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# Playing Past the Troubles: Theatrical Expression in a Post-Conflict Society

Jayce Hafner  
*SIT Study Abroad*

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# Playing Past the Troubles: Theatrical Expression in a Post-Conflict Society

Jayce Hafner

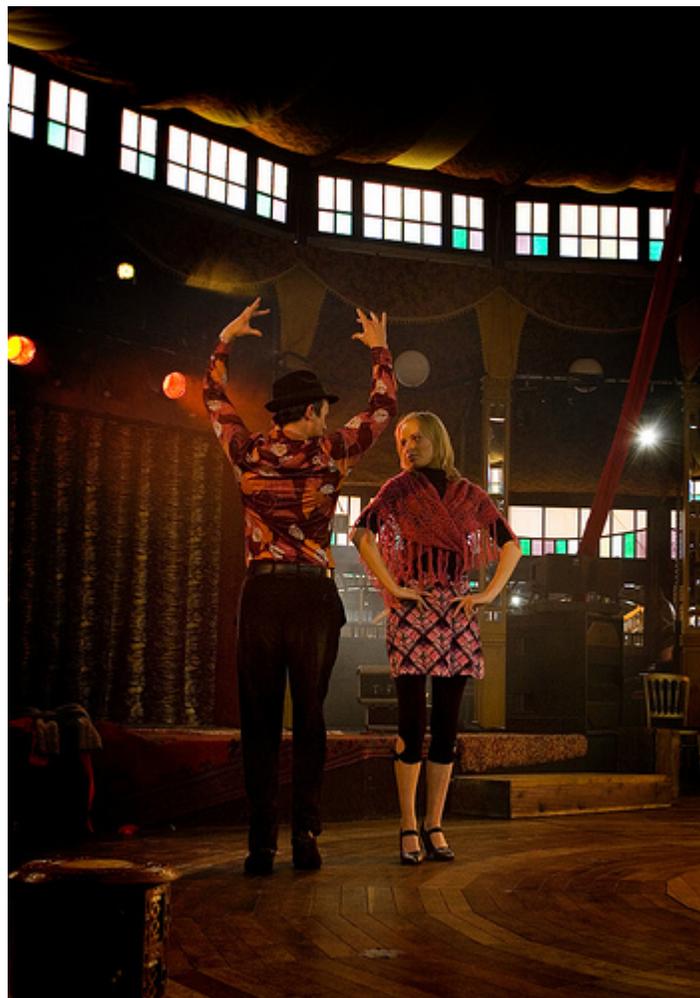
SIT IRELAND, Fall 2009

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### **Abstract**

This report is the result of a month-long study on theatrical expression in Northern Irish Communities. Data was obtained by way of qualitative methods using semi-informal interviews, observation, participant observation, and academic research. It is concluded that theatrical expression can contribute to building peace in Northern Ireland. Recommendations for potential future studies include comedic performance in a post-conflict society, and social development and the Belfast Community Circus.



**“Carnival” by Kabosh Theatre Company**

### **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank the directors, actors and community development workers who generously contributed their time and their insight to this study. Thanks to Aeven, Cara and my fellow students for their constant support and encouragement. I would like to thank Eamon Raftor and the folks at Glenree for helping me to be a part of the *Working with Victims of Violence through Drama Workshop*. I would also like to thank Rachel Craig for setting my feet in the right direction, and Elizabeth Welty for her unwavering encouragement, inspiration, and fine cuisine.



**“Sleep Eat Party” by Tinderbox Theatre Company**

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# Prologue

I lived for nights at the theatre. Growing up, I regularly accompanied my mother to musicals, ballets, operas, and plays; I remember putting on my fanciest dress and waiting with expectancy in the dark theatre for the performance to begin. I also loved acting in plays, and grew up performing with theatre organizations and troupes such as the Foolish Mortals, the Valley Playhouse, the Old Miche Theatre, and Governor's School for the Creative Arts. As I matured, I longed for theatre to be more than a means of expression and a medium of entertainment; I wanted to use theatre for activism, for inspiring people to make changes in their lives and communities. One experience that especially raised my awareness of art as a tool for social change was a summer program I attended that is now called Heifer Theater Project. I left this experience inspired to find new ways of melding social and political activism with theatrical expression.

In college, I am fully immersed in the political world; I study International Relations and am an active member of the Student Senate. Unfortunately, I no longer have the time or the energy to participate in theatre at my college. I have become slightly disillusioned with the conventional, political methods of addressing social issues, and feel there is a lack of art in my life. This study is an attempt to reconnect with my theatrical roots and to delve into a topic about which I am passionate. After a month of exploring theatre for social change, rather than feeling tired and exhausted with this subject, I am only inspired to continue studying this form of theatre. The possibilities of theatre are expansive and I believe that we have only begun to tap into the potential of this art form as a tool for positively impacting society. I hope this study will leave

you inspired to consider the potential of art as an agent for social change within your own community.

# Introduction

*“The stage is a unique, simultaneously empathetic and analytical cultural space presenting communities with the opportunity to question and define itself.”~Augusto Boal*

The IRA has been decommissioned, the Good Friday Agreement signed, a power-sharing government established in Stormont, yet Northern Ireland has yet to be at peace. A record number of ‘peace walls’ have been erected in Belfast since the Good Friday Agreement, and ninety-four percent of all educational systems and ninety-six percent of all social housing remain segregated (O’Baill; Ross). Sectarianism pervades Northern Irish politics, and there is an overwhelming sense of political apathy; as Karen McFarlane of Ballynafeigh Community Development Association admits, “A lot of people in Northern Ireland have become very disengaged from politics... [It is] very sectarian... But the fact is that we haven’t really had an Assembly that’s been able to impact on our lives to date. People just aren’t engaged with the political process” (McFarlane). The current leaders in the Northern Ireland Assembly (NIA), many of whom were once linked to paramilitaries, still struggle to negotiate with one another (Jennings). Meanwhile, the communities of Northern Ireland continue to suffer from polarization, sectarianism, and segregation. There is a continuous need in Northern Ireland for cross-community understanding and cooperation. The NIA has made some valiant efforts at cross-community development through financial aid and symbolic support, yet the NIA is only one of many forces positively developing communities and building peace (Northern Ireland Assembly). Sometimes it is difficult to see past the politics with a capital P and to examine less prominent, alternative factors in the peace process. These alternative influences are what

fascinated me from the beginning; I came to the North particularly interested in how art, theatrical expression in particular, can contribute to peace building.

Theatre has historically played a significant role in Irish and Northern Irish social movements. W. B. Yeats writes that, with the fall of Charles Parnell, “disillusioned Ireland turned from politics, to cultural nationalism”; the arts became a political tool as plays were used to rouse audiences to national action and to envision new freedoms and possibilities (Levitas, 2). The Easter Rising itself was dramaticized before it was enacted; Declan Kiberd, professor at University College Dublin, comments that “no previous Irish insurrection had been imagined in such avowedly theatrical terms” (McDonnell, 3). Yeats later reflected on the impact of his own work in relation to the rebellion: “Did that play of mine send out/Certain men the English shot?” (3). Theatre was a political platform and an inspiring force for the Irish nationalists.

Throughout the Troubles, numerous plays were staged depicting issues of the conflict, from Anne Devlin’s works on violence and politics, to Brian Friel’s cultural commentary in his play *Translations*, to performances staged by paramilitary prisoners in the H-blocks (Northern Ireland Troubles Archive; Foley, 20; Irish Playography). Throughout decades of violence and social unrest, theatre was a reliable source of entertainment and escape from the horrors of the Troubles. As playwright Dave Duggan comments, a good night out at the theatre was a “powerful contribution to peace building” (Duggan, 11). With the Northern Ireland peace process officially underway, theatre still has an important role to play. Drama Officer Imelda Foley writes:

When [playwright] Frank McGuinness intimates that the war on the streets may be over, he also reminds that the war in the heads will take much longer to settle. Gary Mitchell intimates that the Agreed truths and the Real truth may be two different and incompatible entities. There is still much to dramaticize. (Foley, 25)

Theatrical expression can help settle “the war in the heads” through cultivating understanding and raising awareness about the social and political truths of this post-conflict society.

