

(UN)SETTLEMENT: POLITICAL PARODY AND THE NORTHERN IRISH PEACE PROCESS ¹

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Human beings suffer,
They torture one another,
They get hurt and get hard
No poem or play or song
Can fully right a wrong
Inflicted and endured...

History says, *Don't hope*
On this side of the grave.
But then, once in a lifetime
The longed-for tidal wave
Of justice can rise up,
And hope and history rhyme.

(Heaney, The Cure at Troy 77)

Ilha do Desterro	Florianópolis	nº 58	p. 191-215	jan/jun. 2010
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Abstract:

This essay examines Tim Loane's political comedies, *Caught Red-Handed* and *To Be Sure*, and their critique of the Northern Irish peace process. As "parodies of esteem", both plays challenge the ultimate electoral victors of the peace process (the Democratic Unionist Party and Sinn Féin) as well as critiquing the cant, chicanery and cynicism that have characterised their political rhetoric and the peace process as a whole. This essay argues that Loane's transformation of these comedic pantomime horses into Trojan ones loaded with a ruthless polemical critique of our ruling political elites is all the more important in the context of a self-censoring media that has stifled dissent and debate by protecting the peace process from inconvenient truths. From these close and contextual readings of Loane's plays, wider issues relating to the political efficacy of comedy and its canonical relegation below 'higher forms' in Irish theatre historiography will also be considered.

Keywords: Tim Loane, Northern Ireland, peace process, post-conflict theatre, comedy, historiography, media, Sinn Féin, DUP.

As the first play to engage with the nascent Northern Irish peace process, performed four years before the 1994 ceasefires, Seamus Heaney's *The Cure at Troy* is presciently, poetically alive to the possibilities of lasting peace. Set on the "far side of revenge" (77) as feuding Greeks bury the sword—a (problematic) metaphor for decommissioning—and sail off into the sunset, (albeit to sack Troy), Heaney's play mixed Greek myth and Ulster argot to ensure its message of political compromise was not lost on local audiences. The author's utopian desire for hope and history to rhyme, crystallized in the play's closing choral ode (cited above), coined the most memorable phrase of the peace process and christened the tide of sea-change sweeping the world with the collapse of cold wars and walls. Closer to home, Heaney's luminous phrase littered political discourse for a decade: from Mary Robinson's inaugural speech as Irish president in 1990² to Bill Clinton's visits to Dublin and Derry.³ It was also the title of Gerry Adam's account of the peace process before being bitterly twisted by Bono in U2's song "Peace on Earth"⁴ written after the atrocity of the Omagh bombing which butchered 29 innocents to extinguish the earlier optimism of the

Good Friday Agreement (GFA) and estrange hope from history once again. If a week is a long time in politics, a decade is an age; consequently, the utopian possibilities of reconciliation and redemption, the "holy cures" (77) of Heaney's play, are once more suppurating wounds in the work of younger Northern playwrights like Tim Loane and Gary Mitchell, as both deal with the political fallout from our often faltering peace process.

Mitchell's loyalist thriller-tragedies set against the backdrop of a political process perceived by many of his protagonists as a "sell-out" have attracted international critical acclaim⁵; however, Loane's political comedies of the peace process, *Caught Red-Handed* (2002) and *To Be Sure* (2007), have received considerably less attention. It was ever thus and perhaps until Aristotle's missing book on comedy is discovered the genre will continue to play the poor relation to its tragic cousin. Canonically relegated below tragedy and other "higher" forms, comedy is perceived to entertain rather than instruct; its popular, even "plebeian", appeal marking it as less "literary", less serious, less worthy of study. This assumption, as Les Dawson remarked of pseudo-Freudian claims that the Eiffel Tower resembles the male member, is a phallusy; for comedy can be harrowing, subversive, provocative, profound. Laughter can lacerate, expiate, illuminate, traumatize: its material and metaphysical affects are themselves the subject of one of the masterpieces of the Irish dramatic canon, Tom Murphy's *Bailegangaire* (the town without laughter). Comedy is often tragic, according to the world's foremost comic playwright, Dario Fo, as "satire has to have tragedy at its base" (qtd. in Horowitz, *New York Times*) a simple observation that collapses the canonical hierarchy between both genres that has endured for centuries. Comedy's functions are as myriad as its forms: satire, slapstick, scatology, farce, parody, mimicry, carnivalesque, burlesque and *Caught Red-Handed* and *To Be Sure* are "play-full" pastiches of many of these modes and represent a potent political double act. Moreover, in keeping with the peace process's "parity of esteem", both plays are equally critical of the North's largest political parties: the DUP and Sinn Féin.⁶

