlighted as encouraging both sovereign governments to work together.

The major task remains the structuring of links between the descendants of the natives and the planters within the confines of N Ireland itself, whose long standing division has been accentuated by almost thirty years of bloodshed and hate. It is now accepted that any advance will consist of a series of small steps towards reconciling differences. It is the opinion of this writer that in this particular context Playback Theatre could play a role of some significance.

Personal Experience of the Form

Having received an introduction to Playback as part of my Theatre Studies degree at the University of Ulster, I appreciated its facility to accommodate notable aspects of Irish

culture where oral tradition had played such an important role in the transmission of valued experiences long before the arrival of Christianity, and at a later period, when during Penal Times, a majority of the people were deprived of any type of formal education by the English administration. Additionally, because of the role of story telling in informal entertainment in peoples' homes, humour frequently became an important ingredient of the process. Even during the horrific episodes of our past 30 years of social unrest, the N Ireland sense of humour was a source of wonder to the world's media.

I enrolled for the first part of training at the Playback Theatre School, New York, to pursue the form in more depth. This prolonged exposure to Playback convinced me further that here was a medium which offered individuals opportunities to express deeper more meaningful experiences that could be recreated and shared by others. Not only did this give the Teller of the experience a sense of validation about his/her perceptions, it also managed to evoke a genuine support and empathy from others.

On the course, one particular incident stands out in my memory. While relating a personal experience that highlighted my sadness about the situation in my own country and the frustration at the individual's inability to contribute towards some form of peaceful outcome, I became aware of the manner in which my feelings were understood and respected by the others present. As a result, I felt quite safe in revealing my vulnerability simply because it was apparent to me that the conditions were just right for personal revelations. The others in the group intimated that while they had frequently heard news reports dealing with the N Ireland problem, they felt that it was through attempting to share my feelings at that time they had been enabled to arrive at a fuller understanding of every day life in such an environment. The bonds between us grew stronger as a result. It was then that I came to fully appreciate the extent of empathy provided by the Playback form and its potential for the pursuit of understanding and reconciliation in a conflict situation.

Ideas into Action

While I appreciated that I was merely a young inexperienced and unknown actress among the hundreds for whom Ireland has become renowned worldwide, I decided that it would be a good idea to form my own Playback group which would include a mix of Catholic and Protestant performers with varying perspectives on the origins of the conflict and the direction the future should take. I sought to recruit people I knew who would be open enough to communicate and reflect on opinions contrary to their own, as well as seeking to creatively experiment in a theatre form new to them. The group eventually came together as an ideal mix reflecting a broad section of N Ireland society. There were five middle class Catholics, two of whom were teachers. One held a moderate political opinion and was totally opposed to any form of violence, the other more inclined to support the on going armed struggle for a united Ireland, which is totally opposed by most of N Ireland's Protestant population. The others were an actor,

a speech therapist and a mother. These three, similar to the teacher, held the view that the establishment of peace in the short term was far more important than any armed struggle for an alternative political structure in the future or the preservation of the status quo.

The participants from the Protestant tradition all supported the link with Britain to varying degrees. Robert who worked in retail, came from a working class background, was staunchly Protestant, and could never agree to a united Ireland, a prospect which he considered would be Catholic dominated and determined to suppress, if not eliminate, his culture. Two from middle class backgrounds worked in business. They valued the existing link with Britain but were opposed to violence, either for its continuation or removal.

Everyone had agreed to commit themselves to an eight week trial period during which I had promised to introduce them to the Playback form. The one common bond from the outset was a love of theatre, as had all been previously involved in some form of amateur dramatics. One or two had met before through drama work, but there was no shared group background. Initially, a considerable amount of time was spent in establishing trust among the individuals through team games and trust exercises. A great deal of caution and restraint was evident during the early days which I had expected and knew had to be respected. It was apparent that Playback was placing demands on all of them "to open up" and they were experiencing the same sentiments of reluctance that I had once had to confront and overcome in New York, in order to become ready to share deeper and more personal perceptions.