The purpose of this study is to explore the positive impact of theatrical expression on communities in Northern Ireland. Because the effects of theatre on these communities are diverse, this is a broad topic to cover. To narrow this study, I decided to look at mainly small, independent theatre companies, practitioners, and organizations, and to concentrate on the information I gleaned from these entities, rather than focusing upon more prominent theatres and organizations. I also limited the subjects of my study to three general categories. These categories include **Theatre of the Oppressed** as articulated by Augusto Boal (I examined practitioners, performances, and organizations that use this form of theatre), **dramatic performance addressing pertinent social issues of Northern Irish society**, and the **Belfast Community Circus (BCC)**. It could be argued that the BCC does not fit into the realm of theatre; however, this is a study of ‘theatrical expression’ rather than strictly of drama. Because circus performance maintains theatrical elements, the BCC has been included in this study. This study is based mainly upon the information I gathered through visiting theatres, witnessing performances, speaking with theatre practitioners, actors and directors, and attending workshops and classes. My conclusions stem from my experiential learning as much as my academic research on this subject.

Through my exploration, I discerned three dimensions of theatrical expression in Northern Irish communities: **the empowerment of social and personal development, the formation of alternative spaces, and full participation and inclusion**. These are only three of many dimensions of Northern Irish theatre; other aspects include entertainment and professional training. However, due to the limited scope of this project, focusing on three aspects allowed me

to go in-depth in these areas, rather than attempting to broadly cover many themes. After an explanation of my methodology, I will further explore each of the three dimensions in the next section of this paper. Then, using these three themes, I will begin to analyze how theatrical expression impacts Northern Irish society.

# Methodology

When I embarked upon this project, I envisioned it as an odyssey, an exploration of diverse forms of theatre for social change. Rather than studying one specific organization, I decided instead to explore different mediums of theatrical expression. From this comprehensive view, I hoped to discover a few overarching themes which pertained to all the mediums that I studied. I often tend to see the forest before the trees, and I assumed my broad approach would lend some insight that could be lost in a detailed exploration of a single source. As my project progressed, I honed my case studies into three types of theatrical engagement: **Theatre of the Oppressed** as articulated by Augusto Boal, **dramatic performance addressing pertinent social issues of Northern Irish society**, and the **Belfast Community Circus**.

My hope at the beginning of this study was to immerse myself in the theatrical world; I wanted to speak directly with actors, directors, and playwrights, and to see as much theatre as possible. I was not disappointed; I saw multiple performances and spent long hours in offices, restaurants, coffee shops and pubs speaking with directors and actors. One source led to another, and by the end of my three weeks in Northern Ireland, I felt overwhelmed by the amount of information at my fingertips. This was especially a relief because I had few connections at the beginning of my study.

I began my exploration knowing very little about what sort of theatre existed in Northern Ireland, but assumed that due to the troubled history of the region, some theatrical companies and organizations surely would use their work to address themes of social relevance. I was pleasantly surprised by the abundance of performing arts organizations and theatre companies that addressed these pertinent issues; I was even more surprised that so many theatre companies have established outreach programs to compliment their theatrical performances. As Matt Jennings said, in order to receive government funding, theatre companies have to prove that they are doing a service to the community. Thus, in many theatre companies, there is an overwhelming focus on public outreach (Jennings).

## *Location*

The study took place in Belfast, Derry and at the Glencree Centre for Peace and Reconciliation in the Republic of Ireland. These sites offered drastically different backdrops for this study. Belfast is a transforming urban centre, a contender for the European City of Culture in 2008, and boasts a burgeoning arts scene in the Cathedral Quarter (Duckworth). My perception of Belfast is that of a city pulling itself up by its bootstraps from the wreckage and violence of

the past. Derry is also slowly emerging from the poverty and sectarianism of the past few decades, although it seemed lacking in the momentum, promise and vigor of Belfast. Perhaps this impression is due to the smaller size of the town, which glaringly elucidates Derry's residential segregation; perhaps it is the eerie emptiness and impoverishment I sense while walking through the Bogside. Derry seems more grounded in the past, with ghosts of the Troubles still lingering on street corners and in dark rooms in pubs. My weekend at the Glencree Centre for Peace and Reconciliation offered a respite from the urban tension of the North, and gave me time and space to reflect upon this study. Had I not been so limited in time, I also would have liked to spend a week in a border area, such as South Armagh. However, since I only had a month to complete this study, I chose to stay within the North's largest cities in order to take advantage of the most opportunities and resources. I will now describe the methods I used to collect this information.

### *Participant Observation*

I observed and participated directly in a Theatre of the Oppressed workshop, a circus school class, and a conference on queer performance. Participant observation offered me the opportunity to become directly immersed in the action at hand, while at the same time giving me space to reflect upon and observe the subject matter when necessary.

#### **Working with Victims of Violence through Drama Workshop**

This workshop, led by Raul Araujo, was a weekend-long seminar which explored the use of Theatre of the Oppressed techniques on victims of violence. Approximately fifteen people participated; these participants included educators, actors, community development workers and mediators. We discussed and explored the concept of violence, participated in Augusto Boal's trust-building games, learned and experienced the practice of forum theatre and created our own six-hour Theatre of the Oppressed workshop. This seminar offered a direct immersion in Boal's techniques as practiced by Araujo in Belfast, gave helpful and relevant background information on forum theatre, and prepared me to lead a Theatre of the Oppressed workshop on my own.

#### **Adult Circus Class at the Belfast Community Circus**

The Belfast Community Circus is an organization that teaches circus skills to youth and adults and offers them the chance to perform at regular intervals throughout the year. The mission of the circus is to "*Transform lives and communities through the power of circus arts and street theatre*" (The Belfast Circus). The circus regularly offers workshops and trains individuals from socioeconomically diverse communities in Belfast. I attended an adult circus class to understand what it's like to participate directly in the circus experience.

### **Performing Queer Subjunctives Conference at Queens University**

This conference explored the political implications of queer performance. The section of the conference that I attended included panels led by professors from Trinity College and Queens University who gave talks on Oscar Wilde, gay rights parades, and the effects of queer performance on political systems and social movements. While the material I gleaned from this conference did not directly contribute to my study, it ultimately provided me with a unique perspective on performance and social change.

## ***Observation***

I directly observed theatrical performances and a youth class at the Belfast Community Circus. Observation allowed me the distance and time to observe my subject completely without becoming distracted through directly engaging with it. Listed below are events that I had the opportunity to observe, provided in the order in which I encountered them.

### **Kreative Konnectionz Production of *Summer Detention***

This performance, based on John Hughes's *The Breakfast Club*, addressed the issues of prejudice and the faults of the education system. Although the material did not directly contribute to my study, it was an example of theatre with a social message, and my first experience of theatrical performance in Northern Ireland.

### **Tinderbox Theatre Company's Production of *Sleep Eat Party***

I saw this production at the Old Museum Arts Centre in Belfast, and had the opportunity to go out with the cast, crew and playwright after the show. *Sleep Eat Party* is based on interviews with young men and women across Northern Ireland and addresses social issues faced by the youth of today.

### **Theatre of Witness's Production of *We Carried Your Secrets***

I saw this production at the Waterside Theatre in Derry. *We Carried Your Secrets* is produced by The Derry Playhouse and presented by amateur actors who relay their personal stories of experiencing the Troubles and how the legacy of the violence continues to affect them. Described as a meeting point between art and social justice, this production explores questions such as "What is the legacy [we] have been left? How do [we] carve a future in a land divided by conflict?" (Theatre of Witness).

### **The Belfast Community Circus School Youth Session**

I had the opportunity to observe an hour of the BCC's youth class, as the children practiced juggling, cycling, trapeze and other acts in preparation for their upcoming Christmas performance. I witnessed firsthand the trust, the dedication and enthusiasm these youth shared in their work.

## *Interviews*

I interviewed community workers, mediators, directors, playwrights and actors. I recorded many of these interviews on a tape recorder, and for others I jotted down notes. I generally determined whether to use a recorder or to take notes based on the nature of the interview. If I met my interviewee in a coffee shop or other public place, I refrained from using a tape recorder; however, if we met in an office or other private space, I often used the tape recorder. While tape recording allowed me to catch the entirety of the interview without having to furiously jot down notes, it also had the potential make the interviewee self-conscious. In the same way, while note-taking was a less thorough form of documenting an interview, I noticed that it generally helped to put the interviewee more at ease. The following is a list of individuals with whom I conducted semi-formal interviews, listed in the order in which I encountered them.

