

PERFORMING BELFAST: STEWART PARKER'S *NORTHERN STAR* (1984) AND *PENTECOST* (1987)

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As we approach the twentieth anniversary of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, Belfast remains a starkly divided city. Despite the promises of reconciliation and tolerance contained in that landmark accord, much of what constitutes everyday life in Belfast takes place against the backdrop of sectarian division. Among the most visible expressions of that division, peace-lines continue to grow in number, but segregation is also much in evidence across a number of other variables – attacks on police, fire and ambulance crews, religiously divided housing and education, and intra-bloc competition that is framed along the lines of ethnic tribune tropes. Violence remains a key element in these forms of division. However, individuals continue to negotiate, navigate and even subvert and transcend those divides in many ways. Although cultural practices remain salient indicators of division (parading, commemoration, mural painting and drama are often framed according to 'community' rubrics), they also provide a means of traversing division. This paper looks back to how two of Stewart Parker's plays, *Northern Star* (1984) and *Pentecost* (1987), address the problem of staging this divided city, and argues that in foregrounding civic identity as a performance, they put a utopian space of futurity onto the mapping of Belfast, opening it up to a different future, where identity can be performed with a difference, which is of immediate relevance for the present.

Performing the City: "Theater of Social Action"

In "What is a City?", his 1937 talk to an audience of urban planners, Lewis Mumford, one of the champions of progressive urban planning in the twentieth century, explains the cityscape as "a theater of social action":

The city fosters art and is art; the city creates the theater and is the theater. It is in the city, the city as theater, that man's more purposive activities are focused . . . The physical organization of the city may . . . through the deliberate efforts of art, politics, and education, make the drama more richly significant, as a stage-set, well-designed, intensifies and underlines the gestures of the actors and the action of the play. (Mumford 93)

I want to suggest that this notion of the city as a form of social drama, the site for social action, is a productive way to understand how Stewart Parker's work addresses the problem of performing and staging the divided city of his hometown, Belfast. To understand the city not just as a text but as theatre, an urban stage, emphasises its actively performative elements: the urban stage becomes a creative space that is constituted through performances of all kinds – ranging from cultural or symbolic performances, such as rallies and demonstrations, marches, parades, commemorations

and celebrations – to everyday performances, such as flaneuring (or, as one would say in Belfast: dandering) through the streets, meeting friends, shopping, window-shopping, chatting, eating, drinking, and so on. The city is the urban stage upon which urbane citizens practice their “everyday life”, as Michel de Certeau (1988) would put it – upon which they perform their sense of self and belonging – both to themselves and beyond.

The citizens thus take on the double role of being both performers in the urban drama and spectators of it. There are thus active and passive elements to it – and we can extrapolate this to the way in which identity can be both more passively interpellated, that is inscribed, and actively performed. This dialectic is emphasised in Parker’s play, *Northern Star*, in which Henry Joy McCracken, leader of the United Irishmen at the end of the eighteenth century, addresses his fellow citizens – and the audience – in these terms:

Citizens of Belfast – you rehearse all of your chosen parts and you play them with the utmost zeal – except that maybe they’re really playing you. Think about it. They costume themselves in your flesh and bones, borrow your voice, strike your poses, and at the end they move on (Parker, *Northern Star*, in *Plays*: 2 29-30).

McCracken raises here questions of agency and power: are Belfast’s citizens mere puppets, their chosen roles their puppet masters, thus taking on an identity of their own? Who plays who here? This notion that individual actors no longer have agency and flexibility over their roles suggests their congealed nature. As John Harrington and Elizabeth Mitchell note, “Northern Ireland’s charged atmosphere of sectarian division encourages a considerable amount of dramatic political performance within, and about, its borders” (Harrington & Mitchell 1). Rather than transformative and fluid, these repeated dramatic political performances can work to solidify identity: that is, fix it into a form that makes it appear to have been there all along, unmodified throughout history. However, resonant of Judith Butler’s notions of gender performativity (1999), Parker emphasises that they do not need to be ‘repeated’ in the way they have been for so long – namely, marked by sectarian divisions. When McCracken addresses the “Citizens of Belfast”, he tries to make them aware of the fact that their congealed “playacting” has taken on an agency beyond their own: “Think about it”, he demands. What Parker via McCracken seems to suggest here is that this awareness opens up the potential to repeat their ‘parts’ with a difference – to perform a different, more fluid and inclusive identity, which, in turn, gives shape to a different and more inclusive city. In *Northern Star*, I suggest, Parker makes us aware of the performative nature of identity and the city without yet being able to break away from their construction by History. *Pentecost*, by contrast, actually performs the image of an alternative, hybrid identity that can give rise to an inclusive, redemptive image of the city.

