

"A SCEPTIC IN A CREDULOUS WORLD": RE-EVALUATING THE WORK OF STEWART PARKER ON THE TWENTIETH ANNIVERSARY OF HIS DEATH

Clare Wallace

Charles University, Prague

The theatre is an even chancier business than literature, for a published play is nothing more than a box of tricks stuck on a shelf waiting for somebody to haul it down and find a key to unlock it. (Parker, "*Exiles* by James Joyce" 78)

Abstract:

This paper aims to survey and re-evaluate the work of Northern Irish writer, Stewart Parker, following the twentieth anniversary of his death in November 2008. The paper takes into account work collected and published in 2008 that had been previously available only in archives. The focus is upon the alternative images of Northern Ireland that are to be found in Parker's dramatic writings. These alternative versions might be informally divided into two categories: the work that deals with specific historical events or moments, and the work which more generally addresses conditions of existence in and attitudes to Northern Ireland. In both what is of most consequence is personal experience and individual will to transcend or survive the constraints of circumstance. It is this quality which has led commentators to remark upon the humanistic and humane tenor of Parker's work and remains as captivating today as it did more

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than twenty years ago. The plays discussed include *Spokesong*, *Northern Star*, *Pentecost*, *The Iceberg*, *I'm a Dreamer Montreal*, *Iris in the Traffic*, *Ruby in the Rain* and *Lost Belongings*.

Keywords: Stewart Parker, Northern/Irish Drama, Television Plays, the Troubles, *Spokesong*, *The Iceberg*.

There seems to be little disagreement among those familiar with his plays that Stewart Parker was one of Northern Ireland's most gifted and inventive playwrights. In 1987 Douglas Kennedy described him as "one of the most intrepid writers to have emerged from this island in the past fifteen years. Never content with resting on his considerable laurels, he is that rare breed of playwright who has successfully resisted being pigeon-holed, and has therefore produced a formidable body of work which is as diverse as it is challenging and inventive" (qtd. in Harris 289). In 1999 Stephen Rea writes in his introduction to the Methuen Drama *Plays*: 2 volume, that Parker's most significant accomplishment was to "imagine the possibility of a future," to envision "harmonious possibility on the other side of violence" at a time when Northern Ireland was torn apart by the Troubles. For Rea, Parker "restored to theatre a moral as well as a political dimension while adapting to the technical demands of the contemporary stage and media" and for that "he will always be remembered both with affection and admiration" (xii). Yet such esteem for Parker's oeuvre has arguably not coalesced to become substantial critical recognition. His writing, like the metaphorical "box of tricks" of the opening quotation, has been rediscovered periodically but on the whole has remained at the periphery of what is popularly or academically celebrated as Irish drama. If the reasons for this regrettable situation are multiple, then there are also recent signs of transformation that may precipitate a long overdue re-evaluation of his achievements. The 2nd of November 2008 marked the twentieth anniversary of Parker's death and activities commemorating his life and work throughout the year have begun to generate increased awareness of his importance as a writer and dramatist.

Born into a working-class Belfast Protestant family in 1941, Parker's unique creative engagement with this background has, somewhat paradoxically, been an issue in the mixed reception of his work. Well before he was to produce his breakthrough stage and radio plays, Parker described the experiences that shaped his youth with a characteristic blend of humour, self-deprecation and irony in a piece entitled "The Green Light" that was broadcast under the title "Self Portrait" on Radio 4 in 1971. The programme illuminates a good deal of what was to become foundational to his drama: the stark social geography of Belfast, the habitual cruelty of the school system, the ebbing of his religious belief, the seismic influence of his teacher John Malone and finally, the impact of his own ill-health on his worldview. All these elements are presented with an extraordinary sense of balance—the dark never eclipsing the light, light never eradicating the dark. Indeed, such precarious equilibrium was to emerge as a crucial feature of his stage drama. Parker remembers a school production of *Everyman* organised by Malone as a watershed moment; it was, he recalls, "probably the first work of literature to flood [his] mind with light" leaving him "intoxicated with the theatre" ("The Green Light" 74). Parker's performance in the lead role of *Everyman* in many respects was to uncannily foreshadow his own experience and, it might be argued, to some extent furnished him with a means of dealing with it. Just as *Everyman* is obliged to reckon with Death, so too Parker was to have an early and acute sense of his own mortality, losing a leg to cancer before he reached the age of twenty. The blissfully intoxicating qualities of drama, first encountered at the age of thirteen, were gradually melded with a commitment to play as a powerful transformative force. As playwright, Frank McGuinness has suggested, "the wound inflicted played its part in his writing, not in self-pity or cynicism, but in a joyous determination to celebrate sweet life in all its struggles and defeats. The ability to transcend suffering first requires the courage to confront it" (qtd. in Harris 280).