### **Sean O'Baoill of Mediation Northern Ireland**

O'Baoill is a licensed mediator who works for Mediation Northern Ireland, a mediation organization in Belfast. He has been practicing mediation for over two decades and uses Augusto Boal's techniques in his work with ex-combatants. O'Baoill gave me a new perspective on how Theatre of the Oppressed can be used to foster understanding among ex-combatants and to build peace.

### **Karen McFarlane of Ballynafeigh Community Development Association's International Social Theatre Lab**

Ballynafeigh Community Development Association (BCDA) was established to bring together different Protestant and Catholic communities in Belfast. The International Social Theatre Lab is a joint partnership between BCDA and the professional theatre troupe, Partisan Productions. The Lab uses the techniques of Augusto Boal to engage diverse Belfast communities in theatre performances about relevant social issues. McFarlane heads the Social Theatre Lab and runs a

regular Art and Conflict course with Raul Araujo in Belfast. She told me about how Theatre of the Oppressed techniques could be applied specifically to communities in Belfast.

### **Raul Araujo**

Araujo is a practitioner of Augusto Boal's Theatre of The Oppressed techniques and has trained with Boal in Brazil. He runs workshops (such as the *Working with Victims of Violence through Drama* workshop at Glenree), teaches an Art and Conflict course in Belfast, and continues to use Boal's techniques in Northern Irish communities. Raul provided me with a Theatre of the Oppressed practitioner's point of view, and gave insight into the process of using Boal's techniques to inspire activism.

### **Paula McFetridge of Kabosh Theatre Company**

Former director of the Lyric Theatre in Belfast, McFetridge has been involved in a number of independent theatre productions, many of which address social issues. She is now Artistic Director of Kabosh Theatre Company, an independent company that uses site-specific theatre and narrative to engage audiences with social and political issues relevant to Northern Ireland. McFetridge provided me with stories and insights into the process of creating productions with a social message, and the effects of these performances upon audiences.

### **Will Chamberlain of the Belfast Community Circus**

Chamberlain, director of the Belfast Community Circus, gave a director's perspective on the work of the BCC. Chamberlain provided helpful information about the BCC's community outreach, and gave anecdotes to illustrate the success of the BCC in developing Belfast communities.

### **Mike Moloney of the Prison Arts Foundation**

Moloney is a founder of the Belfast Community Circus and an administrator at the Prison Arts Foundation, an organization that provides forums for artistic expression in the prison system of Northern Ireland. Moloney shared his personal journey of using different theatrical forms to engage youth and to develop communities in Belfast.

### **Stephen Beggs of Bruiser Theatre Company**

Beggs is a freelance actor and Company Manager of Bruiser Theatre Company, a theatre troupe known to address political issues in its productions. Beggs has also done work with cross-community groups at the Corrymeela Community retreat centre. Although this interview did not directly contribute to this study, Beggs gave me a freelancer actor's perspective on community development.

### **James King**

King is a retired professor, community development worker and street performer who currently lives in Derry. King uses his drama training to build relationships between diverse communities and to raise awareness about social issues through his performances.

### **Matt Jennings**

Jennings is a PhD. candidate who studied under James King and is currently writing a thesis on community theatre in Northern Ireland. Jennings provided a fascinating perspective on the politics of community theatre.

### **Pauline Ross of the Derry Playhouse**

Ross is the founder of the Derry Playhouse, a performance space and centre for cross-community development through the creative arts. Ross told me about how theatrical expression can help to form cross-community relationships and foster self-esteem in youth, and provided background information on the Playhouse's Theatre of Witness program.

## *Written Sources*

I also used a number of print and electronic sources in my paper which include:

### **Theatre of the Oppressed by Augusto Boal**

This book explores the possibilities of theatre as a tool for social change and outlines techniques (such as forum theatre and legislative theatre) that use theatre to prepare individuals to be social and political activists. I read this book from cover to cover as a foundational piece in my study of Theatre of the Oppressed and to prepare for my weekend seminar at Glencree.

### **Plays in a Peace Process by Dave Duggan**

Plays in a Peace Process is a collection of short plays written to address social and political themes pertinent to contemporary Northern Ireland. Duggan's introduction to his book was significant to this study because it explored the notion of theatre as an agent for peace. Duggan is a resident of Derry and has had his work staged at the Derry Playhouse.

### **Theatre and the Troubles: Theatre, Resistance, and Liberation in Ireland by Bill McDonnell**

This work gives an account of theatre in Northern Ireland during and after the Troubles, and provides case studies of theatre companies which addressed the Troubles in their work. This book lent insight into modern Northern Irish theatre in the light of past theatrical endeavors.

### **The Theatre of Nation: Irish Drama and Cultural Nationalism 1890-2002 by Ben Levitas**

While most of the contents of this book did not apply directly to my study, this work still provided a useful historical perspective on how theatre has been used in Irish nationalist and political movements. This information helped to contextualize present day Northern Irish theatre in a legacy of drama and conflict.

### **Northern Ireland Troubles Archive**

This online research centre, created by the Northern Ireland Arts Council, gives examples of theatrical works written to address issues of conflict, inequality and violence during the Troubles. This database provided me with a multitude of case studies of theatre with a social and political message.

### **Drama and the Troubles by Imelda Foley**

This essay was distributed by the Northern Ireland Arts Council, and gave the most comprehensive historical perspective on how theatre was used during the Troubles. This gave my research a historical backdrop, and lent insight into the origins and evolution of theatre companies such as Tinderbox and Kabosh.

### **When the Circus Came to Town ed. By Laura Haydon**

Published by the Belfast Community Circus, this book tells the story of the BCC. When the Circus Came to Town is written in narrative form and recounted from the perspective of the BCC's founding members and directors.

### **Feedback to the Performance of *We Carried Your Secrets***

This document is a written compilation of audience responses to the production *We Carried Your Secrets*. Through documentation of personal reactions, this compilation offered me the most tangible evidence of how theatre can positively impact an audience.

## *Obstacles*

The greatest obstacle that I faced in this study was a limited amount of time in which to conduct my work. I wanted to achieve a comprehensive view of my topic by visiting many locations where organizations were using theatre as a tool for social change, yet found myself struggling to make the most of the numerous opportunities in Belfast and in Derry. Even in these cities, I did not have the time to meet all the people and visit all the organizations that I would have liked to explore. To make the most of my limited time, I scheduled my days carefully, filling them with research, writing and interviews.

The next obstacle was the amount of travel that I was required to undertake; I rode up and down the island from Dublin to Belfast, back to Dublin, back to Belfast, up to Derry, and then back to Dublin again. My travel time on the bus took up a great deal of my schedule and I lost full days moving from one place to another. However, I tried to read on the bus and to carefully schedule days when I was not traveling to make up for lost time on the road. Another obstacle I faced is a lack of empirical data regarding the effects of theatre on audiences in Northern Ireland; had I had the time and the resources, I would have liked to survey the audiences of *Sleep Eat Party* or one of BCDA's forum theatre pieces. Fortunately, I did receive a document summarizing feedback to *We Carried Your Secrets*, which has proven to be very helpful. My lack of connections beforehand could have been a setback, but I was lucky to meet a number of people more than willing to talk with me and to point me in the direction of future leads.

It is important to keep in mind that many of the sources contributing to this study are involved or associated with a theatrical organization, and thus are likely to give a generally positive perspective about their organization and their work. Had I not been so limited for time, I

would have liked to interview politicians or community development workers who prefer to use non-theatrical methods in their work. This could have provided a broader and more inclusive perspective on the effects of theatrical expression in communities. Thus, this study cannot be viewed as comprehensive, and many of the sources in this study may have a bias.

## **Part I: Theatrical Expression as an Empowering Agent**

*“Forum theater, as well as these other forms of a people’s theatre, instead of taking something away from the spectator, evoke in him a desire to practice in reality the act he has rehearsed in the theatre. The practice of these theatrical forms creates a sort of uneasy sense of incompleteness that seeks fulfillment through real action.” ~Augusto Boal “Theatre of the Oppressed”*

Playwright John McGrath writes that after witnessing a theatrical performance, “We come out feeling exhilarated: we are more alive for seeing it, more aware of the possibilities of the human race, more fully human ourselves” (Duggan, 12). McGrath argues that while theatre can be a source of entertainment, it also has the power to remind us of our human potential, and what

we are collectively capable achieving. Theatre can also equip us with the tools we need to achieve these possibilities, empowering community and personal development. In this section, I will explore four forms of development inspired by theatrical expression. These forms include worldview shifts, direct activism, the development of cross-community relationships and self-esteem building.