Performing Belfast: Stewart Parker

Stewart Parker was born in Sydenham, East Belfast, in 1941 into a Protestant working-class family. This background provided him with ample material as a playwright, as he writes in the foreword to his *Three Plays for Ireland*:

The ancestral wraiths at my own elbow are (amongst other things) Scots-Irish, Northern English, immigrant Huguenot . . . in short the usual Belfast mongrel crew, who have contrived between them to entangle me in the whole Irish-British cat's cradle and thus to bequeath to me a subject for drama which is comprised of multiplying dualities: two islands (the 'British Isles'), two Irelands, two Ulsters, two men fighting over a field. (Parker, *Plays*: 2 xiii)

Parker importantly emphasises here the hybridity of his origins. While the term hybridity had negative connotations in colonial discourse, its connotation has changed within the field of postcolonial studies, mainly through the work of Homi Bhabha, who uses the notion to argue that claims to the inherent purity and originality of cultures are "untenable." Bhabha proposes the notion of the "Third Space" of culture as a quasi-utopian space in which "we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of ourselves" (Bhabha 56).

Parker studied at Queen's University, Belfast, and then moved to the United States where he taught and became interested in American civil rights politics of the 1960s. In August 1969, during a period of intense violence which caused the British government to send in troops to restore 'law and order', Parker moved back to Belfast and stayed there for nine years, involving himself in a variety of different projects, ranging from writing a pop music column for the *Irish Times* to a novel (just recently posthumously published), but largely fixing his attention on drama. When he died in 1988 of cancer, aged only 47, he had written over 20 plays for radio, television and theatre.

Parker believed in the capacity of theatre to instigate social betterment and change; a belief that is fundamentally Brechtian, as Parker notes in his 1986 John Malone memorial lecture. As Shaun Richards remarks, for both Bertolt Brecht and Parker – if for different historical-political reasons – "society... is deeply flawed and in need of theatre to aid it along the path of correction" (Richards 355). In *Dramatis Personae*, Parker asserts: "The politicians, visionless almost to a man, are withdrawing into their sectarian stockades. It falls to the artists to construct a working model of wholeness by means of which this society can begin to hold up its head in the world" (Parker, "Dramatis Personae" 26). This didactic impulse is, at the same time, complemented and countered by an emphasis on fun and entertainment, which Parker picks up from Brecht's "A Short Organum for the Theatre." Parker believed that theatre should be pleasurable and playful: "Play is how we test the world and register its realities. Play is how we experiment, imagine, invent, and move forward. Play is above all how we enjoy the earth and celebrate our life upon it" ("Dramatis Personae" 12). This is, for instance, demonstrated in his first play *Spokesong* (1976), in which music and bicycles take centre stage against the backdrop of the violence and bigotry of the Troubles. As Terence Brown suggests, the play makes a gentle plea for a city to concern

itself with less dangerous and more joyful activities, such as singing and bicycling (Brown 120).