Both parties are the ultimate (electoral) victors of the peace process, having vanquished their moderate, moribund rivals in the SDLP⁷ and the UUP.⁸ Only the churlish would deny that both parties deserve considerable credit for collectively persuading the most difficult (and dangerous) constituencies within the North to accept power-sharing and peace. To have taken their followers across the Rubicon without causing splits that would have destabilized the whole political process is remarkable; an achievement for which we should all be grateful. But this does not put them beyond the pale of criticism. Are both hard-line parties not morally culpable for the obscene length of time they took to compromise; to sign up to what is a fundamentally centrist political agreement?

As a decade of political negotiation concludes with the stage entrance of the most unlikely political double act imaginable, the already iconic image of Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness laughing together as First and Deputy Leaders at the 2007 (re)opening of Stormont has become emblematic of the North's successful peace process. The apparent *bonhomie* of both the "big man" and the Bogside's ex-IRA commander signifies the beginning of a new (st)age in the North's political scene. But as our euphoria ebbs and incredulity subsides, some elemental questions remain. What was it all for? Why did it take so long? Did nearly 4000 people have to die for this? These fundamental questions freight Loane's farces, transforming pantomime horses into Trojan ones loaded with ruthless polemical critiques of our ruling political elites. Below the comic surface of *Caught Red-Handed* and *To Be Sure* boils furious anger at the futility of so many deaths; so much suffering and sacrifice for what is arguably a re-run of Sunningdale's 1973-1974 power-sharing executive,⁹ which Paisley and McGuinness helped to collapse.

This article will examine how Loane's satires explore and expose the political cynicism of the peace process whilst raising broader questions in relation to the political efficacy of comedy and its canonical relegation below "higher forms" in Irish theatre historiography.

Caught Red-Handed examines how the DUP, for so long (over)defined by its resistance to change, will have to adapt to the new, evolving political environment envisioned by the GFA. Conversely, *To Be Sure* questions how republicans will adapt to their new political landscape after decommissioning their core principles with the ending of armed struggle, their acceptance of the police and their participation in a Stormont government, which signifies their *de facto* acceptance of partition. In the radical tradition of Dario Fo, farce sheathes Loane's scathing attack against the political order of things but though levity belies the gravity of his critique, it cannot fully disguise his contempt for the patronising, political cynicism of the leaderships of both parties:

WYLIE. We know what's best for the people, Wayne. And they have entrusted us with that. Don't be under any illusions here; they don't want details or grey areas, they just want to know what's good and what's bad. They *need* fearsome icons. They *need* unassailable truths. Controlled hysteria. That's what we're creating. We want them there, wound up and ready for action. (Loane, *Caught Red-Handed* 42)

JEROME. They want to think that they're thinking for themselves. But they don't like complications. They want easy answers; they want black and white; they want lines they can learn. So we talk to them in the language they understand: that's fighting talk. (*beat*) We said fight, and youse fought. Narr we say stop. And I think it's best for all of the people if you be good and do exactly what you're told. (Loane, *To Be Sure* 87)