Parker was already in his second year of study at Queen's University Belfast when his leg was amputated. He went on to complete

an MA on the topic of poetic drama and participated in Philip Hobsbaum's writing workshop, known as the Belfast Group (Clark 54-55). The main focus was upon poetry, and erstwhile members of the Group such as Seamus Heaney and Michael Longley are now among Ireland's most important poets. As Richard Rankin Russell has contended, "the Belfast Group proposed a 'twin emphasis on ethics and aesthetics' that influenced the work of its members" (Russell, "Playing" 366; Russell, "Inscribing" 223). Parker's poetry is all but forgotten, but perhaps the attraction of Hobsbaum's Group was the ecumenical nature of its membership, all of whom found common ground in creative endeavour—not an everyday occurrence in Belfast in 1963. His twin loyalties, to his Belfast identity and to the power of cultural intervention, were to remain at the centre of his thinking right through his career.

Throughout his life Parker was to explore aesthetic and ethical questions in unexpected ways and across a range of cultural forums. Possibly the heterogeneity of his writing activity and, consequently, the challenge it poses to neat categories has also compounded his subsequent lack of widespread recognition. Between 1964 and 1969, he taught in the USA, an experience that helped him formulate his attitudes to his home place and its history, but which also fuelled his enthusiasm for popular culture. One of the most vivid examples of this enthusiasm is the lively column he wrote for the *Irish Times* between 1970 and 1976 entitled "High Pop," in which he aired his views on contemporary music. It was in America that Parker began *The Iceberg*, a radio play, and *Spokesong*, a stage play, two pieces idiosyncratically focused on Northern Ireland, and the first of his works he felt were worth preserving. Both were produced in 1975, effectively launching his career as a playwright.

It was a career that was to be tragically brief; Parker died of cancer at the age of forty-seven. Nonetheless he was remarkably prolific, leaving two volumes of poetry, journalism, at least one novel and a collection of stories for children, eight full stage plays, as well as at least

five radio plays and eight plays for television. Yet until 2008 only seven of the stage plays have remained widely available through Methuen Drama. The remainder of Parker's written work is available to scholars and researchers in the theatre archives of the Linen Hall library in Belfast, while recordings of the work for radio and television are located in the archives of the BBC Northern Ireland and the British Film Institute in London. This dearth of accessible material has in turn shaped the critical discourse around his position in the Irish literary and dramatic canon. Academic articles have largely centred on the dramatic works collected in the two volumes published by Methuen, in particular the "Three Plays for Ireland" and *Spokesong*. Although more recently analyses of the as yet unpublished *Kingdom Come: A Caribbean-Irish Musical Comedy* and *The Iceberg* have also been advanced by Marilynn Richtarik and Richard Rankin Russell (Richtarik, "Across"; Russell, "Exorcising"; Russell, "Playing"). If Parker is considered to be one of the most original and experimental playwrights of the late 1970s and 1980s, it is both noteworthy and unfortunate that (in contrast to some of his contemporaries and successors) as yet no scholarly publication has been solely devoted to his work, Marilynn Richtarik's forthcoming critical biography excepted. As Mark Phelan has asserted, the stage plays have been greeted with ambivalence by critics who have praised similar qualities in the work of other playwrights. In particular, Parker's final stage play, *Pentecost*, has often been the subject of scepticism or incomprehension by Southern commentators. Phelan attributes such misreadings of Parker's drama to Southern Irish anxieties concerning Northern Protestant identity and religious faith, and the predominantly, if implicit, nationalist underpinning of the literary criticism produced by some of Ireland's most well-known scholars (Phelan).