To understand the ongoing conflict, Parker widened his dramatic canvas to explore Belfast's present through the prism of his past. In so doing, he hoped to uncover and locate alternative ways for staging his native city. In the 1980s, Parker wrote his three 'trptych' *Plays for Ireland*; three historical plays that deal with the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth-century, respectively. The first and the last of these three plays are *Northern Star* (1984) and *Pentecost* (1987). As Terence Brown notes, the plays "share a sense of Irish history in its local, regional and national manifestation as fated and doomed. Each is a ghost-haunted play, as if the energies of the past cannot let go of the present and that present is in thrall to the ancestral demands of the tribe" (Brown 121). This is emphasised by Parker in his "Foreword" to these plays:

Plays and ghosts have a lot in common. The energy which flows from some intense moment of conflict in a particular time and place seems to activate both. Plays intend to achieve resolution, however, whilst ghosts appear to be stuck fast in the quest for vengeance. (Parker, *Plays*: 2 xiii)

Northern Star and *Pentecost* are both set during or in the immediate aftermath of such "intense moments of conflict": whereas the former focuses on the activities of the Belfast Presbyterian and United Irishman Henry Joy McCracken, as he awaits arrest and execution, from the point of view of the 1798 Rebellion's failure, the latter play is set during the Ulster Workers' Council Strike of May 1974 against the short-lived devolved Executive, established following the December 1973 Sunningdale Communiqué as a first effort to establish a form of power-sharing. If the 1798 United Irishman Rebellion and the 1974 power-sharing Executive were events that brought hope for change and a resolution of the conflict, the aftermath, with which both plays are concerned, suggests a sense of despair, doom and stasis – giving rise to a sense of history repeating itself in a cycle with no resolution or escape, as described in Joep Leerssen's "traumatic paradigm" (1998).¹

This notion of history leads to a sense of Belfast as a kind of ghost city. This is emphasised in *Northern Star*; as McCracken turns towards death, he beseeches his native city:

Why would one place break your heart, more than another? A place the like of that? Brain-damaged and dangerous, continuously violating itself, a place of perpetual breakdown, incompatible voices, screeching obscenely away through the smoky dark wet. Burnt out and still burning. Nerve-damaged, pitiable. Frightening [...] we can't love it for what it is, only for what it might have been, if we'd got it right, if we'd made it whole. If. It's a ghost town now and always will be, angry and implacable ghosts. Me condemned to be one of their number. (Parker, *Plays*: 2 81)

1 Joep Leerssen suggests that the turmoil and violence of 1798 gave rise to a "sense of Irish history as a series of defeats, injustices and mortifications" as in a "traumatic paradigm", expressing a sense of historical stasis or paralysis whereby history seems to revolve in a nightmarish, repetitious cycle and "no longer progresses" (44-45).

While the play itself is haunted by the failure of 'lived' history, it also sports the character of a ghost: the Phantom Bride, whose freethinking lover was murdered and who hanged herself on her wedding day. As Eva Urban notes, she "dramatizes the endless quest for vengeance between the opposing sides in Northern Ireland, as the symbol of an incomplete soul" (116).

In *Pentecost*, the immediate stage-set similarly seems to suggest "the frozen stasis of a society" held in the grip of a congealed tradition (Brown 121): the *mise-en-scène* is the kitchen and parlour room of the last inhabited house between the sectarian lines in the East Belfast working-class area of Ballyhackamore. The stage direction emphasises the sense of constriction and frozen stasis that Brown notes (122):

The rooms are narrow, but the walls climb up and disappear into the shadows above the stage. The kitchen in particular is cluttered, almost suffocated, with the furnishings and bric-a-brac of the first half of the century, all the original fixing and fittings still being in place. (Parker, *Plays*: 2 171)

The house functions as a microcosm of the Belfast described by McCracken in *Northern Star* as a "ghost town", and is repeated in the form of the ghost of Lily, who formerly lived in the house and now haunts it.

Yet, despite these images of despair, both plays imagine alternative ways to perform both identity and the city. Although *Northern Star* ends on a notably more tragic note with McCracken's imminent execution, it offers a redemptive dream-sequence of McCracken imagining himself, "to be able to walk freely again from Stranmillis down to Ann Street ... cut through Pottinger's Entry and across the road for a drink in Peggy's ... to dander on down Waring Street and examine the shipping along the river, and back on up to our old house" (Parker, *Plays*: 2 81). As Shaun Richards notes, Oscar Wilde's famous quote that "a map of the world that does not include Utopia is not even worth glancing at" seems certainly to reflect the credo of Parker's two plays considered here (Richards 363), and attests to his desire to stage his native city with a difference.