Initially the stories that did emerge were of a somewhat light nature, but before long the, concealed attitudes arising from religious and political differences began to emerge. On one occasion, for example, an account of a Catholic funeral which contained ideas quite alien to the Protestant members of the group was related and reconstructed. Another story focusing on Orange (militant Protestant) marches, which have led to the riotous situations that have featured on world-wide television, presented empathy difficulties for the Catholic actors. The issue of identity could not be avoided as marches of this nature, and the hostility towards them, had led to widespread community violence relayed by television to a world wide audience. This violence became a part of our everyday living during the Summer months.

It now became obvious that in seeking to include issues presented by the long standing conflict, a great deal about the background, religious orientation and the political leanings of the participating individuals would be revealed. There has been a longstanding consensus in N Ireland that whenever Protestants and Catholics come together in groups, then issues which might give rise to the emergence of conflicting opinions are avoided in the interests of preserving harmony. So while discussions on the current affairs of any other part of the world can be conducted over coffee in a relaxed manner, matters relating to the local conflict are studiously avoided in case disagreements might emerge. It might be expected then that Playback would always have to be performed in a safe and intimate environment where a respect for conflicting

viewpoints has been established. It was only much later towards the end of the trial period, after the group members had accepted that all views merited understanding and respect, that deeper more personal insights and responses were shared.

Rather surprisingly, James aged 27, a worker in the retail sector, who initially had been one of the more resistant members of the group to the opening up process, became the instigator of a marked change in relationships between the members. He had related his feelings at his grandfather's funeral when he was six years of age and recalled the pain and bitterness expressed by his parents and other relatives at his grandfather's killing by the IRA. His father had told him never to trust Catholics as all of them were as suspect as those who had murdered his grandfather. It was the first time in his life to relate the incident publicly. The recreation in drama proved to be a very powerful experience for all of us and was instrumental in breaking down the reluctance to confronting the core issues of the N Ireland conflict that had been prevalent for so long..

Mary, a Catholic teacher, had been picked to play the role of James' father. Afterwards she expressed her feeling of guilt that a fellow Catholic could have carried out such an act, and expressed her revulsion at the extremes to which some were prepared to go in order to create an alternative political system. She also observed that the experience had enabled her to acquire an understanding about how prejudice in her own family had been passed down the generations. As a consequence, she felt that her own natural instincts about the current situation might merit re-examination. Michael, the other teacher who had voiced support for the on-going guerrilla action to change the existing political structure, felt the need, likewise, to question some of his own attitudes, given the pain one past incident, to which he had never considered expressing opposition previously, had inflicted on James and others who came from a section of the population holding similar views.

This one incident was a powerful moment for all of us. Those who had held prejudice, or even had never taken the time to reflect on the pain caused to others by the operation of violence in support of their own preferred political viewpoint, had clearly experienced a degree of empathy never anticipated heretofore. It could be said without fear of contradiction, that that evening of Playback had impacted on all our lives.

As it had been agreed that the bulk of the time at our disposal would be devoted to our own personal explorations in private, the group performed publicly on just a few occasions. One public performance merits mention, however, as it exerted quite a considerable impact on our Protestant colleagues. We had been invited to perform during a conference of Ireland's Traveling Women, who mostly Catholic, are referred to as Gypsies in other European countries. During the Second World War countless numbers of their group had ended up in the gas chambers as a result of being labeled by Hitler as inferior members of the human race because of their way of life and culture. One related a story of the discrimination she had suffered from the Protestant residents living in houses near to where a group of travelling families had been allowed to live by the local council. There they had been verbally abused by these residents, not only for their chosen way of life, but also for their particular form of the Catholic faith. Some

members of the Playback Team who were Protestant revealed later to the rest of the group that previously they had actually shared the prejudice against the travelling culture, and realized that this would have to be confronted as a result of witnessing the distress experienced by the teller as she recalled the particular incident and having actually played members of the family on the receiving end of the racist type abuse.

