

FRANK MCGUINNESS AND ARMAND GATTI: PLAYS OF MEMORY AND SURVIVAL

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In Frank McGuinness's two Ulster plays, *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching towards the Somme* (premiered in 1985) and *Carthaginians* (premiered in 1988), memory, identity, and a sense of place engage to negotiate the painful passage from past to future and to articulate a possible strategy for survival, for the individual and the group. Both plays centre primarily on a group of characters rather than on individuals: they focus on what constitutes the group, what process brings them together in the first place and what sustains the fragile identity that the group represents. The group has endured an historic and destructive experience: in the earlier play, the annihilation suffered by the Ulster Volunteers at the Battle of the Somme, in July 1916; in the later play, the events of Bloody Sunday, when, on 30 January 1972, thirteen young protestors taking part in a Civil Rights march were shot dead in the streets of Derry by the forces of the British Army. In both plays, there is a particular tension between personal experience, historic moment, and the possibility of healing. The outcome for the group becomes a pointer for ourselves.

In *Carthaginians*, a group of people from the city of Derry – three women, three men – is squatting in the cemetery outside the city walls. Each of them in different ways, directly or indirectly, has been shattered by the events of Bloody Sunday, although not all the pain was inflicted by the toll of political events. Maela, in particular, has suffered the loss of her daughter, who died of cancer on the infamous Sunday, but, as she walks home from the hospital, at every street corner the tally of the dead is spiralling upwards and the city itself is becoming a living mausoleum of the slain:

I'm walking home through my own city. [...] Two dead, I hear that in William Street. I'm walking through Derry and they're saying in Shipquay Street there's five dead. I am walking to my home in my house in the street I was born in and I've forgotten where I live. I am in Ferryquay Street and I hear there's nine dead outside the Rossville flats ...
(*Plays One* 352)

To reach this point of recognition and tell her story, Maela has an inner journey to make. The central scene of the play, Scene Five, is a fantastical and farcical acting-out of the traumatic events of the infamous Bloody Sunday. It forms a play-within-the-play, scripted and stage-managed by Dido, and derisively entitled *The Burning Balaclava*. This burlesque acting-out takes on the healing function of a psychodrama. Dido distributes the *dramatis personae* on a principle of cross gendering and the reversal of roles. Thus, the one-time republican activist Paul is given a blond wig and must play the part of the Protestant girl friend, Mercy Dogherty. "How am I a Protestant with a name like Docherty?" he objects. "You spell Dogherty with a 'g'," retorts Dido (332), the relevance of the proposed emendation being far from clear. Most of

the characters discover they are to be named as variants on Doherty/O'Doherty. "Everybody in Derry's called Doherty," comments Hark, "it's a known fact" (332). Dido himself is left to play two parts simultaneously, the pram-pushing Doreen – "one of life's martyrs who never complains" (334) – and the British Soldier, "in deep torment because he is a working-class boy sent here to oppress the working class."

The Burning BalACLava is the catalyst that allows the characters in the play to release themselves from the grip of the past, to realise that they are themselves the very Dead whose resurrection they have been waiting for. This play-within-the-play has been compellingly analysed in terms of group psychotherapeutic practice and, in particular, the techniques of psychodrama developed by J.L. Moreno after the First World War (Mikami 42-46). The present study has other parameters. It will examine, in each of these two plays, McGuinness's specific treatment of history, memory, and identity, and the dramaturgical choices that correspond to his understanding of the interrelationship between these issues. It will further examine to what extent that treatment and those dramaturgical choices are informed by models of representation present in the work of French filmmaker and dramatist Armand Gatti, whom McGuinness met in the late seventies. The seminal influence of Armand Gatti's work on the developing dramaturgical practice of the Irish playwright has never been examined or recognised.¹

Dido is an openly gay character and when in Scene Five he enters brandishing the script of his newly written playlet, he is outrageously dressed in drag. As gay playwright, he has assumed the identity of Fionnuala McGonigle. By mischievously playing on his initials, Frank McGuinness has projected a figure of the author into his own text, but this playwright, we learn to our surprise, is French. With a name like Fionnuala? *Sans problème* – it is to be pronounced Fionn –u –ala! Dido-in-Drag reveals his character's mission: "Oui. I have come to your city and seen your suffering. Your city has changed its name from Londonderry to Derry, and so I changed my name to Fionnuala in sympathy. What I see moves me so much I have written a small piece as part of your resistance" (331).