Parker's *Northern Star*

Northern Star opens with the following stage direction: "*Ireland, the continuous past. A farm labourer's cottage on the slopes of the Cavehill outside Belfast. [...] The cottage is a semi-ruin, half-built and half-derelict*" (Parker, *Plays*: 2 3). For the recent Rough Magic production of the play in May 2016 at the Lyric Theatre in Belfast, directed by Lynne Parker, the stage directions were read aloud by members of the cast for the audience, which together with a set that reflected the backstage area of a theatre, foregrounds the meta-theatricality of the play. While the time suggests the previously mentioned static conception of History, it is also a history in which the past haunts the present, thus emphasising its importance and relevance to the present. This relevance resonates with McCracken's envisioned address to the "Citizens of Belfast", based on the historical legend that McCracken planned to make a speech

from the gallows, during the actual performance. As Richtarik notes: “In the theater, the citizens addressed by McCracken merge into the present-day citizens of Belfast in the audience” (Richtarik, “Living in Interesting Times” 20), reminding them of the legacy that his visions bequeathed them and their responsibility towards future generations, in turn.

The main action of the play is set in a dilapidated cottage on Cave Hill, where the original settlement of Belfast in the Bronze Age began. The location is one of distinct liminality: a threshold space, in-between city and country; half-built and half-derelict. This liminality is foregrounded in the stage design of the above-mentioned 2016 production by Stewart Parker’s niece and artistic director of Rough Magic Theatre Company, Lynne Parker, who affirms its importance: “It’s set in the wings of the theatre [...] Not the stage of the theatre, but the wings; the liminal space. It makes total sense for these peripheral ghosts” (Crawley). Foremost amongst them is the “Phantom Bride”, who guards the house; but liminality is also reflected in McCracken’s claim to a hybrid identity, which directly echoes Parker’s:

My great-grandfather Joy was a French Huguenot, my great-grandfather McCracken was a Scottish Covenanter, persecuted, the pair of them, driven here from the shores of home, their home but not my home, because I’m Henry Joy McCracken and here to stay, a natural son of Belfast, as Irish a bastard as all the other incomers, blown into this port by the storm of history, Gaelic or Danish or Anglo-Norman, without distinction... (Parker, *Plays*: 2 7-8)

McCracken invokes Belfast here as a place that is imprinted with a hybrid identity, and this hybrid identity should, in turn, shape a hybrid city. This conception mirrors the vision of the United Irishmen of an egalitarian and non-sectarian society, a vision to which Parker was specifically drawn.

The play was originally commissioned by the Lyric Theatre, which hoped it would make a political difference in Northern Ireland, “because it would show a time when Catholics and Protestants worked together to reform” (qtd. in Murray 197). However, this utopian possibility is, to some extent, counteracted by the form of *Northern Star*: by setting the action in the aftermath of the failed rising as McCracken awaits arrest and execution, practicing his “positively last appearance” (Parker, *Plays*: 2 9), Parker’s play critically examines the utopian hopes of the United Irishmen with the benefit of hindsight. What this perspective allows Parker to do is to foreground the irony of the whole affair, which – among other elements – foregrounds its histrionic qualities. The idealistic leaders of the United Irishmen in the North, mainly middle-class Presbyterians, joined with the Catholic Defenders in what they conceived as a united battle against a common enemy, with McCracken becoming their commander.² Unfortunately, however, as Richtarik notes, these idealistic Northern Protestants “never comprehended the depth of sectarian animosity in the rest of the country” (Richtarik,

2 The Defenders were a Catholic agrarian secret society in eighteenth-century Ireland, originally founded in County Armagh, who participated, though not always harmoniously, in the insurrection of 1798 (see Swift139).

Stewart Parker 254). The dramatic outcome was that the Rising failed because the Defenders did not turn out in any force to support the republican dream of the Protestants, and the rebels were defeated because they took the army's retreat as an attack.