Both speeches appear identical and yet are spoken by representatives of political parties ideologically opposed to one another. Each eschews “grey areas” in favour of “black and white” politics, as they need to maintain the monochrome moral universe that keeps their followers in the dark. Edmund Burke may have argued that “all government - indeed every human benefit and enjoyment, every virtue and every prudent act - is founded on compromise and barter” (130-1) but Loane excoriates our locally elected exponents of “compromise and barter” for their sectarian self-interest and the mendacious manipulation of their mandates. In *Caught Red-Handed*, the bourgeois leaders of unionism dissemble, deceive and demagogically exploit their electorate; their lack of trust in the unwashed Protestant masses matched only by their distrust of their nationalist opponents. Loane condemns the comfortable middle classes for (ab)using politics to protect their privileged positions of power and for complicity in perpetuating the conflict. Nationalist politicians are no less culpable. In *To Be Sure*, the “democratically elected representative of the people” (48) Jerome Duffy, is a Saville-Row-suited Sinn Féin snake-oil salesman; all cords and no cordite, his cynical cant and chicanery a match for any of the dissembling DUP parodies of *Caught Red-Handed*:

JEROME. Let’s just calm down and talk about this, narr.

GRACE. You can’t talk without lying. (89)

Grace speaks for a generation jaded by spin, deceit and hypocrisy; a condition not just confined to the North, but one shared by the South given its endemically corrupt political culture (*Caught Red-Handed* refers to a fictional future Minister for Tribunals being under investigation!) and throughout Britain, a baleful legacy of Tony Blair’s (*sic*) New Labour. Few parties or positions escape Loane’s invective, but that is not to say that politics *per se* is rejected for, fittingly, it is in the apostate children of political activists, Wayne and Grace, that some hope for the future exists. Both break ranks with their families and

communities to espouse a civic, shared sense of belonging that suggests the next generation just might make it "to the far side of revenge".

The reactionary nature of "not-an-inch" unionism is Loane's central satirical target in *Caught Red-Handed*. However, his satire never simply caricatures hard-line unionism as religious bigotry but strips its sectarian appearance to reveal more secular, sophisticated *realpolitik* motivations.¹⁰ Although Watson and Wylie rely on religious and sectarian rhetoric, they have little time for the pious Protestantism of Reverend McIlroy, whilst ex-paramilitary, working class fixer, Watson, scorns the pastor's sanctimonious invocations: "I don't care about God; our people need freedom and jobs, and that's what they won't get in a United Ireland" (29) although his pseudo-socialist politics are not shared by his colleagues. His violent anti-Catholicism and unconditional support for his party's social hierarchy, however, allows him to be controlled by Wylie who manipulates him to murderous ends:

WAYNE. Are you seriously going to take the rap for this?

WATSON. Call the cops now. They can put me away for it but I will never sacrifice my principles.

WAYNE. What principles? You don't have any left since you sold your *soul to him?* (Wylie)

WATSON. I pulled that trigger for my people and my country.

WAYNE. Aye, because he told you to.

WATSON. I make my own decisions. I do what I think is right.

WYLIE. Good man, Jackie. You stick to your guns.

WAYNE. You're just a foot soldier to him. A lap dog. You did what he told you and now he's prepared to let you go to jail for it. He doesn't care about you or his people; he's just looking after himself... He won't let us think for ourselves. He doesn't believe in freedom or democracy. He doesn't care what way it ends up so long as he's in charge. (57)

It is not only Watson's principles that are questioned, however, as *Caught Red-Handed*, like all good political theatre, doesn't confine its challenge to the fictional figures of its stage world but explicitly extends it to its real audience, notably when the cheesy political chatshow—"Let's Chat"—turns its attention to the passive spectators sitting silently in their comfortable seats:

PRESENTER. Well let's do our own survey. Let's ask this audience here tonight.

CAMERA wide on the audience as house lights are raised.