The target of this lampooning might well be seen in general terms, not so much with reference to the events of January 1972, but rather to circumstances nine years later, when the death of Bobby Sands and the ordeal of the Republican hunger-strikers created unprecedented interest and sympathy throughout continental Europe and, more specifically, brought droves of French journalists and intellectuals to Derry. The attention of foreign media was generally received with suspicion by the nationalist community of Derry, who had learned by experience to mistrust the appropriation of their situation and their objectives by left-wing ideologues of every hue. One French playwright and filmmaker had, however, won the trust of the Derry Youth and Community Workshop, and that was Armand Gatti. Through my own mediation, he put in

1 Some of the material presented in this paper appears, however, in my earlier study of McGuinness.

place a community-based film project and, after a lengthy period of preparation, the first week of the shooting schedule in May 1981 coincided, by a painful irony of circumstances, with the death of Bobby Sands and the turmoil that ensued in Northern Ireland. Gatti's community-based film was addressing, among other themes, the collective memory and sense of place among the largely working-class population of Derry.² The experimental scripting of his film had involved gathering stories and experiences from among the unemployed young people, both Catholic and Protestant, attending the Workshop, as well as those of the adult population of Derry who had agreed to take part in the project. Having assembled these anecdotes into a formal script, Gatti invited the young people and the adults to play, in the film, the fictionalised version of themselves, as it appeared in the script. In most cases, this was agreed. Thus, it came about that a real-life episode in the life of the Workshop was transposed into the film, namely an exercise in group dynamics, in which the young people were called upon to act out roles most opposed to their own beliefs and situations: Protestant young people were to re-invent themselves as IRA activists, Catholic youngsters were to project themselves into the role of members of the RUC or the British Army, pacifists were to be militants, hardliners were to be clergymen, and so forth. The Director of the Workshop at the time, who had devised this experiment in self-questioning both in real life and in the fictional world of the film, was a visionary community leader who was widely known by the nick-name of Paddy Bogside and whose real name was Paddy Doherty. The issue which, in the film, challenges the assumptions of the young people is the death of a British soldier who falls victim to a shooting incident and who is revealed to be an unemployed young man from the north of England, whose social circumstances have brought him to that end.

Dido's lampooning of these stereotypes in *The Burning Balacava* has therefore a more specific target than might at first appear. The targets, all in all, are many and varied, and include some of the most sacred icons of nationalist sentiment. The pathos of Sean O'Casey's evocations of nationalist motherhood in *Juno and the Paycock* is derisively parodied at several points, with lines such as: "Son, son, where were you when my Sacred Heart was riddled with bullets?"³ The media icon of a nationalist Catholic priest – in fact, the future Bishop of Derry – waving a white handkerchief under gunfire is subverted by the character Seph, playing Fr Docherty and waving two great white sheets. The socialist construction of the British soldier as an alienated working-class youth is ironised by the reference to his "deep torment." The wider target of all this is, clearly enough, the inadequacy of any ideology or any form of representation to account comprehensively for the contradictions of experience

2 Armand Gatti's Derry-based film *Nous étions tous des noms d'arbre* was distributed in the UK with the co-operation of the British Film Council by Other Cinema, under the title *The Writing on the Wall*, and was shown on Channel 4 television in March 1983 (Prix Jean Delmas at Cannes Film Festival, 1982).

3 Cf. Mrs Tancred: "O Blessed Virgin, where were you when my darling son was riddled with bullets ..." (O'Casey 115).

and the manner in which discourse appropriates and distorts the reality it claims to express, an issue which McGuinness's play has in common with Brian Friel's *The Freedom of the City*.