The play takes the form of seven flashback scenes of the years leading up to the Rising, interspersed with McCracken's present situation in his hide-out at Cave Hill. As the United Irishmen movement lasted seven years, each of these sequences represents one of the seven 'ages' of mankind, detailing the movement's development from innocence, through idealism, cleverness, dialectic, heroism and compromise, to knowledge. Each scene is written in the style of a famous Irish playwright, chronologically organised – starting with George Farquhar (1677-1707), Dion Boucicault (1820-90), Oscar Wilde (1856-1900), George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950), J.M. Synge (1871-1909) and Sean O'Casey (1880-1964); to the last episode being written in imitation of Brendan Behan (1923-1964) and Samuel Beckett (1906-1989) (see Murray 198). Parker calls this method "pastiche" and told an interviewer that the association with James Joyce's technique in the "Oxen of the Sun" episode in *Ulysses* was deliberate. The subject matter of the "Oxen of the Sun" episode is childbirth and Joyce recapitulates the history of English language to illustrate "embryonic development" (Richtarik, *Stewart Parker* 256; Murray 198). In turn, Parker's play is about the "birth" of a nation, even if it ends up "stillborn", as McCracken and his men "botched the birth" (Parker, *Plays*: 2 81). But *Northern Star* enacts stylistically what failed historically: his "theatrical ventriloquism", as he calls it (cited in Richtarik 256), nosily performs a hybrid nationality and a hybrid nation. Through his "pastiche" of different Irish playwrights, Parker positions himself as part and also inheritor of an Irish literary tradition of hybrid heritage: like Parker and McCracken, the majority of the playwrights he mimics are Protestant but consider themselves Irish. Breaking the realistic framework of the play, this self-conscious theatrical device draws attention to the constructed nature not only of the play itself, but also of history, identity, and the nation. This opens them up to the possibility to perform them differently, to repeat the performance with a difference.

But rather than just celebrating this utopian hybrid identity, the play importantly foregrounds divisions along the lines of religion, gender, and class. The seven flashback scenes are punctuated by dialogues between McCracken, his lover Mary Bodle, his sister Mary Ann, and "the future ghost" of his working-class comrade, Jimmy Hope (Parker, *Plays*: 2 54). The challenge these discussions pose to McCracken's vision are foregrounded in Act Two: firstly, the character of Mary Bodle undercuts the construction of McCracken as a national hero by reminding him of his responsibilities towards her and their child. Her plan to escape to America is yet dismissed by the leader, who considers his primary responsibilities to remain "in my own country" and "play out your allotted roles until the curtain falls" (Parker, *Plays*: 2 55). Mary exposes his desire to set himself up as a national martyr as a form of irresponsible egotism:

[Y]ou're more in love with that rope than you are with me and the child ... [...] The love of your family isn't enough. My love isn't enough. You want the love of the whole future world and heaven besides. All right, go ahead, let them love you to death, let them paint you in forty shades of green on some godforsaken gable-end! (Parker, *Plays*: 2 53-5)

Whereas Mary's viewpoint offers a female critique of the endeavours of the United Irish movement, Jimmy Hope's perspective emphasises divisions along the lines of class as well as religion. He recognises that "The condition of the labouring class was the fundamental question at issue [...] We couldn't reform a system that was rotten at the core. Known activists had been stripped of their livelihood" (Parker, *Plays*: 2 54). But he also realises that "Without the Protestants of the North, there'll never be a nation. Not without them as part of it" (58). The characters of Mary and Jimmy offer important counterpoints to the idealistic vision of hybrid identity that McCracken propounds, emphasising the importance to take into account class and gender issues, which limit the ways in which identity can be performed as they are restricted by material conditions. This is an aspect that is too often ignored or overlooked by critics that emphasise the liberating effects of performing a hybrid identity, such as Bhabha, for instance.³