The group remained together for a year during which time several other heartrending stories were told and recreated. Relationships grew warmer over that period of time. I for one, learned a considerable amount about the Protestant culture and outlook and now consider that I have acquired a higher level of respect for their traditions. As we grew together we appreciated that Playback was providing us with a vehicle to acquire insights that may have been missing from our lives previously. However, the intensity of the work was taking its toll on the group. We were young and inexperienced to the Playback form. Some Members were wishing to experience other types of drama which did not draw so directly on personal sharing. Others who were in full-time occupations just wanted to rest. At times I was acutely aware of my own limitations at facilitating such personal sharing. I felt that I needed more guidance if I were to pursue this work further. It seemed appropriate to disband much to my regret.

Broadening the Context

I was invited to facilitate a day for students of a Masters Degree Level course in counseling. Most of the participants were social workers or community out-reach facilitators. Some belonged to organizations dealing with bereavement in N. Ireland, while others worked in prisons with both Catholic and Protestant offenders. The session progressed really smoothly as a great deal of trust existed already among the participants, and I anticipated that emerging stories would focus on the experiences of those who were damaged or ended in prison as a result of the N Ireland conflict. This was to be the case and it proved quite a powerful experience for all those involved. The course tutors were impressed with what they had observed and were very much in favour of including Playback in future courses .

In an Educational Setting

For six months I have been teaching classes in both Protestant and Catholic schools for 2 Education Boards. The scheme was organised so that I would work with the Protestant and Catholic classes individually and then bring them together for a shared experience at the end of the seventh and final session.

Initially, emphasis was placed on the exploration of identity, leading the children to communicate their personal experiences, to reflect on their past, explore the issues that were confronting them in the present, and to consider their futures. Each session was monitored by their Drama teachers who were unanimous in reporting that the sessions had proved beneficial to their pupils in that they had gained additional insights and experienced increased confidence through the work.

As planned, the final session brought the children from both religions together. We began with some fluid sculptures and stories being performed by the separate classes before integrating the performers. The children discussed and compared their experiences of school, weekends and holidays and although no reference was made to the political situation, the session proved to be a positive one for all involved. The children had taken the whole experience of Playback quite seriously and enjoyed meeting students of the same age from a different tradition and sharing backgrounds. While phone numbers were exchanged over orange juice at the end of the afternoon, a final evaluation meeting between the teachers and the education officers was held. Some of the teachers agreed that they would continue Playback Theatre sessions with their children as a form of open discussion and debate during English and drama classes in the future. The Education Officers were given access to the written work compiled by the pupils as a follow up to the sessions. They considered that the outcome had been a positive one.

Some Conclusions

There is no doubt that Playback provided opportunities for the participants to examine their own assumptions and consider the validity of those who held different views from them. Being present at dramatized recreation extended their awareness further. Frequently a spontaneous moment provided the most valuable learning experience. Being amateurs the time at the disposal of people was limited but nevertheless the group held 2 public performances.

It would seem appropriate to say that through my experience of working with groups in Northern Ireland Playback Theatre has a contribution to make in shifting entrenched prejudice among the people of Northern Ireland. The use of the playback form not only created an environment conducive to sharing stories of religious difference, but also gave each of us an opportunity to begin to appreciate and understand political views contrary to our own. Experiencing the power of playback as an actor, musician, audience member or conductor helped each of the group to understand and empathize with the teller and also to re-evaluate his/her own political belief.

Into the Future

I have always considered myself, primarily an artist not a mediator for peace. Having experienced working with these groups through the form, however, my interest in this type of work has grown considerably. I am currently involved in the early planning stages of integrating Playback Theatre into the proceedings of an international conference for peace and reconciliation which will take place in Belfast in October 1998. The purpose of the conference is to encourage the delegates to explore conflict resolution through a variety of media. It will be a new development in N Ireland. While the responsibility for the success of that particular session will weigh quite heavily on my shoulders in the days ahead, the certainty that Playback will achieve recognition as a

vehicle for increasing awareness will make the burden easy to bear. I just hope that as the event draws nearer I have enough confidence to sleep easily at night.

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