Fionnuala/Frank McG's ironic deconstruction of Gatti's script and indeed of his very presence in Derry is therefore part of a larger scheme of displacement and clearly not a specific score to settle with the French writer. Nonetheless, it has to be admitted that Frank's personal encounter with Armand Gatti had been somewhat fraught. Gatti's own ideological position is complex enough. He has never been a member of any political party. His driving philosophy is a form of utopian anarchism, which he traces back, in part through his own father's experiences, to the Anarcho-Syndicalist movement of the 1920s. It has as its references, among others, Antonio Gramsci in Italy and, in Russia, Bakunin and Makhno. Frank McGuinness's engagement with politics, notwithstanding the Republican tradition of his family, is based on personal witness and an acute awareness of the ambiguities on every side. He felt, as he has expressed to me more than once, that there were enough complexities in the Northern situation without Gatti adding further complexities of his own. On the other hand, his encounter with Gatti's dramatic writing, some years earlier, had been a shock and a revelation, and he acknowledges to this day the extent to which Gatti's work first opened up for him the full potential of theatre and the "utopian space" of the stage.

The encounter with the French playwright dates back to 1977, when Gatti came to University College Dublin for the English-language premiere of his play *The Stork*, which I had translated and staged with a talented group of student performers. Frank McGuinness was cast in the role of Engineer Kawaguchi. As often in Gatti's formal drama, the character is based on documented, real-life experience. On 6 August 1945, the fictitious Kawaguchi, like his real-life counterpart, was working on a construction site in Hiroshima, at the moment the first atomic bomb was dropped. Being a strong swimmer, he escapes by the river from the inferno on either bank. By evening, he makes his way to the shore. He clammers onto a freight train, not knowing where he is or where he is going. Three days later, the train has brought him to Nagasaki, in time to witness the second bomb. In order to dramatise experience of such scale and intensity, both personal and historic, Gatti moves away from the conventions of realism and its contrived plausibility. Thus, Frank McGuinness as performer is not asked to make himself up and move and speak as if he were a survivor who had received two massive doses of radiation within three days. There might seem to be something presumptuous, even obscene, about such a mode of representation on the stage. Instead, at the start of the play, the performers present themselves as a group of volunteer workers clearing the ruined streets of Nagasaki. They have decided not to take part in the celebrations to mark the Commemoration of the Dead: instead, they present a play and each performer has chosen an atomised object from the rubble of the city. Thus, Frank McGuinness's character has chosen a burnt-out watch, and that object will conjure up the Engineer Kawaguchi to

whom the watch once belonged. The performer may therefore speak *as the watch*, that is, as a carbonised relic, or as the one-time Kawaguchi, or indeed as the volunteer worker in the here-and-now. The play will thus move seamlessly between "that time" before the bomb, the time immediately after the bomb, and the present time, that is, the time of performance. A central issue of the play is how can those from the period before the trauma find a language to speak to us in the present day – how can a carbonised watch speak to us and what can it say? – and, indeed, how can we, in the here-and-now, as volunteer workers or as members of their audience, find words to cope with what is an undeniable part of our own past, of our memory, and of what we have now become.

The group of volunteers, in *The Stork*, has come together around a dying child – Oyanagi, a victim of atomic radiation – with the project of making a thousand paper storks to save her life. She dies, and the thousandth stork, which was never made, becomes the central symbol of the play. Here Gatti has transposed the Japanese legend of the crane as giver of health, and the practice of hanging paper cranes, in the origami tradition of paper folding, around the bed of a sick person. His use of the legend echoes the real-life experience of Sasaki Sadako, a Japanese child victim of the effects of radiation, whose vain attempt to construct a thousand paper cranes before she died became the emblem of the Peace Movement in the fifties. In Gatti's play, Tomiko, one-time Hostess of the Tea Ceremony, pieces together a garment for the Day of the Dead: "Do you know why I took to sewing this kimono today? Because I thought that Oyanagi must have grown. And that she would be happy to see that we think of her as a living person, already of an age to wear a woman's kimono" (119). Her gesture reaches out to that of Maela, in *Carthaginians*, as Maela lays out her child's garments on a grave and, in her state of denial, makes ready for her dead daughter's birthday:

Greta What age would she have been?