### *Shifting Worldviews*

When we attend a theatrical performance, our tiny universe is opened to another's world. And what are the effects of this encounter? No doubt, we are exposed to new ideas, situations, concepts and life choices presented to us in the performance; through this exposure, our minds have the potential to be opened, and our worldviews changed. In Tinderbox Theatre Company's production of *Sleep Eat Party*, the audience was presented with the disillusioned world of Irish youth. Set on a jungle-gym of pipelines and wire, this powerful little production highlighted some of the major problems facing the Northern Irish youth of today. Through dramatic representations, the production addressed issues such as drugs, pregnancy, suicide, self-esteem, alcohol, relationships, and transgender discrimination. The script was based on interviews with young men and women across Northern Ireland, and seventy-five percent of the play's script was copied verbatim from this oral documentation. The production's poignant narratives, told from an actor center stage under a spotlight or hanging upside down from the jungle gym, addressed the audience in a conversational manner (Gorman).

The play highlighted the failure of Northern Irish society to properly address youth issues by portraying parents who withheld support from their son (ultimately leading to the suicide of the young man), gay intolerance, and the failures of drug rehabilitation centers. The commonly held

prejudices toward youth in Northern Ireland were exposed and criticized through farcical representation of these negative viewpoints (Gorman). This approach was conducive to helping us in the audience examine our own perceptions and become more sympathetic to young people. Personally, I left the theatre with an enlightened and compassionate perspective toward these disenfranchised youth.

Paula McFetridge of Kabosh Theatre Company described in conversation another production that challenged prejudices and opened minds. In October 2009, Kabosh performed *This Is What We Sang*, a play about Belfast's Jewish community. In accordance with Kabosh's site-specific approach, the production was set in a synagogue in East Belfast. Like *Sleep Eat Party*, this play was based on interviews, this time with Belfast Jews. Because the Jewish population of Belfast is rapidly shrinking, McFetridge envisioned the play as a celebration of Jewish heritage, and an appreciation of this unique cultural legacy in Belfast. The play elucidated some of the traditions and eccentricities of the Jewish culture which were foreign to much of mainstream Belfast. McFetridge said that the production challenged people's biases toward the Jewish community, opened dialogue about Judaism between audience members and helped to clarify misconceptions. "All of those things you couldn't have quantified" she said. "It is a rare opportunity when you feel you are making a difference" (McFetridge).

After Theatre of Witness's performance of *We Carried Your Secrets*, audience members gave tangible feedback on the affects of the play. The play commenced in darkness; somewhere from stage left a woman's voice began to sing a sad, slow melody. The vocalist stepped to centre stage and introduced herself as Victoria, the daughter of a Catholic school teacher and an RUC officer. "What DO you tell a child?" She asked. "When are you old enough to be told the truth? When do you have a story?" One by one, six actors came forward and introduced themselves; all were

amateur actors with a personal story of violence and sectarianism. James, an ex-UVF member said “During my teen years you could say that I fell into the wrong hands. It’s a part of my life I’ve tried to bury and forget. But like thousands of ex-combatants walking the streets, it never really goes away. It’s a bag of shame I carry around.” Another young man was introduced as Chris, a 21-year-old university graduate. “I am part of the ripple effect” he said. “Sectarian prejudice, alcohol, drugs and fighting was my way of life.” As the play progressed, every actor told their story: each narrative was personal, powerful and raw (*We Carried Your Secrets*). After each performance, audience members were asked to give written feedback on the play. The responses include:

*“It was a very powerful production. Definitely gave me cause to think”*

*“I am a sixteen year old girl from a protestant background. I have always had a knowledge of “Bloody Sunday” and paramilitaries but to me really they meant nothing. I think this was because I hadn’t experienced them or really didn’t want to know about paramilitaries/wars in depth. But, tonight really made me open my eyes and understand what a tough world it is.”*

*“I really enjoyed the play, it made me think a lot about all the awful things that have happened in the past and what bad things people have done to each other all over religion and politics.”*

*“This experience truly opened up the minds of myself and [my] two nieces. It was a truly emotional experience. We were absorbed from the beginning.”*

*“I left tonight’s performance with my eyes wide open. As a child moving to Northern Ireland I had my mother’s side of the Troubles if any...Small things started to register with me but didn’t make a massive impact. Now 25 I know the ins and outs but nothing of the other side. Tonight gave me that. Thank you so much for giving me a new side to understand.”*

*“Tonight I have been helped to learn that unconditional love is not for one side, it’s real when I search to understand those who disagree with me or I them. This stirred up so much, thank you for making it happen and leading by example”*

*“We can’t let our grand-children and their children grow up in what we did. It has to be **HISTORY!** Great eye opener! Well done!” (Feedback to Performance of *We Carried Your Secrets*).*

To many who witnessed the play, *We Carried Your Secrets* was truly an eye opening and worldview changing experience. While it lacked the fast-paced narrative and professional acting of *Sleep Eat Party*, I found this production's personal story-telling equally powerful. Both productions explored ideas that lack acknowledgement in mainstream society. Pauline Ross of the Derry Playhouse echoes John McGrath in her belief that the arts "have the magical ability to raise us up better than what we are...raise our humanity, our consciousness, our awareness, and hopefully give empathetic emotions that we need to see how the other sees" (Ross). Theatre can expand our biases, grant us new understanding and empathy, and transform our view of the world.

### *Empowering Activism*

It is evident that theatrical expression can change our worldviews, but can it change the very way we live? Do the possibilities of theatre end with opening our minds, or can theatre be used to inspire new actions? Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed forum theatre techniques, as practiced by Raul Araujo and Karen McFarlane of BCDA in Belfast, allow audience members to act out and discuss potential solutions to political and social problems in their society. Boal writes that in forum theatre,

The spectator delegates no power to the character (or actor) either to act or to think in his place; on the contrary, he himself assumes the protagonic role, changes the dramatic action, tries out solutions, discusses plans for change –in short, trains himself for real action (Boal, 98).

Through Boal's forum theatre techniques, audience members are presented with a problem on stage, and then asked to solve the problem. If an audience member suggests a solution, this person is called up to the stage to play the role of the catalyst acting out the new course of action. Through conceiving and testing solutions to pertinent social problems, audience members are given helpful skills and knowledge to implement these tactics in their own society (Araujo, 2009). We explored these forum theatre techniques at the Working with Victims of Violence through Drama workshop with Raul Araujo at Glencree.

The exercise at this workshop that most effectively illustrated how theatre can train us for social activism is called Forward March. In this exercise, four participants played four marchers who loved to step together in time, and who attacked or converted anyone who walked to a different beat. Another participant played the role of a dancer who loved to waltz gleefully next to the marchers. Araujo challenged us to conceive and test different scenarios to determine what the waltzer could do to continue dancing without being oppressed by the marchers. In the first scenario, when the waltzer danced in front of the marchers, the marchers beat the waltzer down and then forced him to convert to their march. In the second scenario, the waltzer refused to conform and was immediately beaten to death by the marchers. Next, the waltzer tried to protest civilly, but was attacked by the marchers again. The final and most effective solution was for the waltzer to recruit audience members to dance with him, disrupting and overpowering the marchers (Araujo, 2009).

The suggestions for this exercise came from the actors and the audience. When a participant suggested a new action for the waltzer, he or she would play the role of the dancer onstage to determine if the suggestion was effective. This exercise helped us explore the different ways we can stand up to conformity and authority. Raul told us that Boal's exercises help us realize that

violence, rather than being randomly inflicted, can be a part of a societal system (Araujo, 2009). With this realization, we can use theatre to test ways of transforming the violence, and we are empowered to take ‘real action’ in our communities to make positive social changes. As Araujo said (quoting Boal), “Drama [is] a tool for change, for liberation” (Araujo, 2009). In short, drama can train us to be social activists.