PRESENTER. I'm sure you're only too glad to have a chance to answer the big one in public. Let's have a show of hands: those in favour of remaining part of Britain? (*he scans the crowd*) Those who would vote for a United Ireland? (*scans crowd*) (43)

As presenter and camera address the audience the house lights are raised so that the "fourth wall" separating actors from audiences, stage world from real world, is broken and a blinking audience is propelled into the play, forced to publicly state their support (or not) for a united Ireland. In one powerful gesture, a culture notorious for its political reticence in public spaces—described in Heaney's memorable phrase

“whatever you say, say nothing”—is directly challenged. The audience’s profound sense of personal and political unease was palpable with every performance—a magical theatrical moment hard to fully convey in print, as Loane deftly combined what the late great John McGrath called “a good night out” with an uncomfortable kick in the arse. For those in the audience too intimidated or afraid (or ashamed?) to vote publicly, there was a message made earlier in the play:

REPORTER. But surely this is time to let the people have their say; the chance for the silent majority to speak.

LEADER. They’ve had nothing to say before now. And their silence has always been consent. (14)

Silence is consent, but these plays are about *dissent*, and in the time-honoured tradition of Irish theatre they try to foment it amongst audiences.

Unlike poetry or prose, theatre is participatory and *public*, which makes it the most political art form. It is also performed *live* in the evanescent present; so it must always be remembered that many things are lost when plays are transposed from stage to page. The printed word can never convey an actor’s characterisation or the audience’s interaction, and it is utterly impossible to explain how central Dan Gordon’s superb performances of frightened *ingénue* and fulminating ideologue in *Caught Red-Handed*, and his etch-a-sketch characterisations of peeler, politician, paramilitary and paramour in *To Be Sure*, were to the success of both shows. It is equally difficult to reconstruct the extraordinary political resonance that each play enjoyed when they were premièred, as both were informed by events unfolding as part of the larger political drama of the peace process. A matter of weeks before *To Be Sure* opened in 2007, Sinn Féin held an historic *Ard Fheis* meeting where they recognized, for the first time, the legitimacy of the new policing structures in the North: an unprecedented reversal

of their longstanding resistance to the RUC, and latterly the PSNI, which Loane played upon with the entrance of affable Catholic cop Lesley into the hostile republican home of the Power family: "I wanted to get out and meet the community. We're all one big family now" (23). The fact that he is (apparently) bludgeoned to death with a frying pan shows the gap between political rhetoric and reality and hints at future difficulties, as has proven to be the case with the shootings of Catholic policemen in Derry and Dungannon and, more recently, the murders of two soldiers in Massereene and a policeman in Craigavon.¹¹

Caught Red-Handed was no less topical. The play opens with news that a referendum on the unification of Ireland is to be held and concludes just as the results are being announced. When the play was first performed in 2002 the local media were filled with feverish speculation over such a scenario, fuelled by the results of a recent census to be announced imminently. The census had been expected to confirm unionist fears of an increasing Catholic population; a demographic demon haunting its collective psyche since the foundation of the state and one further exacerbated by Sinn Féin's triumphalist predictions that Ireland would be united by 2016, just in time to commemorate the centenary of the 1916 Rising! Soon after the play opened, David Trimble, then leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, demanded that a referendum on a United Ireland be held in order to counter Sinn Féin's claims and "kill the issue for a generation" (qtd. in McDonald, *Observer on Sunday*). Satire should always be topical, but to be actually *ahead* of events is a measure of Loane's understanding of political developments here and the acuity of his insight into unionist and nationalist politics.