Nevertheless, in 2008 in conjunction with the twentieth anniversary of his death, several activities have initiated a process of change with regard to Parker's reputation. Among the highlights undoubtedly has been the Rough Magic Theatre Company's "Parker

Project." Lynne Parker has, of course, been largely responsible for keeping Parker's plays on stage, producing *Nightshade* in 1987, *Spokesong* in 1989, *Pentecost* in 1994, 1996, 2000, and *Northern Star* in 1994. The 2008 "Parker Project" featured a double bill *Spokesong* and *Pentecost* in Belfast and Dublin, plus a dramatic reading of *Joyce in June* for the Dublin James Joyce Centre's Bloomsday festivities.¹ Productions were greeted with warm reviews and some healthy media interest. The second major event of the year was a commemorative festival hosted by Queen's University Belfast. In addition to a two-day academic conference, the festival featured screenings of some of Parker's television plays, staged readings, a walking tour and a concluding performed miscellany with Stephen Rea and Frances Tomelty, two actors who were regular performers of Parker's work during his lifetime. The conference is to result in the launch of an annual Stewart Parker memorial lecture at Queen's University Belfast and the first volume of essays devoted to Parker's oeuvre. Finally, several new collections of Parker's previously unpublished or out of print work have become available: *High Pop: The Irish Times Column 1970-1976* and *Plays for Radio and Stage* are published by Lagan Press, while *Dramatis Personae and Other Writings* and *Television Plays* are published by Litteraria Pragensia Books. Such developments have effectively transformed the potential future of Parker studies for scholars, students and readers.

It is accordingly all the more timely to reconsider Parker's work at this juncture and to investigate how his views on theatre and his drama stand the test of time. As suggested by Stephen Rea above, Parker was keenly attuned to the political and moral aspects of theatre and the attendant difficulties for any playwright attempting to harness this potential. He was to consider such questions at length in a public lecture entitled "Dramatis Personae," commemorating John Malone, the schoolteacher who first introduced him to the theatre. Throughout the lecture he pays particular attention to Bertolt Brecht's writings on the Epic Theatre, reiterating the pivotal questions that exercised his

predecessor: Should theatre primarily be a tool of instruction or a venue for pleasure? Can it ever effectively fuse these two objectives? For Parker, Brecht "has bequeathed to us a sense of drama as a potentially dynamic force in society, as a medium political by its very nature, as a forum in which ideas may thrive and be communicated" ("Dramatis Personae" 21). Without doubt, this sense of a vital theatre of ideas is one that strongly appealed to Parker, but just as Brecht was eventually to conclude, he also espoused the ideal of a theatre "imbued with a spirit of playfulness" ("Dramatis Personae" 21). The immediate context for Parker was inauspicious to say the least. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s sectarianism, military intervention and political violence took its appalling toll on Northern Ireland. Against the backdrop of the foundering of the Civil Rights movement, Bloody Sunday, Bloody Friday, the Ulster Workers' Council strike the collapse of the power-sharing executive, the hunger strikes, daily murders and bombings, the question "What should drama be aiming to do in this society at this time?" ("Dramatis Personae" 23-4) is not posed lightly or as mere academic rhetoric. The answer can by no means be a literal one: "I see no point in writing a plea for unity between prods and taigs. What use has piety been? I can only see a point in actually embodying that unity, practising that inclusiveness, in an artistic image; creating it as an act of the imagination, postulating it before an audience" he declares ("Signposts" 104). Clearly the theatre he envisions cannot be tainted with agit-prop proselytising. Rather Parker sees artists as crucial in "constructing a working model of wholeness," and suggests that the work that will lay the foundations of a healthy future "will be neither didactic nor absurdist. It will aim to inspire rather than to instruct, to offer ideas and attitudes in a spirit of critical enquiry, as a challenge rather than as a riddle, and by means of this, above all, to assert the primacy of the play-impulse over the deathwish" ("Dramatis Personae" 26-7).

Play is a concept Parker unpacks in the "Dramatis Personae" lecture with reference to *Homo Ludens*, the Dutch philosopher Johan Huizinga's study of the human inclination to play. Play, asserts

Huizinga, is a fundamental aspect of how human beings discover and experience the world. As Parker puts it: "Ludo ergo sum: I play therefore I am. 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). Indeed, in all his work the magnetism of playfulness charges his claims to a theatre of ideas. Play and irony are strongly linked in Parker's drama, as Ondrej Pilný has perceptively noted, and that irony has a deconstructive energy, problematising accepted or hegemonic views (140).