### *Cross-Community Cooperation*

Theatre can positively impact audiences by changing world views and inspiring individuals to take action in their own communities. But what about those who are not in the audience? Can theatrical expression positively affect the performers too? Through exploring the work of the Belfast Community Circus and the Derry Playhouse, I discerned some of the positive effects of participating in theatrical expression. One of these effects is the creation of cross-community relationships, and the Belfast Community Circus (BCC) is the perfect example of an organization that uses the performing arts to form these ties. I witnessed this firsthand during a Saturday youth session at the BCC headquarters. Walking into a large gym in downtown Belfast, I found myself surrounded by children busily spinning diablos, practicing trapeze moves on a high ring, juggling, and playing tag on unicycles. From the children’s giggling and enthusiasm, it was evident that the circus arts were play to the children as much as they were work. Many of the acts required one child to spot, hold or support another child, and it was obvious that for these feats to be successful, the children had to put a great deal of trust in one another.

Later that afternoon, Will Chamberlain, the director of the BCC, spoke with me about the power of the circus as a tool for community development. Chamberlain said that if a Protestant child looks down from the top of a human pyramid and sees he is being supported by seven

Catholic children, the Protestant is much less likely to judge or snub the Catholics. Circus exercises can inherently build trust and develop relationships between children from different communities. Because the primary ethos of the circus arts is based on cooperation rather than competition, circus-related activities foster cross-community cooperation. The process of fostering confidence and cross-community relationships in children is more important than the artistic end result, Chamberlain said (Chamberlain).

The Derry Playhouse also cultivates cross-community relationships. Pauline Ross, founder and director of the Derry Playhouse, told me that the Playhouse works with several hundred youth from interface areas in the city. Through the Playhouse's outreach programs, young people have the opportunity to discover their shared Northern Irish culture through visual, media, theatrical and dance arts. Ross said

Take out of the equation...their religious divide, [and you still have] the segregated housing system that they grew up in. Ninety-six percent of our social housing is segregated. Ninety-four percent of our education system is segregated... these young people would never get to meet each other. It's only through having a neutral building and the work of creativity and the arts that we can, in confidence, bring them together in safety. (Ross)

The Derry Playhouse is strategically situated within the walled section of Derry (which is neutral territory) so that it remains unassociated with a Catholic or a Protestant community. The residential youth work that the Playhouse offers is intentionally balanced between Catholics and Protestants. "A safe environment and safe spaces is pivotal to do this work. And once you get [the children] together they immediately see their similarities, their commonalities..." Ross said. While exploring their common culture through artistic mediums, these youth can also earn the equivalent of GCSE's, the accreditation awarded by the National Curriculum of the Education Act of Ireland (Ross). Ross stated that the youth "may have left school at fifteen...but through

creativity and the arts, they're receiving qualifications equivalent to, if they had stayed in school, what they would have [received]" (Ross).

The Playhouse's Northern Ireland Theatre of Witness Program has been especially successful in establishing cross-community relationships. Teya Sepinuk, founder of Theatre of Witness, received a grant from Swarthmore College to travel to Northern Ireland to direct the production *We Carried Your Secrets*. The final result of the creative experience was the performance; the process of cast-bonding and story-sharing began months earlier. The cast is composed of Catholics and Protestants, an RUC officer, an ex-UDA member an ex-IRA member, and a young man, Fionnbharr, whose father was shot by a UVF gunman (*We Carried Your Secrets*). Before the experience, Fionnbharr thought he could never stand to be in the same room with an RUC officer. Now he is friends with not only the policeman, but also with the rest of the cast (Ross). Ross said "You have people on that stage who have become very close friends. There is a bond that nobody could break... their stories are so different, but their pain...is obviously the same..." (Ross). Through theatrical expression and the performing arts, both the Derry Playhouse and the BCC bring individuals together to form enduring friendships in a divided society.

#### *Cultivating Personal Self-Esteem*

The BCC and the Derry Playhouse not only create cross-community relationships, but also foster a sense of self-worth in youth. Chamberlain told me that the BCC works with many of the youth who are considered "bad lads" who have been excluded from the public education system. The BCC welcomes these young men, teaches them circus skills, and offers them opportunities to perform in Belfast parades. The teenagers dress up in costume, walk down the streets of Belfast on stilts, and are cheered on by their community. Chamberlain said that this provides

them with the recognition that they can positively contribute to their society. “The validation you get from the applause of a stranger is really hard to beat” he said (Chamberlain).

The circus can also encourage positive self-esteem in children with learning disabilities. Some theorists believe that juggling can help with dyslexia, and through honing circus skills, kids with ADD and ADHD can improve their concentration. Healthcare professionals in Belfast now recommend that learning-disabled children attend the circus school to help with their challenges. After learning and excelling at circus skills, youth find the positive reinforcement they receive a helpful counterpart to their low self-esteem at school (Chamberlain).

The Derry Playhouse also encourages a positive self-image in youth. Ross described the gradual process of fostering self-esteem in the young people who participate in the Playhouse’s outreach programs:

And subtly, all of [our work] is building in [them] self esteem...self worth, a confidence in how they talk. You can see body language changing. [The kids] could be walking in here with shoulders rounded and hoods up...and through the months you see more squared shoulders, more open space...how it happens we don’t know. It’s the magic of the arts, and their own creativity...because they’re discovering deep down that they haven’t failed...this program is massaging...their imagination, their creativity. (Ross)

The success of the Playhouse’s work isn’t always immediately visible, but progress is evident over time. Ross fervently believes in the power of the arts in empowering teenagers and instilling in them a positive sense of self-worth. This personal development begins with the process of self expression and engagement with ideas through a creative process:

People say money makes the world go round. It’s not money, it is ideas. It’s through ideas that the enterprise and the entrepreneur comes. Ideas become things, become products. Working with young people’s imaginations and creativity [shows] them other horizons, their own potential, and that it has to start inside their own heads. And self-belief is where it starts. (Ross)

Both the Belfast Community Circus and the Derry Playhouse empower community and personal development through their outreach programs. Workshops, performances and classes

bring people from different communities together in an atmosphere of cooperation. As these organizations are encouraging cross-community bonds, they are also fostering a sense of self-worth in individuals. Both the Belfast Community Circus and the Derry Playhouse develop self-esteem and cross-community relationships by cultivating collaboration and encouraging youth to express themselves through the performing arts.

### *Conclusion*

While the theatrical organizations and mediums I explored in this section are diverse, each form empowers community and personal development. Performances such as *Sleep Eat Party*, *Convictions*, and *We Carried Your Secrets*, expose the audience to new points of view, opening their minds to fresh possibilities and encouraging in them a sense of empathy and understanding. Augusto Boal's forum theatre techniques, as practiced in Northern Ireland by Raul Araujo, equip audience members with tools of social activism, preparing them to make positive political and social changes within their community. The BCC and the Derry Playhouse use theatrical expression to develop self-esteem and cross-community relationships in and among participants and performers. Whether participating in a production such as *We Carried Your Secrets*, a theatre workshop at the Derry Playhouse, or an upcoming circus show, individuals are empowered to be positive role models and cross-community ambassadors. The diverse mediums of theatrical expression I have explored in this section all encourage personal and community development by fostering understanding, activism and cooperation within Northern Irish communities.

## **Part II: Theatrical Expression and the Formation of an Alternative Space**

*“Art does so many things that are absolutely essential for a sane community. It reflects, to allow other people to reflect...different perspectives, different opinions, different views. It’s escapism...and that’s absolutely essential for people in any kind of society...the ability to escape into another world, maybe a world you’re never going to be able to experience in real life. It opens the mind to all sorts of possibilities. And without those possibilities, what kind of sustainable community can you have...without dreams or wishes or values? There has been art since civilization began...I think it’s just part of our nature” ~Karen McFarlane of Ballynafeigh Community Development Association.*

Karen McFarlane describes art as a form of escapism; through watching or performing in a theatrical production, we escape from our daily lives into a place set apart for us to create, to share and to wonder. The second aspect of theatrical expression that I will explore is the concept of this alternative space. The space can be an alternative site for troubled youth, a place apart to recognize and address difficult issues, and a forum where people can share their opinions, ideas and stories. The theatre can be a political platform, a thought stimulator or a sounding board. For many, it may be the one place where they can express themselves freely. Regardless of how theatre is used, it creates space for possibility.