Moreover, the extraordinary changes that have taken place between *Caught Red-Handed*'s première in 2002 to *To Be Sure*'s in 2007 are no less remarkable. The former play opens on the steps of Stormont with its Paisleyesque "Leader" declaring a "Day of Rage" will be unleashed against the "undemocratic process being foisted upon us" (14): incandescent rhetoric recalling Paisley's orchestration of the Ulster Workers' Strike which brought the North to a standstill and collapsed the power-sharing Executive in 1974. And yet, *To Be Sure*

opened two months before the marbled splendour of Stormont set the scene for the same man to resurrect a power-sharing government after Sinn Féin signed up to policing: a move that provides the backdrop to Loane's second play. Moreover, in *Caught Red-Handed*, the Chief Constable who "abhors" political violence is Sinn Féin's Gerry Kelly, who blew up the Old Bailey. The hilarity of this gag obviously lay in its jarring juxtaposition given republicanism's violent opposition to the police. However, by 2007, swords had been transformed into powershares, so to speak, as IRA decommissioning and Sinn Féin's reversal on policing paved the way for the stage entrance of Loane's star-crossed lovers Lesley and Grace in *To Be Sure*.

What makes this love-across-the-barricades relationship different from the risible clichés of romantic Northern Irish fiction is that both are Catholics. One hails from a hard-line nationalist family, the other is a "peeler": a division deeper than religion for many republicans. The divided Power household thus becomes representative of the broader republican family: the mother, Marian, is as implacably opposed to the police as she is to partition; as dismissive of the "doves" within Sinn Féin as she is of her decommissioned ex-paramilitary husband who mixes republican principles with more pragmatic politics. The play opens with Marian putting the finishing touches to her life-sized crucifix, built not to commemorate Christ's resurrection or the Belfast Agreement ("Good Friday my oul arse"), but the "heroes of the republic and the Easter Rising" (8) whose "socrifice" she will remember with a dissident Easter oration of her own inveighing against their sell-out by that "shower of Sinn Féin shites" (9). Although one of her sons is an anti-social delinquent and the other a sexual deviant, Marian believes her daughter Grace brings greater disgrace to the family, for she is dating "a turn coat; a black leg; a scab" (25). When Lesley enters their home with the aim of asking for Grace's hand in marriage, things come to a head as in savage Syngean style he (apparently) has his skull staved in. The Powers' subsequent attempts to cover-up his killing only unleashes further murder and mayhem which swiftly spirals out of control as in suitably mock epic terms, the murder of a member of the

polis spells trouble for the wider *polis*: "This is exactly the kinda thing could polish off the peace process permanently" (29).

Of course, all is not as it seems as Loane plays upon Good Friday's scriptural and secular significance in terms of the risen Christ and the Belfast Agreement, as the seemingly dead policeman is resurrected when Lesley emerges Lazarus-like from the loo from under his tricolour shroud, bloody and befuddled, but alive. His second entrance is reminiscent of Mahon *père's* in Synge's *Playboy of the Western World*, which is not the only similarity, as *Playboy* attacks rhetoric that glorifies violence and Loane's play similarly explores the "great gap between a gallous story and a dirty deed". This time round though, poetic speechifying is replaced by political spin. In several interrogative exchanges, the sound-bites, sheen and spin of local political supremo Jerome Duffy are stripped to expose his less palatable appetite for power:

JEROME. Look, we have finally got the prods to the negotiating table on our terms, and I am doing nothing to jeopardise that.

MARIAN. "Negotiate?" You think you can negotiate our birthright? You sold us out.

JEROME. We compromised.

MARIAN. But you told us not to. What about "Brits Out"? What about "Disband the RUC?" What about "Not a bullet, not an ounce" Where was the compromise in that?

JEROME. That's called strategy. They were the right words at the right time, and they got us the victory we deserved. (83-4)

Duffy and his cohorts are good at government, adroit at handling the media and well able, in his own words, to “deal with Prime Ministers, Presidents and Primates” (50). Increasingly influential (and embedded) within the North’s political structures, they are most effective at spin, though one imagines republican spinning isn’t confined to the celestial heights of Stormont but is equally evident in the more terrestrial depths of Milltown cemetery where many of their comrades are doing the same in their graves, “sold out by some people for thirty two pieces of Stormont silver” (8) in the uncompromising words of Marian.