Certainly it is this deconstructive energy coupled with a ludic momentum that is one of the most remarkable features of Parker's depictions of Northern Ireland and Northern Irish characters. Significantly, as Elmer Andrews argues, for Parker "if play is to be genuine, it must know itself to be play, to be figurative representation and not reality itself. Only by admitting the historical limits of understanding can it resist the claim to totalitarian knowledge and represent a view of history as an open-ended process of transformation" (Andrews 241-2). Unsurprisingly, given the sentiments expressed with such clarity in the "Dramatis Personae" lecture, the majority of his plays attempt to develop images of Northern Ireland that are "alternative versions" (24). These alternative versions might be informally divided into two categories: the work that deals with specific historical events or moments, and the work which more generally addresses conditions of existence in and attitudes to Northern Ireland. In both what is of most consequence is personal experience and individual will to transcend or survive the constraints of circumstance. It is this quality which has led commentators to remark upon the humanistic and humane tenor of Parker's work and remains as captivating today as it did more than twenty years ago.

Parker's ingenuity in weaving fact with fiction for dramatic effect is in evidence in his earliest full stage play. *Spokesong* is framed by two historical events: Belfast man John Boyd Dunlop's invention of the pneumatic tyre in 1888, and the much debated plans for the Belfast

Urban Motorway, finally abandoned in the mid 1970s. Parker had in the early 1970s actively participated in campaigning against the proposed Belfast Urban Motorway which was to cut a network of roads around and through the city of Belfast destroying in the process much of the old urban centre. The scheme was met with such public controversy that an inquiry, similar to the one the central character attends in the play, took place between 1971 and 1973. In a 1973 issue of the magazine *Fortnight*, Parker even published a satirical sketch entitled "Safe as Houses: The Great Belfast Urban Motorway Show"—giving a foretaste of the views espoused by the character Frank Stock in *Spokesong*. Parker worked to combine elements of "local history" with a depiction of "the violence of the early 1970s in Belfast," but rather than portraying the conflicts between Catholics and Protestants he turns to what he called "the core," that is "how people perceive their history, the past, and what sort of relationship they establish with it" (Richtarik, "Ireland" 261). The result is a play that is, as Pilný remarks, in part a memory play (143). The central dramatic conceit, the bicycle, enables Parker to roll back the action to the turn of the century and to bridge between past and present day issues by means of a mediating figure, a trick cyclist embodying "the spirit of Belfast" (Berkvist 5). The protagonist, Frank Stock, owner of a bicycle shop founded by his grandfather in 1895, finds himself besieged from all quarters, terrorists of both persuasions, the city council and his own brother. The past, too, is a site of some conflict. His family history is a welter of comedy and contradictions: his grandfather a loyalist and his grandmother an eccentric, feminist nationalist are united by a love of bicycles. Frank's fond memories of them—providing a rose-tinted view of the spectrum of political sentiments in Ulster at the turn of the century—are harshly dismissed by his brother Julian: "Your memory's an entire school of romantic fiction," he says, "he was a vain and obsequious little Ulster tradesman, a crank and a bore . . . she was a spoiled daughter of the regiment, slumming it in the quaint back-streets and in her ridiculous lace-curtain nationalism" (60). Frank, an idealist, seems ill-equipped

to counter the cynicism of his brother, the tales of everyday violence and cruelty related by his customer and future partner Daisy, the powers of municipal authority or terrorist threat; nevertheless, the quirky good will and irrepressible optimism of his character carry the play.

With *Spokesong* Parker felt that he “[he] had at long last found a way of embracing the whole city, my city” artistically. He was also “desperate for it to be seen first by a Belfast audience” (“Signposts” 105). So it was a considerable disappointment to him that, after much negotiating, the Belfast production was not awarded funding from the Arts Council and was abandoned. The play finally opened in Dublin and swiftly transferred to London, setting Parker on his path as a playwright. Predictably, commentary on *Spokesong* has tended to focus upon the playful portrayal of competing nationalist and unionist ideas and the sinister forces of paramilitary violence that threaten Frank Stock’s business and Belfast life more generally. However, now that peace has been established in Northern Ireland and as the immediate experience of the Troubles fades, the environmental debate that is also at the core of *Spokesong* may perhaps begin to win more attention. Significantly, the battle to preserve the bicycle shop is primarily a clash with urban planning and car culture and Parker’s pronouncements voiced by the character Frank have a bizarrely prophetic quality. Indeed, Frank’s proposed solution to urban congestion—“a free pedal cycle scheme” (38)—is remarkably ahead of its time, and is a good deal less unfeasible sounding in an era governed by concern about pollution, climate change and environmental sustainability.