Maela You mean what age she is?

Silence

I'm saving for her birthday. (*Whispers*) A leather jacket. (300)

What vision of salvation, if any, is offered in the play? In both the Irish and the French play, the hope of a positive future is invested in the character who challenges the enclosed existence of the group, their self-imposed incarceration, and their refusal of a world that is moving on without them. In McGuinness's play, it is Dido who suggests, in the final scene, the possibility of reconciling past and future, or rather of carrying the memory of the past into the future, without denial or capitulation, as he takes leave of the others in a movement of transcendence: "While I walk the earth, I walk through you, the streets of Derry. If I meet one who knows you and they ask, how's Dido? Surviving. How's Derry? Surviving. Carthage has not been destroyed. Watch yourself" (379).

In Gatti's play, it is the demobilised soldier Enemon who leaves, who sets out to challenge the world, and it is Tomiko, in the final scene, who evokes, like Dido, the possi-

bility of the past speaking to the future, and enters a plea for recognition and acceptance:

Forgive us if our district is different from yours. Ours faces the sea – Yours faces the sky – Between the two the ruins of Nagasaki circle the earth. – If one day they come to rest among us, who will be able to recognise them, and who will know how to speak to them? We are clumsy in what we call life. (162)

In March 1979, McGuinness had traveled to Belfast to see an earlier play by Armand Gatti, produced by The Lyric Theatre, *The Second Life of Tatenberg Camp*, and which I had directed for The Lyric. The play is rooted in a different historical context, that of the Holocaust, but engages with similar themes of past and present, of memory and identity, and the need to find a language capable of uttering the unspeakable. Tatenberg Camp is a fictitious name, standing in a sense for all of the camps, but its location identifies it with the notorious camp at Mauthausen, in Austria, close to the banks of the river Danube. Gatti does not bring us directly into the violence of the camps: instead he locates the action some ten years later. A group of survivors is still squatting in the railway station that served the camp, in a post-war world that has wiped them from memory: a Spanish deportee, a Ukrainian, Jews from Cracow or from the Baltic states. The reality of this situation is historical and corresponds to what the young Gatti found when, as a journalist, he visited Austria in the mid-fifties, ten years after the liberation. However, the play has nothing of a documentary drama. The characters are caught in a world where no fact is verifiable: who was traitor? who was victim? Did the Jewish Kapo play a double game, feigning collaboration, while secretly saving lives? Did Moïssevitch kill him in the end? In Gatti's dramaturgy, there is no healing psychodrama to release the stranglehold of the past: in its place, a surreal carnival on an imagined Prater in Vienna, where the characters are caught in nightmarish sideshows, and the figures from his past return to engulf Moïssevitch in the unrelenting self-questioning of the survivor: "Do you know the reproach that Mordochy threw in my face? (Mordochy Auerbach!) and Sabbatay Zaks? That I was in luck the day they asked: who do you want to save, your wife or your mother? I was alone. And they both sent their mothers off to die. Not you? You sent your wife ..." (82).