However, Marian’s dissident republicanism is fanatical. Her resistance to change and commitment to the “cause” of (continued) armed struggle is suicidally absurd in a post-9/11 world as Duffy rightly retorts: “You want even more of us dead? You want us to go the whole hog and strap explosives to ourselves?” (84). The world has moved on; our own Troubles now seem insignificant against the carnage of a new century convulsed with global terrorism, the “clash of civilisations” and a specious “war on terror”. The collapse of the Twin Towers has surely signalled the end of our century as surely as the sinking of the Titanic opened it. 9/11 “changed utterly” Ireland’s long tradition of physical force republicanism, and the shadows of gunmen that flit through *To Be Sure* in the videoed confession of Jerome Duffy and the dismemberment and beheading of Ireland’s first “suicide bomber” Thumper Magee belong to a different age of international terrorism. These are the savage signatures of a new era of extremism, one in which our own people will hopefully play a more peaceful role, as witnessed in the recent talks with representatives of Iraq sundered communities.¹² Lest we forget the lessons of our past, however, Loane’s comedy of terrors provides us with a grotesque vision of how violence begets violence and how the cycle of violence can easily escalate out of control as the Power family murder, maim and torture all those who get in their way.

In one stunning scene that gives the lie to spurious claims that Martin McDonagh’s *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* was “too dangerous”¹³

to stage in the North, Marian, like some deranged Kathleen Ni Houlihan, exhorts her sons to dismember and decapitate her former lover as their patriotic duty:

“Do it for me, boys; and do it for Ireland.”

She dims lights, pulls curtains and flicks the CD on loud—‘The Patriot Game’ with a wicked dance beat. They raise the bin-lid and LIAM starts to chop—blood squirts— and he lifts out the severed right arm dripping gore. He chops some more—then pulls out the left... (41)

This bloodspattered scene is a visceral warning of the consequences of violence, a message hilariously reinforced by the furtive entrance of another farcical figure, Duffy’s lethal one-handed bodyguard, Kathleen De Ruin, a satirical reference to *Kathleen Ni Houlihan*—the archetypal “poor old woman” of Irish drama who calls the young men of Ireland to fight for her fourth green field—but who appears here as a murderous Mata Hari; a parodic personification of (ex)armed struggle. The corrosive influence of violence is more soberly debated later in a heated exchange between Grace and her father as they dispute the legitimacy of armed struggle:

JOE. Back off, Grace. You weren’t there. You don’t know what it was like.

GRACE. So I’m not entitled to an opinion?

JOE. We were defending our people, it was a legitimate armed campaign.

GRACE. Maybe in the beginning, yeah.

JOE. We’d no rights, no politicians; there was soldiers shooting us on the street, we had to fight.

GRACE. I know. But then one day you started tarring and feathering wee girls...

JOE. You're far too young.

GRACE. Then you started shooting lorry drivers and taxi-men...

JOE. We did what we had to do.

GRACE. Then you finished off knee-capping your own kids and knifing young fathers in the street.

JOE has no answer.

GRACE. And who decided *they* were legitimate targets?

Silence. (86-7)

Joe's Pavlovian rhetorical responses trail off into silence when he can no longer justify the unjustifiable. Grace refers to the savage murder of Robert McCartney by drunken IRA and Sinn Féin personnel¹⁴ whose respective organisations covered up the killing, accusing his family, the police and the media for later blowing the issue "out of proportion." The fact that his killers had returned to Belfast from Derry where they had been demonstrating against perfidious Albion's cover-up of Bloody Sunday and its denial of truth, transparency and justice to the families of the innocents killed on that infamous day, rendered the republican's actions all the more obscene. No wonder Joe is silent. Who says comedy cannot be serious?