The Iceberg, similar to *Spokesong*, revolves around a specific moment in history as a means of considering Northern Irish identity. Taken together these plays vividly illustrate Parker’s early attempts to produce unorthodox pictures of the province. A radio play, *The Iceberg* was first aired on BBC Northern Ireland in January 1975. The action is set on the *Titanic*; however, as Richtarik observes, the infamous sinking of the ship on 15th April 1912, is not the focus of the story (Richtarik, “Ireland” 258). As in *Spokesong* the past invades the present. Two of the protagonists, Hugh and Danny, are workers from the Harland and

Wolff shipyard, who find themselves aboard the ship they had laboured to construct. It soon becomes clear that they are ghosts, having fallen to their deaths from a gantry—references to watching a double funeral procession on Albertbridge Road, their home street, losing balance and falling are looped through the characters' conversations. Via the characters Hugh and Danny, Parker suggests another aspect to the well-known tragedy of the *Titanic*, that of the forgotten shipyard workers who died building it. Richtarik states that seventeen workers died, a somewhat more modest figure, a total of eight deaths, is listed by Stephen Cameron in *Titanic: Belfast's Own* (25). Nonetheless, in giving such characters a voice, Parker shrewdly offers an unexpected, conventionally invisible version of the *Titanic* narrative. The result is strongly reminiscent of Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. In a fashion not dissimilar to Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern*, Hugh and Danny wander through a plot in which they are peripheral, doomed characters, attempting to piece together a story that makes sense of their situation and ultimately finding themselves aboard a ship destined to transport them to ruin.

Running parallel to Hugh and Danny's adventures is an exchange between the play's other two protagonists: the ship's designer and managing director of Harland and Wolff, Thomas Andrews, and the ship's surgeon, Dr O'Loughlin. The former is an Ulster Unionist, the latter a Southern Nationalist. In a conversation evocative of those in George Bernard Shaw's *John Bull's Other Island*, they debate the political issue of the day—Third Home Rule Bill which was introduced into the Westminster Parliament in 1912:

O'LOUGHLIN. (exaggerating accent) Ah Thomas, sure you're terrible suspicious of us poor peasants.

ANDREWS. We're simply rationalists up in the North, doctor. We look at Belfast today, a city of close to a half a million souls employed in manufacturing industries that can compete with any in the world. Yet what was it before the Act of Union

made us part and parcel of Britain? A scruffy provincial village.

O'LOUGHLIN. Thomas. I never love you more than when you're earnestly assuring me of your rationalism and you sitting there with your eyes full of stars. Sitting in the biggest ship in the world which you built—in a country without a single raw material for the purpose—on a patch of reclaimed mud. No, we're far too sensible and workaday in the South—for the new Ireland to be complete, we'll need impractical wild dreamers like yourself and all those other mad Northerners.

ANDREWS. (laughs, then pauses) You'll find that what we have we hold, doctor. (54)

Not only does O'Loughlin challenge the conventional Northern-Southern character stereotypes (with a nod to G.B. Shaw), he inverts the familiar interpretation of the *Titanic*. The ship, as Andrews avers, was seen at the time to be a symbol of Belfast's industrial prowess, of the tenacity of a Protestant work ethic, Ulster's "proudest offering—to the Empire—and to the world" (28). In contrast, for O'Loughlin the *Titanic* is an emblem of Northern reality-defying fantasy, the ability to conjure something from nothing. The iceberg inevitably functions as a complex metaphor in the play, which concludes with bleak irony as Danny and Hugh remark, "They didn't thwart us. We're home and dry" just as they feel the boat "shiver." The iceberg, like the question of Home Rule, ruptures the pride of Ulster. But Home Rule, like the tip of the iceberg, was to be but a fraction of the historical conflict at the beginning of the twentieth century that was to capsize the British Empire and subsequently alter Ulster's status in a radical and unforeseen manner.