The long monologue scene which closes *The Second Life of Tatenberg Camp* and in which Moïssevitch is inexorably drawn in by the figures from his past – "What do you want of me now? I can give you nothing..." (81) – points to the lengthy monologue of the Elder Piper which opens *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching towards the Somme* and during which his dead comrades, the figures from his past, surround the lone survivor. The real affinities, however, between the two playwrights are not so much on the surface, in the coincidence of situations or characters, but in fundamental dramaturgical choices: a flexibility, for example, in the representation of time and space, a concept of character which is not based on a psychological model but more on the function of witness, the embodiment of memory within the structure of a group. For example, when McGuinness comes to represent the reality of trench warfare and

the soldier William Moore cracking up under the trauma of gunfire, he consciously avoids, as he says himself, "the trap of realism, of people running and going *bang, bang*."⁴ Instead, he imagines the scene of the rope bridge on the cliff face of Carrick-a-Reede, on the north Antrim coast, where Moore is brought by his comrade Millen and forced to cross over, in an attempt to regain his nerve. As he moves across the rope bridge, Moore – a dyer by trade – enters into a time beyond death, in which he sees his comrades waiting for him beyond the grave and in which his own life is encapsulated in an intuition of selfhood and integrity: "This bridge is a piece of cloth. It needs colouring. I'm a dyer. When I step across, my two feet are my eyes. They put a shape on it. They give it colour. And the colour is my life and all I've done with it. Not much, but it's mine. So I'll keep going to the end" (160).

The undermining of the realist parameters of time, space, and character was not, of course, entirely new to Irish dramatists in the early eighties. Frank McGuinness has frequently paid homage to Brian Friel, both for his daring in the issues that he introduced to the Irish stage and for his innovations in dramatic form. Friel's innovations are blended more discretely into the traditional, realist practice of mainstream Irish theatre, and not fore-fronted in the flagrant manner of the French dramatist, but they are no less radical. *Faith Healer*, for example – premièred in Dublin at the Abbey Theatre in 1980, after a less successful New York première directed by José Quintero with James Mason in the title role – is constructed as four monologues, delivered in turn by each of the three characters, who never encounter each other on stage. When Frank Hardy, the Faith Healer of the title, returns for the final act, we realise before long that he is recounting the process and the circumstances of his own death. Frank McGuinness frequently cites this production as the catalyst which clarified, in his own mind, his ambition to become a writer and in particular to write for the stage. Nonetheless, it is clear from the preceding discussion that it was the work of the French playwright which suggested the dramaturgical models or systems of representation, which Frank McGuinness took over and made his own, and which he adapted to the staging of memory, identity and survival in the Ulster plays.

The dense and complex texture of Frank McGuinness's writing for the theatre brings together many influences and experiences. On the one hand, it is firmly rooted in the mainstream of Irish writing, bringing the creative imagination to bear upon the central issues of conflict, memory and survival that have deeply marked his generation. At the same time, it has remained open to the forces of renewal that have characterised dramatic writing and theatre practice in continental Europe over recent decades. This paper has demonstrated how the encounter with the work of one continental writer suggested alternatives to the realistic mode for the representation of time and space, and in the relationship of character and performance.

4 From a discussion with UCD International Summer School students, Abbey Theatre Dublin, July 1995.

Frank McGuinness has extended the accepted boundaries of what can be represented on the Irish stage, and he has explored a full gamut of different modes of representation, contributing to widening the horizon of expectations that an audience brings to the experience of theatre. His theatre is, in a sense, a theatre of extremes. In *Someone Who'll Watch Over Me*, an intimate chamber piece with three characters, he brings us close to a form of realist document drama, based as it is on accounts by Brian Keenan of his hostage experience. In *Mary and Lizzie*, premièred by the Royal Shakespeare Company at the London Barbican in 1989, he sketches out an epic canvas, closest perhaps of all his plays to Armand Gatti's "utopian space," where imagination has only the limits that it invents for itself. In that play, the historic journey of Mary and Elizabeth Burns brings the audience from a time-out-of-time and a surreal Irish location where women chant in Gaelic in the tree-tops, to the city of Manchester in the mid-nineteenth century and a dinner party with Karl and Jenny Marx; and from a descent into the underworld to meet the sisters' dead father to a space and time closer to the present day, that is, to the Stalinist work-camps and the long queues of women in deportation. The scope of the issues which Frank McGuinness opens up in his theatre and the energy of his explorations in dramatic form assert the place of contemporary Irish theatre within the mainstream of European memory and imagination.

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