Parker's *Pentecost*

While *Northern Star* testifies to the limits of performing new forms of identity, *Pentecost* closes with performing a utopian image of harmony and community, thus realising in embryonic form McCracken's dreams while being aware of its failures (Richards 362). At the opening of the play, Lenny's estranged wife Marian comes to seek refuge in the house that was last occupied by Lily Matthews, whose furnishings and possessions are still in place, making the home a kind of museum of her life and times. Marian describes the "house eloquent with the history of this city" (Parker, *Plays*: 2 192) – a fact that is emphasised by the active presence of the ghost of Lily in the play. Having died at the age of 74, Lily is as old as the century and, as Anthony Roche notes, "in many ways representative of the history of the Northern Protestant community over that period" (Roche 162). Lily's refusal to be evicted reflects McCracken's sense of the city as full of "angry and implacable ghosts" (Parker, *Plays*: 2 81). However, in the play, this cycle of retribution is broken as the inhabitants transform the haunted house into an inclusive space that allows for both past and present as well as the representatives of different communities to co-exist. While Marian at first wants to preserve the house as it was, she realises that this attempt to fossilise the past would also mean to petrify the cycle of hatred and retribution that marks the history of Belfast. As Marian remarks: "It would only have been perpetuating a crime . . . condemning her to life indefinitely. I'm cleaning most of this out. [...] What this house needs

3 For a detailed critique, see Ahmad, *In Theory* and "The Politics of Literary Postcoloniality."

most is air and light.” (Parker, *Plays*: 2 238). Opening up the house to air and light is to also open it up towards a more forgiving and inclusive future.

Over the course of *Pentecost*, the house becomes a sanctuary for a group of hurt and damaged people (Brown 125). Marian and Lenny have lost a child in his infancy, which is the source of their estrangement. They are then joined by Marian’s friend Ruth, seeking refuge from her abusive husband, who works for the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) and frequently beats her, as well as Lenny’s university friend, Peter, who returned home from Birmingham, feeling alienated from his own roots, and needs a place to stay during the strike. Providing both roof and shelter for these different people, their new home also gives shelter to the frictions between them that reflect those of the wider community. The two Protestant characters, Ruth and Peter, disagree about the Ulster Workers’ Strike: Ruth, who listened with fury to British Prime Minister’s Harold Wilson’s speech on the radio, sees the strike as a kind of democratic people’s movement, whilst Peter condemns it as fascist: “We’re at the mercy of actual real-life fascist jackboot rule!”, he proclaims (Parker, *Plays*: 2 215). In the end, they “kiss and make up”, as Peter proposes (221) – unintentionally re-enacting history by making love in the same room in which Lily had her one-time affair which resulted in her getting pregnant with a child that she felt compelled to abandon on the porch of a Baptist church. Notably, Lily’s abandoned baby links her to both Marian, who lost her child in infancy, and Ruth, who had several miscarriages. In this play, just as the personal and the political are intertwined, so too are the past and the present.

The ending of *Pentecost* finds a means to not only to redeem the past but also to actualise the promises of the past, as suggested in *Northern Star*, as Richards suggests: McCracken’s stillborn nation, which echoes the death of Marian and Lenny’s child, is redeemed in an image of community performed by the inhabitants of the house who stand as “an Irish little family”, as Peter ironically names them (Richards 362; Parker, *Plays*: 2 242). This last scene has been often criticised as Parker imposing an overly religious and didactic conclusion onto the play, but, along with Richards and Eva Urban, I want to foreground its importance in performing a utopian image of an inclusive identity, which in turn gives shape to a different and more inclusive city. The play ends with Catholic Marian and Lenny, and Protestant Ruth and Peter celebrating Pentecost Sunday together, performing McCracken’s belief in “nurturing a brotherhood of affection between the Catholics of this town and my fellow Protestants” (Richards 362; Urban 223-39; Parker, *Plays*: 2 4). Following the Pentecostal injunction to “speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance” (Parker, *Plays*: 2 240), the last scene comprises what could be called a mythic storytelling session, in which each character speaks for and through an ‘other’. This storytelling offers a means of healing, “a ritual enactment of forgiveness and personal transformation which draws on the mythologies, traditions and cultural forms of the dramatist’s own background in Protestant east Belfast”, as Brown acutely describes it (126). After Marian imagines Lily alone in her house during a World War II bombing raid,