With *Northern Star* in 1984, Parker again takes a seminal historical moment as his foundation and transforms dominant perceptions of that moment. *Northern Star* is the first of what *The Oxford Companion to*

Irish Literature neatly labels "a trilogy of 'history plays' [that] dramatizes the struggle between individual creativity and the forces of the age in settings ranging across three centuries" (465). The central figure is Henry Joy McCracken, a Belfast Protestant member of the republican revolutionary society of United Irishmen. Though the 1798 rebellion concluded in violent atrocities and defeat of the rebel forces, it was notable as a movement that began at least with a non-sectarian vision. The demise of the movement and rebellion paved the way for the Act of Union which came into effect in 1801. Perspectives on the Act of Union, as already suggested in *The Iceberg* are politically charged and, often, mutually opposed. For the character Andrews, the voice of Protestant Ulster, 1801 marked the beginning of an era of progress; for nationalists the Act signalled the exacerbation of colonial subjugation. Because of the importance of the uprising as a turning point in Irish history, the play has been analysed in considerable detail by a number of scholars including Marilyn Richter, Akiko Satake, Nicholas Grene and Ondřej Pilný. What he achieves in this play is, as Richter so pertinently points out, a restoration of "the Belfast dimension of the 1798 rebellion to popular memory" ("Ireland" 265) as well as offering a reminder to audiences of the non-sectarian and visionary ideals that inspired United Irishmen like McCracken. Ultimately *Northern Star* warns of the dangers of the violence that perverted those ideals for both the Catholics and Protestants of Ireland in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and by implication it resonates with the politics of the 1970s and 1980s, which seemed perpetually compromised by sectarian hostility and brutality.

In each of the plays discussed above specific historical events are integral to the development of the drama. *Catchpenny Twist*, *I'm a Dreamer Montreal*, and *Iris in the Traffic*, *Ruby in the Rain* are examples of plays where Parker's methods are more oblique. These dramas, nevertheless, constitute a significant dimension of his project to chronicle and renovate using cultural tools. Until recently, *Catchpenny Twist* has been the only of the three in print, and this is presumably due to the fact that it was first performed as a stage play before being

produced for television as part of the BBC's "Play for Today" series in 1977. In that same year *I'm a Dreamer Montreal* was first aired on BBC Radio 4; later it was substantially revised and produced for Thames Television in 1979. *Iris in the Traffic*, *Ruby in the Rain* broadcast on the BBC in 1981. Music is an important aspect to each—in two of the plays the protagonists are involved in the music business, in all music has political implications be they direct or indirect. *Catchpenny Twist* is perhaps the most overt in this respect. The play follows the tragic-comic fate of two Belfast songwriters who learn the hard way that even ditty writing is a dangerously political venture.

I'm a Dreamer Montreal similarly reveals Parker's idiosyncratic sense of humour and attitude to the Northern Irish situation of the day; however the bleakness of *Catchpenny Twist* is considerably diminished. The play takes its name from the misheard lyrics of a song first recorded by Bing Crosby in 1929: "I'm a Dreamer aren't we all." Set in Belfast in the 1970s, the plot follows Nelson Glover over the course of three days. Glover, a man in his late twenties, lives with a cranky uncle, works in the music department of the city library and sings in a band that plays retro covers in the evenings. Nelson, very much in the spirit of the character Frank in *Spokesong*, is a romantic dreamer who lives in a world of songs of yesteryear, oblivious to the trouble brewing around him. His inability to remember the words of the songs accurately is about to cost him his position as singer, while his absentminded humming in the library earns him a reprimand from the Head Librarian, Mr Hackett.