### *Juggling Alternatives*

The Belfast Community Circus has always been a place where troubled youth can find a safe haven and an alternative to destructive behavior. Mike Moloney, founder of the BCC, understood the power of circus arts to engage the youth from different communities through presenting them with an alternative to risk taking behavior, such as joyriding and paramilitary activity (Chamberlain). Moloney was commissioned by the Arts Council of Northern Ireland to initiate a drama program in the Short Strand area, a small Belfast working-class neighborhood. The program met with limited success; during sessions, Saracen vehicles would drive through the neighborhood and the teenagers would scramble out of the theatre session to hurl bottles at the drivers (Moloney). The youth found this dramatic daily ritual much more entertaining than engaging in formal theatre exercises. Moloney realized that straight theatre just wasn't "edgy" enough for these youth. He began to look for other options. "I was a teacher by trade" he said. "Community drama [is] only one of the tools in the tool box that [I] carry around"(Moloney).

Moloney and his colleague Donal McKendry initiated a circus arts program in the Short Strand area for young people. “We decided to go down the circus route”, said Moloney, “which was...more exciting. A little more of that challenge mechanism for [the youth]” (Moloney). To the young people, the circus had more bravado and street credibility than theatre, and they quickly embraced the circus arts. It was, as Will Chamberlain says, a “back door approach” to theatre and the arts (Chamberlain). Moloney began with the simplest of props: Coca-Cola bottles to juggle and beer kegs to balance upon (Hayden, 10). Word spread quickly, and eventually Moloney’s program expanded to support hundreds of children. The circus provided a safe and creative space in which children were supported and encouraged to share their ideas and to express themselves freely (Moloney). This neutral and supportive space continues to allow youth to be accepted for who they are regardless of their socioeconomic background or religious heritage.

### *Looking the Elephant in the Eye*

Theatrical expression also provides a space to confront critical social and political issues that often go unaddressed in everyday life. Playwright Dave Duggan describes this as recognizing the elephant in the room. At the Indian Culture Centre in Belfast, there is a representation of Ganesh, the Hindu elephant god of arts and sciences and the remover of obstacles. Duggan describes the opening night of one of his plays at the Centre:

The elephant in the room refers to the problems that cannot be faced, that cannot be spoken about: sectarianism, cultural stand-offs, the impact of violence by the state or by paramilitaries, collusion by police officers with paramilitaries, the search for truth. So many elephants in so many rooms. The play starts. A political ex-prisoner meets the husband of a woman she blew up. The audience, drawn from unionist and nationalist communities, watch intently, under the benevolent gaze of Ganesh, as obstacles to discussion and engagement between a victim and perpetrator of violence are removed –as peace is built. (Duggan, 8)

As the spectators are drawn into the story, they come face to face with the same issues that the characters in the play are confronting. Through watching a performance, the audience is given the opportunity to face, to consider and to discuss the problems that often go unspoken or unrecognized in their everyday lives. Here in the theater, audience members are safe to consider these difficult issues, and are encouraged to reflect on these themes.

Tinderbox Theatre Company's production of *Convictions* explored issues that often went unaddressed in everyday Belfast life. The play was staged in the year 2000 in Belfast, "A city", as Paula McFetridge described it, "on the cusp of peace." McFetridge directed the performance for Tinderbox. "As artists we didn't know what we were aspiring to do" she said. "We wanted to create something that would challenge audiences" (McFetridge). And challenge they did. The play was set in the Crumlin Road Courthouse and addressed the notion of judgment, of Belfast's place in a post-conflict society and of the future of the city. People who came to see the production were divided by gender into groups of twenty, and ushered into different rooms of the courthouse to watch theatrical vignettes about justice, judgment and the future of Belfast. McFetridge said that the greatest measure of the success of *Convictions* was that not only theatre buffs and tourists came, but that ordinary Belfast residents attended the play. Within their groups, audience members were stimulated to discuss the themes of injustice and judgment presented to them; suddenly they were in a space where they felt safe to begin conversation about the issues conveyed to them in the play. When one man passed the chalk outline of another man who had been killed by a bullet, he exclaimed to his group "Jesus! I put him there!" (McFetridge) In the theatrical space of *Convictions*, the audience was able to admit to and converse about issues that they might not have felt secure discussing elsewhere (McFetridge).

The creators of *Convictions* realized that they truly had something special, that they had created a space where individuals could finally address “the elephant in the room”. When McFetridge and the production crew saw the effect of the first performance, they said to each other “We’ve got something!” (McFetridge). McFetridge remembers “We knew it wasn’t easy and we knew it wouldn’t happen anywhere else.” Later, the Tinderbox Theatre Company was nationally recognized in Dublin when it won against two productions at the Abby Theatre for the ESB Theatre Award. The legacy the show left, said McFetridge, is that art can truly make a difference (McFetridge).

The creation of an alternative space through theatrical expression is not limited to a physically enclosed area. James King of Derry, drama teacher and street performer, uses the open air as a playhouse and passersby as an audience. Each Thursday, King takes to the streets, sometimes dressed in costume, often toting a single prop such as a chair or a crab net. King has done plenty of performances for the sake of pure expression, such as standing on a street corner in the pouring rain and singing to passersby “Enjoy the rain, enjoy the rain!” Yet many of his performances address social issues pertinent to Derry and the international community. Some of his notable pieces include performances on hunger, alcoholism, and labor exploitation. By pouring beer over his head in a public space and falling to the ground intoxicated, King presents a striking and repulsive image of alcoholism. Standing with a sign listing Guatemalan labor statistics, or strutting by the Foyle River dressed in full regalia as the historical King of Derry, or emitting sound poetry to depict the violence of the London bombings, King creates space in which passersby come face to face with these social and political issues. King transports civilians from their daily routine to a space where social issues come first. He makes room, in everyday life, for these difficult problems to be recognized and discussed (King).

*Space to Share*

Theatrical performance is a medium of sharing. As audience members, we do not come to a performance expecting to challenge, to debate or to disprove the actors onstage; instead we come to listen and to watch another's story be told. Playwrights become storytellers, and actors become the agents of the narrative. If the theatrical performance is forum theatre, audience members and actors become interchangeable, as each has the opportunity to act, share or listen to the story at hand. At the Working with Victims of Violence workshop at Glencree, we all had the opportunity to share our stories of violence. Araujo divided us into teams of two, and each team went around their circle sharing personal experiences with violence. The accounts ranged from being robbed at gunpoint in Nicaragua, to saving a young woman from masked attackers in Sri Lanka, to witnessing the structural violence of an impoverished Lakota reservation. After everyone had shared a personal story, each team was asked to choose one story to represent dramatically to the other team, using frozen images (Araujo, 2009).

The second team chose to tell the story of Ruth, a lady whose wallet had been stolen. After the theft occurred, the detective had failed to properly consult her, and instead questioned the male witnesses who had been near the scene of the crime. The image that the group portrayed showed blatant gender inequality; the men crowded around the detective in a circle, and the actor portraying Ruth was left on the outside, struggling to be heard. After this image was depicted, Araujo told the group to now portray a timeline showing Ruth one month before the incident, Ruth five minutes before the incident, Ruth during the incident, Ruth five minutes after the incident and Ruth one month after the incident. Ruth positioned each of the actors to demonstrate herself at these times, and eventually the actors showed a progression leading to the incident and

the resulting changes in Ruth's life. These images helped to tangibly contextualize the effects of the violence (Araujo, 2009).

After this demonstration, we took turns commenting on the different stages of Ruth's encounter. "It looks as if she feels powerless after the event" one audience member said. Ruth herself commented "I never realized how much the incident upset me until years later." Araujo had truly created a safe, theatrical space, in which Ruth felt comfortable sharing her stories with us. Through this sharing, we began a lively discussion about the impact of violence and how we can best handle violent situations (Araujo, 2009).

During Theatre of Witness's *We Carried Your Secrets*, audience members listened as the six actors shared their accounts of the Troubles and its aftereffects. Victoria told us how her father, the RUC officer, would embrace her each day before going off to work as if it was the last time he would see her. For the first time in twenty-three years, Kieran tells his story of being tortured into confessing to crimes he did not commit and enduring years in prison. Jon, an ex-IRA combatant who is now a community peace activist, reads aloud the account of his life in a letter to his unborn grandson, hoping that his grandson's generation will not follow in his footsteps. Each story is told with uncensored honesty, opening a window to the pain and the suffering each actor has experienced. During the performance, audience members and actors wept together. The theater provided a safe space apart from the conflict for these actors to deliver their personal narratives. Together, the stories were a supplication to the audience that the legacy of violence not be passed to the next generation. Coming straight from the mouths of those who experienced the pain of the Troubles, this message of peace was especially powerful. Theatre provided the space for this message to be heard and shared, creating a platform for peace and a message of hope for the next generation (*We Carried Your Secrets*).