Lenny tells a fantastical story of nuns bathing, playing in the sea. Their performances invoke a sense of pagan celebration of sexuality and spirituality, suggesting alternative ways to perform religious identities, which are here associated with a time “Before Christianity” – that is, before sectarian divisions (Parker, *Plays*: 2 239). An alternative image of Christianity is provided by Ruth and Peter who start to recite texts from the Acts of the Apostles when “they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues as the spirit gave them utterance” (Parker, *Plays*: 2 240). Marian responds to this by invoking her lost son, Christopher, who, she suggests, was “a kind of Christ to me, he brought love with him . . . the truth and the life. He was a future” (Parker, *Plays*: 2 244). Marian’s confession of her pain and anger at the loss of her child enables her to absolve the past and open herself up to the future. She reaches the conclusion that:

Personally, I want to live now. I want this house to live. [...] We don’t just owe it to ourselves, we owe it to our dead too ... our innocent dead. They’re not our masters, they’re only our creditors, for the life they never knew. We owe them at least that – the fullest life for which they could ever have hoped. (Parker, *Plays*: 2 244-45)

Embracing life, she stresses the generational debt, which commits them to the creation of a better future.

Remapping Belfast: “New Forms of Inclusiveness”

In his 1986 John Malone Memorial Lecture, Parker emphasises the challenge for the Northern Ireland playwright “to find a belief in the future, and to express it with due defiance in the teeth of whatever gory chaos may nevertheless prevail” (“*Dramatis Personae*” 26). This is what the ending of *Pentecost* does: as a play about redemption and reconciliation, it defiantly imagines a utopian future of inclusiveness. While the final scene opens with a sense of impending danger with circling army helicopters and rioting sectarian mobs impinging on the safety of the house, it ends with a redemptive vision of an alternative form of community. The stage directions read as follows:

... Lenny has started to play a very slow and soulful version of “Just a Closer Walk With Thee.” After some time, Peter picks up his banjo ... he starts to pick out an accompaniment to the tune. Ruth reaches across and opens the window. As the music swells, the lights fade, very slowly, to blackout. (Parker, *Plays*: 2 245)

The ending creates a “communal jazz session” – a popular musical form that has its origins in the music of the excluded – which stands as a “metaphor for a reconciled community”, as Urban suggests: “It is a musical genre that is based on independent individual improvisations contributing to the same coherent piece of music” (Urban 239). The action of Ruth opening the window suggests an opening out of this microscopic community to the wider outside community of Belfast. The scene invokes an image of “international urbanism,” which Parker described in his review of the band Osibisa, a Ghanaian Afro-pop band, founded in London in 1969, as follows: “There’s Nationalism and there’s international urbanism. While the first continues to motivate

real politics, the second has long since dominated real culture. So far as vital forms of expression go, from sport to the higher mathematics, the global village is a fact of life" (Parker, *High Pop* 122).

Parker concludes his Memorial Lecture with a call for "new forms of inclusiveness", which, in turn, reinvents theatre in this process: "New forms are needed, forms of inclusiveness. The drama constantly demands that we re-invent it, that we transform it with new ways of showing, to cater adequately to the unique plight in which we find ourselves" (Parker, "Dramatis Personae" 27). As a performance art, theatre needs to be kept open to the transformative performative processes, keeping it in a state of constant 'becoming'. The same holds true for the processes of performing the self within the city. In *Northern Star*, Parker makes us aware of the performative elements of both identity and the city; in *Pentecost* he concretely enacts it, offering us Belfast in an image of reconciliation and redemption. The process of re-imagining history works to expose the loopholes in the seeming cycle of historical repetition; finding these allows us to repeat things with a difference, as Butler wanted. In his "Foreword", Parker wrote of *Pentecost* as a play appropriate to his own generation, "making its own scruffy way onto the stage of history and from thence into the future tense" (Parker, *Plays* 2 xiv). That future tense implies the utopian hope for the not-yet in which it is possible to perform things differently. Parker's plays put this utopian space of futurity onto the mapping of Belfast, opening it up to a different future, where identity can be performed with a difference, so that, as Bhabha suggests, "we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of ourselves" (Bhabha 56).

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