When performing at the band's usual venue, the sleepy Loughside Arms Hotel, Nelson meets an old school acquaintance, Sandra Carse, with whom he immediately falls in love. The Troubles provide the backdrop for the narrative of unrequited love, in a manner that is both comic and sinister. Mr Hackett's warning to Nelson that he must maintain silence in the library is punctuated by a bomb blast that blows the music library to bits. The band is invited to play at a republican function and is almost caught in the midst of a riot, quelled only by a

rough rendition of "The Soldier's Song" and is concluded by a Yeatsian "You have disgraced yourselves again" (see Foster 305) speech delivered by the Republican organiser. As they are leaving the venue, Nelson is picked up by the British Army. The interrogation takes a surreal turn when Nelson is obliged by the Detective to sing the Beatles' "Help me if you can," and when he can barely remember the words, is treated with growing suspicion. In the barracks he is told that a woman who looks like Sandra was shot dead earlier that day. As soon as he is released he frantically checks the city morgue for her remains. Failing to find her he instead bumps into Dickie Doyle, the band's drummer, who has just been playing in an Orange parade. They find themselves drinking in a U.D.A. club where they meet Sandra, alive, well and attached to Loyalist hardman Silver Magee. When Nelson persists in talking to Sandra, Silver punishes him by carving his initials on his buttocks. Sandra does nothing to intervene. In the final scene, Nelson, unable to sit down and heartbroken gets on the bus home. The driver is singing "I'm a Dreamer Montreal," Nelson corrects him—this is in fact the only lyric Nelson manages to accurately remember. It stands as a whimsical metaphor for the play and its web of misunderstandings. In contrast to *Catchpenny Twist*, in which music is used for debased or cynical commercial ends and leads to the maiming of the central characters, in *I'm a Dreamer Montreal* it remains an untainted means of escape and communication.

Iris in the Traffic, *Ruby in the Rain* was published in full in *Irish Studies Review* in 1998, edited and introduced by Marilyn Richtarik. Richtarik provides a detailed account of the genesis and development of the project. Parker was initially invited by BBC producer June Roberts to contribute something to the *Play for Today* series in 1979. As Richtarik explains, the idea for the play derived in part from a story told to Parker by a friend and later acquired a Joycean framework. Parker later was to refer to the play as "a condensed female variant on the Dedalus-Bloom odyssey" ("Jim and Me" 98). It is an odyssey that takes place in Belfast, and this gave rise to some friction when the proposed director, Stephen

Frears, wanted a much more explicit story of the Troubles. In the end no agreement was reached and production was delayed while a new director was sought (see Richtarik, "Introduction").

Life in Belfast is evoked visually in the play—Iris traipsing along near City Hall, Ruby driving past red-brick terraces, Iris being searched by a security guard as she enters a department store, Ruby's car being checked by the police. Military vehicles and soldiers frequently stray into the frame. But these deliberately remain peripheral to the narrative core, even though they bear upon it. As Parker put it in a letter to Frears: "The soldiers, the bombs, the political rhetoric, they take for granted, they've lived with it forever, it's like the traffic and the rain" (qtd. in Richtarik "Introduction" 316). In the foreground are the social problems that plague the city's working class inhabitants, and the callous responses to these problems from the middle classes.

The play's central characters wander restlessly from location to location, while the aggressive strains of *Stiff Little Fingers's* "Alternative Ulster" set the tone for Ruby's and Iris's odysseys through Belfast. By the play's conclusion a trio of responses to the conditions of Belfast life has emerged: loss of sanity; emigration; or staying on and surviving together. Strikingly it is the female characters that seem most rooted in the city. Fleeing the chilly middle class restraint of her mother's "well-appointed" semi-detached house, Ruby finds warmth and friendship in Joyce's home.

Running discreetly beneath the social themes is an ironic reference to *Ulysses*. Ruby, the Bloom figure, is a vigorous if flu-sodden social worker who journeys the city sneezing violently and thanklessly attempting to help others. Iris, the Stephen figure, is a rather passive, incurious character who is regularly and haphazardly caught up in others' activities. Other connections with *Ulysses* are suggested by the setting of various scenes, in an office, a pub, a hospital and finally the house where the two protagonists meet in the evening.

Iris in the Traffic, Ruby in the Rain is an unlikely combination of elements. Yet the discreet Joyce reference, the punk gig and soundtrack

lend the social problem play structure, so emblematic of 'Play for Today,' unexpected nuances. The closing shots of the cramped living-room full of children and women talking and drinking tea intercut with the patrolling police car in the darkened, decrepit street outside, provide an atypical, but characteristically optimistic, image of Belfast life brimming with communal sharing and trust.