### *Conclusion*

The alternative spaces shaped by theatrical expression come in many different forms. Through training youth in the circus arts, the Belfast Community Circus provides young people with a safe space in which they can express themselves freely, and be accepted on the basis of their unique abilities rather than their cultural heritage. Theatre can also create a space in which difficult societal issues are addressed, issues such as post-conflict transformation and injustice in *Convictions*, or alcoholism and violence in James King's street performances. Finally, theatrical expression creates a space conducive to sharing opinions, beliefs, experiences and stories, as seen in the Working with Victims of Violence through Drama workshop and in the play *We Carried Your Secrets*. Theatrical expression creates a space where we can express ourselves freely, face 'the elephant in the room' and share our personal truths.

## **Part III: Full Inclusion and Participation**

*"Art is imminent to all men, and not only to a select few; art is not to be sold, no more than are breathing, thinking, loving. Art is not merchandise"~Augusto Boal*

Theatrical expression can be an observational experience of entertainment, as a romanticized plot unfolds onstage with professional actors playing unfamiliar and mysterious

characters. Theatrical expression can also be an inclusive experience where audience members are integrated into the action onstage, either through characters representing their lifestyles or through participating in the performance itself. I found that the theatrical forms which include the audience have the potential to powerfully impact individuals, as spectators identify with and feel a part of the onstage action.

### *A Mirror to Society*

Theatrical expression has the power to depict the lives and truths of the spectators. By watching fictional representations of themselves, the audience can identify with the story; the performance has the power to impact ordinary individuals in a way that speaks directly to them. Characters, images and themes which the audience recognizes can help them to reexamine their own lives and actions. Do plays with this representation have a greater impact on spectators than those plays that do not mirror the lives of the audience? While this question of comparison is impossible to answer for certain, the overwhelmingly positive feedback of BCDA's Theatre Lab performances suggests this possibility.

Ballynafeigh Community Development Organization (BCDA) runs an International Social Theatre Lab in partnership with Partisan Productions, a professional theatre company (MacFarlane). The Theatre Lab creates productions, often using forum theatre techniques, which portray the lives and issues of the audience. Karen McFarlane, the director of the Theatre Lab, said "One of the biggest [productions we've performed]...was...a piece of forum theatre about a local community worker and the issues he has to deal with" (McFarlane). The play was performed at a community development conference, and documents a day in the life of a community worker. In the play, the worker has to deal with sectarian controversy in a festival

committee meeting, complaints about a community event, and phone calls during his time off. The issues addressed in this production are problems that community development workers frequently face, and the feedback McFarlane and BCDA received from the audience was phenomenal; the viewers, who themselves were community workers, identified with the character onstage because the realities he faced mirrored the truths of their own lives (McFarlane).

### *Full Inclusion and Participation through Forum Theatre*

BCDA encourages audience participation and inclusivity not only through the subject matter of the plays, but also in the performances themselves. The Lab was formed after the success of a forum theatre piece that BCDA organized. The production, *Stevie's Big Game*, was the first big forum theatre production in Northern Ireland, and addressed the issues of living in a mixed community. The plot follows a Protestant who marries a Catholic, has a child, and must deal with ensuing cross-community tensions. According to McFarlane, it was “a massive project the...research editorial side of it was very intricate.” *Stevie's Big Game* was a collaborative effort; a local artist wrote the piece with the help of Partisan Productions, and based the play on the research conducted by community groups (McFarlane).

The production ran for over a week, and had a “crowded house practically every night” (McFarlane). At first, the creators of *Stevie's Big Game* were afraid that people “wouldn't get up on stage” to participate in the forum theatre, but the audience members did get up, “night after night, with some really interesting results” (McFarlane). By opening up the floor to the audience, BCDA turned the spectators into active participants, problem-solvers and actors addressing relevant cross-community issues. After the show, spectators came up to McFarlane glowing with

compliments. The people “recognized themselves” in the production; one woman told McFarlane “this is my life.” (McFarlane).

### *Inclusivity through Accessibility*

The notion of full inclusion is not limited to audience members, but can also apply to the inclusion of the performers. The Belfast Community Circus is currently faced with a waiting list of 450 students, yet refuses to raise its prices to lower the wait list. The BCC’s mission is one of accessibility and inclusion; prices remain low so that people from all socioeconomic classes can have a chance to participate in the circus arts. Many of the BCC’s community outreach programs are offered for free; and the regular circus classes run at only three to four pounds sterling per class. Once children become circus members, they are all encouraged to participate in the performance planning process and in the performance itself. For the upcoming Christmas show, the children chose the theme and helped to create the choreography. When the show runs, sixty-three of the seventy-five troupe members will be performing. The children who are in the show are not chosen to participate based on skill level or auditions, but by their dedication to rehearsals. This is the general rule of the BCC; not to choose performers based on their skill, but on their commitment to the circus. This way, anyone who is willing and able to dedicate themselves to the circus can be a part of the show.

### *Conclusion*

Full participation and inclusion can come in many forms, as I have explored in this section. Inclusion comes through representation, as seen in BCDA’s community drama production in which audience members recognize and identify with the action onstage. Full

inclusion and participation is achieved through forum theatre, as in BCDA's production of *Stevie's Big Game*. Finally, full participation and inclusion occurs through accessibility, as seen in the BCC's effort to keep their prices low so that the circus arts are available to all children, regardless of their socioeconomic background. These multiple forms of theatre allow audience members to have a stake in the creative process. Rather than the theatre arts acting solely as a source of passive entertainment, theatre arts can also incorporate spectators in an active experience. Theatre has the potential to, as Boal says, make art imminent to *all* men.

## Part IV: Analysis

*“That theatre could contribute to peace-building should not surprise us. After all, conflict is at the heart of good drama. We may in fact be seeing an example of what peace researcher Johann Galtung means when he talks about conflict as positive and negative energy, vying and contending across the realms of human endeavor. Theatre offers conflict as positive energy, and as American dramatist David Mamet asserts ‘What you and I want from art is peace’.” ~Dave Duggan “Plays in a Peace Process”*

This paper has explored three dimensions of theatrical expression in Northern Ireland.

The next question becomes, what is the effect of theatrical expression on Northern Irish

communities? This is hardly a quantifiable question, since there are many possible effects, most empirically immeasurable and apparent only through anecdotal evidence. Rather than attempting to analyze all possible effects, I will focus on one effect in particular: the creation of a peaceful society. While I cannot begin to argue that theatre alone creates a peaceful society, I will argue that the impact of theatre on communities contributes to a peaceful society.

Playwright Dave Duggan writes that

In so far as politics engages with power, art, and in particular, theatre, engages with pleasure, so that while facts may be disputed, fictions can be enjoyed, relished and savored, used to bring truth to bear and thus build peace. Theatre work like this, in a variety of forms, both tragic and comic, is happening all over the world in places where peace processes run in parallel with war processes. (Duggan, 12)

While political systems create community structures to promote justice, freedom and peace, theatre can assist in this process by fostering cross-community understanding, bringing truth and healing to audiences and envisioning the possibilities of peace. There are many international examples of theatre being used to further the peace processes of societies in conflict. Some cases include: Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed in Brazil, Madeeha Gauhar's Ajoka Theatre in Pakistan, Hector Aristizabal's dramatherapy in Colombia, and Sean O'Baoill's mediation techniques in Belfast (Ajoka-Plays; Boal, 136; ImaginAction; O'Baoill).

Sean O'Baoill described to me a Boal exercise he uses with ex-combatants from opposing paramilitary organizations. He begins by distributing note cards among the men; each card carries different character descriptions, such as the head of the Orange Order, a republican nationalist whose brother was murdered by the UVF, or an RUC officer. The men are then presented with a dilemma, such as whether to allow the Orange Order to parade down Belfast's Garvaghy Road (a traditionally Catholic neighborhood of Belfast), and are told to solve the issue through acting out their character descriptions (O'Baoill).

When the ex-combatants assume their character roles, they begin to realize the complexity of the problem. The beauty of the exercise, Sean said, is that it helps everyone to realize that they are not above the issue at hand, and that no one is in an easy place to make concessions or to solve the problem. The men realize that even individuals they formerly thought capable of solving the issue are at a loss for a perfect solution. People often have the tendency to assume that the problem lies with someone else; through this exercise, an ex-IRA man could realize the difficulties of being a parade commissioner or a UVF man could begin to understand a Republican nationalist position through acting out his role. The ex-combatants specifically request this exercise because, according to O'Baoill, "they're ready to get to the heart of the issue. They've been in this room long enough to know that they need to get to talk[ing] about the difficult stuff" (O'Baoill).

The goal of the exercise is not to have the issue solved; in fact, if it is solved quickly, the exercise fails. The true goal of this exercise is for individuals, through assuming the role of another, to better understand the other, to realize the complexity of the issue, and to question their own assumptions. By "walking in the shoes" of their enemy, these ex-combatants can begin to comprehend their adversary's position, and are less quick to judge them in the future. Sean said that the power of Boal is in the understanding of the enemy through acting out his part, and recognizing that the other's interests are legitimate (O'Baoill).

Theatre can contribute to the peace process by promoting understanding between former paramilitary combatants. The next question becomes, can theatre help bring healing to ordinary civilians still dealing with the wounds of the past? Dave Duggan writes that theatrical expression can be used to bring truth and healing to these individuals. Duggan comments on the power of a play he created about Bloody Sunday:

It was the power of poetry I was seeking –the universal poetic voice that cries out in the face of awful violence, that saves and heals in the face of utter hopelessness of death and loss. In this way, a piece of theatre has offered healing of great pain, has acted as a balm to wounded hearts and minds. It has assisted in the breaking of taboos by offering some people a different view of the world. (Duggan, 11)

Through watching their own lives represented through dramatic interpretation, audience members can begin to perceive truths about themselves. The right choice of words in the right circumstances can be a powerful inspiration, and theater presents us with such a possibility. Through images, words, and stories, theatre can bring truth and healing to a society, whether it validates a way of life, inspires kindness, or gives hope. This healing potential of theatre was especially evident in *We Carried Your Secrets*, as the actors told their personal truths of the Troubles and the peace process. As Dave Duggan writes, quoting playwright Arthur Miller:

The ‘art of the present tense’ and being with characters as they wrestle with the reality of moving on in a society coming out of conflict provides a collective experience that strengthens us all and contributes to the Peace Process. (Duggan, 8)

The issues of peace and conflict that theatre portrays can often be difficult and troubling. Through creating a safe space for these issues to be addressed and discussed, theatre allows individuals to face the problems of society in a supportive environment that facilitates the consideration of these difficult issues. Through considering these issues, the audience can become opened to new possibilities. Duggan writes:

As the audience sees real people close up, grappling with painful and difficult matters, with resolve and imagination, in poetic characters who are mirrors of themselves, the truth, that questions can be more important than answers, is laid out. Poetic, intelligent language in the mouths of ordinary people offers possibilities...Negotiators need space, and theatre has given a public this space, shown instances of the space being used, shown negotiations occurring on the basics of respect, not mere tolerance. (Duggan, 8)

Theatrical expression can do much more than, as Aristotle says, hold the mirror up to nature; theatre can show us how the world *could* be, and the potential of each individual to contribute to this possibility. Dave Duggan’s plays show ordinary people wrestling with issues of

sectarianism, reconciliation, and moving forward in a post-conflict society. His characters become role models, acting out the parts of ordinary citizens, showing possibilities of how one can live, question and react. By exploring these possibilities and encouraging audiences to do the same, theatrical performance can actually reinforce governments in their attempt to transform societies in conflict. Duggan writes that this process is part of the peace building process known as Track 2 diplomacy, or “unofficial processes at public and community levels that parallel formal political diplomacy” (Duggan, 8).

Even if the social themes raised in the play do not directly complement governmental policies, they can be used to pressure governments to address social issues. Karen McFarlane at BCDA comments on the power of Theatre of the Oppressed in effecting policy changes:

If you hit the right people at the right time...it could make an impact...And it only takes that one time...I do think [theatre] is a powerful tool in terms of changing mindsets... And I think there's more potential for theatre to impact on policy makers. (McFarlane)

Theatre can serve as a political platform to address the problems of a society; Theatre of the Oppressed, *Sleep Eat Party* and *We Carried Your Secrets* are all examples of this type of political performance. While the impact of these performances is hardly quantifiable, it seems impossible to ignore that these performances can have a positive effect on society. As George Bernard Shaw writes

Social questions never get solved until the pressure becomes so desperate that even governments recognize the necessity for moving. And to bring the pressure to this point, the poets must lend a hand to the few willing to do public work in stages at which nothing but abuse is to be gained by it. (Duggan, 8)

Thus, the poets, the playwrights, the actors and directors have an essential role to play in the peace process. Whether they use their art to foster understanding, to bring truth and healing to audiences or to inspire others with the possibilities of peace, their work is indispensable. Through using words, images, stories and even silence, the artist has great power to contribute to

the peace process. Thus, while theatrical expression on its own is not the only factor contributing to the peace process, it is a valuable influence in the creation of peaceful societies.

## Conclusion

*Woman: Look, if you want to go on punishing yourself, you can, but...*

*Man: But nothing. Let's get this straight. This isn't about you and me. You've done your time. And now you're free to do what you like. I'm still doing mine. But I'm learning. I'm not a victim anymore. Not me. Oh no! You want to know what I am? Do you?*

*Woman: Yes, yes.*

*Man: I'm a survivor. I survived. Through all the pain, anguish, hurt, grief, history, time and blood. I survived. That is my legacy.*

~Dave Duggan, "Waiting"

With the limited time of my study, I could not begin to investigate all aspects of theatrical expression in Northern Ireland. Rather, as shown in the previous sections, I limited myself to the

exploration of three aspects: the empowerment of personal and community development, the formation of alternative spaces, and full participation and inclusion. These dimensions are broad in themselves, and their effects are diverse. I noticed that many of the themes I found within each aspect overlapped with those in another aspect; thus perhaps it is impossible to draw a line where one dimension ends and another begins. It is the nature of these observations, which are hardly empirical, to be qualified rather than quantified, to be appreciated as colorful insights rather than pragmatic data.

Society often values those subjects to which data and numerical representation can be attached in order to prove an argument or make a point. I believe that because of this emphasis, we too often dismiss qualifiable evidence as unreliable and even inaccurate. This can lead to conclusions which do not explore, or are not representative of all the possibilities at hand. I would argue that in the same way we need qualifiable evidence to balance empirical data, so too do we need the arts, specifically theatrical expression, to reinforce the political and social development initiatives furthering the Northern Ireland peace process.

Pauline Ross of the Derry Playhouse calls for parity of the arts with other political and social development programs:

We say...that creativity and the arts has a role to play in helping well being, has a big role to play in education....you would read articles that say your psychology becomes your biology; so [too in] the health and well being of children, of adults of seniors – creativity has a role...I would call for parity [of the arts]. In many governments, the department of arts and leisure is the smaller department, and it should have parity with education and health, because it's equally as important. (Ross)

As health and education impact on personal and community lifestyles, so too do the performing arts have a role to play in creating a developed, inclusive, safe, creative and peaceful society. Theatrical expression must be supported and encouraged, both financially and

philosophically, by political and social structures in order for this art form to reach its maximum potential. By encouraging artistic expression, political systems are furthering the arts of peace.

My time in the North flashed by faster than I could have ever imagined. I was soon dragging my suitcase into the Derry bus station, preparing to catch the last bus to Dublin. The whirlwind of my experience often left me feeling as if I was fighting to keep my head above water, trying to synthesize the vast amount of information I had gleaned through diverse experiences and conversations. Yet on the bus ride home, these images settled into a contented picture, my own picture, of the theatrical world I was about to leave. I felt as if I was leaving behind more than a collection of writers, directors and actors; I was parting with a cluster of new friends. I will always remember the kind, wise eyes of James King, as he earnestly showed me pictures of his past performances on Derry streets. I'll never forget the afternoon I spent in Matt Jennings's living room, struggling to hear to his theories of political funding for theatrical endeavors above the roar of his three-year-old playing air guitar. I can picture children from The Falls and Shankhill roads making sturdy human pyramids. I'll always remember the words of a young woman inspired by Theatre of Witness to choose a new legacy for her children and grandchildren. In *We Carried Your Secrets*, Victoria asks the audience "What DO you tell a child? When are you old enough to be told the truth? When do you have a story?" Perhaps the answer is waiting somewhere beneath the bright lights of centre stage or in the suspenseful darkness of a full theatre, for herein lie the possibilities of the future.

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