Although *Pentecost*, the concluding work of the "Three Plays for Ireland" trilogy, is manifestly situated at the time of another "rebellion"—the Ulster Worker's Council strike in 1974, it is a play that must also be read in conjunction with Parker's other last major work, *Lost Belongings*. Broadcast in 1987, this six part drama is perhaps Parker's best known work for television. It is a piece that parallels the cathartic and euphoric movement of *Pentecost* with an apocalyptic tragic vision, but as yet is to receive the critical attention it deserves primarily because the script has been unavailable. On the basis of this series, however, Lance Pettitt describes Parker as among those who "defined the contours of a middle-ground of Troubles representations in drama" in the 1980s (235).

Begun in 1983, the script was completed in late 1984. In an informative introduction to the screenplay, Parker explains the background and development of the project which is conceived as a modern treatment of the Deirdre legend. David Cairns and Shaun Richards provide a rare and substantial analysis of this dimension of the play in *Gender in Irish Writing*. The screenplay consists of a number of interconnected storylines. The dominant and most obvious is that of Deirdre Connell, the ill-fated product of a mixed marriage, and her tragic relationship with Niall Usher, a Catholic. The other strands deal with the lives of other associated characters, each of which is moulded by the Troubles. Alec Fergusson, a classical musician based in London, is haunted by the sectarian violence that marred his youth. Hugh McBraill, Deirdre's half-brother and Republican fundraiser, becomes involved with Gretchen Reilly, an Irish-American academic at Queen's. Lenny Harrigan, Niall's cousin, evinces some light relief when he

attempts to provide a BBC documentary filmmaker with suitably representative Northern Irish types and fails miserably.

Just as many critics have questioned the effectiveness of the conclusion to *Pentecost* with its religious symbolism and Pentecostal tone, Cairns and Richards too question the effectiveness of the transposition of a mythic narrative onto a contemporary situation and medium in *Lost Belongings* (136). Yet *Lost Belongings* is a nuanced and harrowing drama that extends beyond a simple repetition of the tragic cycle of violence and revenge represented by the Deirdre myth. Parker's objective to confront viewers with a harsh image as a means of provoking recognition of the need to change is one that is realised and that remains of relevance.

When considered in the context of Northern Irish theatre since the 1970s, the variety of Parker's work for stage, radio and television is extraordinary in its devoted assertion of "the primacy of the play-impulse over the deathwish" ("Dramatis Personae" 27). The material discussed above represents but a small fraction of the whole; however, these plays in particular elucidate Parker's methodology with regard to his society during his lifetime. The uniqueness of his dramatic vision is underscored when juxtaposed with work by other dramatists from the North. Brian Friel has engaged with some of the same issues of constructing and reviewing the past in plays such as *Freedom of the City* (1973), *Translations* (1980) or *Making History* (1988), yet there are striking differences between their attitudes to politics and their languages of theatrical expression. Parker's combination of zany wit, intelligent observation and flexible theatricality also finds little echo in the work of other Northern Irish playwrights like Anne Devlin, Bill Morrison or, more recently Gary Mitchell, who also has incidentally produced a play on the 1798 rebellion entitled *Tearing the Loom* (1998). Parker once contended that "[p]lays should aim for the greatest possible clarity and simplicity, but not at the expense of their own intellectual integrity and truthfulness, which may turn out to be irreducibly convoluted and ambiguous" ("Dramatis Personae" 25). It is an ambition

that informs his theatrical practice in myriad ways. Parker's commitment to the production of "alternative" images of the Northern Irish context seems uncannily summed up by the concluding lines of Peter Brook's well known disquisition on theatre, *The Empty Space*:

In everyday life, "if" is a fiction, in the theatre "if" is an experiment.

In everyday life, "if" is an evasion, in the theatre "if" is the truth.

When we are persuaded to believe in this truth, then the theatre and life are one.

This is a high aim. It sounds like hard work.

To play needs much work. But when we experience the work as play, then it is not work any more.

A play is play. (Brook 140-1)

It is high time Parker's "box of tricks" was properly explored.

Notes

1. "The Parker Project" directed by Lynne Parker and produced by Rough Magic ran from 26th April to 17th May at the old Northern Bank, Waring Street, Belfast (as part of the Cathedral Quarter Festival), and from 24th May to 15th June at The Empty Smock, Smock Alley, Dublin.

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