As historians of Irish theatre have long known, there is no better way to investigate modern Ireland's political history than to study its popular theatre. If you want to understand how cultural nationalism laid the foundations for political independence, look up the extraordinary efflorescence of drama produced during the Irish Revival.

What motivated the 1916 revolutionaries? Read the plays of Countess Markievicz, Thomas McDonagh, Patrick Pearse and James Connolly. To understand why the realities of life in post-independence Ireland disillusioned a generation: read Brendan Behan and George Shiels; or to unravel why labour politics in Ulster has been consistently stymied by sectarian suspicions: read Lewis Purcell, St John Ervine, Sam Thompson and Martin Lynch. From our own unprecedented era of prosperity, if you want to recall the parlous economy of the 1980s read Dermot Bolger and Tom Murphy; alternatively, to access the “hidden Ireland” underbelly of the Celtic Tiger, read Declan Hughes, Mark O’Rowe, Donal O’Kelly and Marina Carr. In terms of the North, there is no better way to understand the murderous divisions within contemporary loyalism and wider working-class unionist alienation with the peace process, than to read Gary Mitchell.

As regards Loane’s plays, if you want to get beneath the surface of media headlines and hubris over the North’s peace process, or to understand the extent to which manufactured consent and political cynicism have “choreographed” the same peace process¹⁵ then read Loane’s razor-sharp black farces. There is no better way to understand the deals and doublespeak that facilitated this new political “dispensation”. Though the shelf-life of satire is inherently limited by its umbilical connection to contemporary events which soon fade from public consciousness, these plays will have an enduring relevance, especially as details of the murky machinations and manoeuvrings behind-the-scenes of the peace process are gradually divulged in the revelatory diaries and accounts of those intimately involved in its negotiation and implementation. These confessional commentaries will take years to fully unfurl and will fascinate future historians. They will also prove Loane’s critique of the same process to be prescient.

Loane’s critiques of the new authorities and orthodoxies generated by the peace process are all the more important given the wider failure of playwrights to engage meaningfully with this “post-conflict” period of the North’s political history.¹⁶ This failure is compounded by our

invertebrate media's inability/unwillingness to interrogate our new ruling political elites, or to investigate the causes and consequences of the past four decades of political violence: whatever you do, "don't mention the war" (O'Doherty, "Don't Talk About the Troubles" 14). Political commentator Malachi O'Doherty claims this pernicious culture of self-censorship encourages artists and institutions to avoid tackling the Troubles in their work:

For although the Troubles went on too long, there is a prevailing idea that they ended too easily. But they ended. And maybe the best thing is not to scrutinise how they ended or to test the compromises by which they ended, in case we bring them back (15).

Whilst it is inconceivable that any single play could (re)ignite violent conflict—in spite of the cultural mythology surrounding the supposed political consequences of Yeats's and Gregory's *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*—the political efficacy of Loane's plays is evident from the author's account of a conversation he had with Danny Morrison, who was interested in staging *To Be Sure* as part of the West Belfast Festival. The former chair of *Féile an Phobail*, and a prominent republican to boot, Morrison stipulated this would only be on the condition that Loane cut one scene from the play: the final confrontation between Grace and her father in which she rejects the legitimacy of the IRA's campaign of violence and reminds him how republicans butchered Robert McCartney before covering up their crime like para-mafia criminals. To cut this scene was unconscionable for Loane for "the whole play built up to it", consequently, it was never produced in the area where it was set.¹⁷ However, the very fact that Sinn Féin's former director of publicity wanted to remove this scene from any performance in the republican heartland of West Belfast attests to the power of its challenge to the political establishment.¹⁸ Loane's account of this exchange is emblematic of how the possibilities for dissent

have been slowly squeezed out of public debate as opinions critical of the *process* rather than the peace are invariably censured, censored and, more invidiously, classified as the atavist analyses of dissidents and nay-sayers, fanatics and fringe-players that can easily be dismissed as backward and anti-peace.

This strategy has been successfully deployed against various activists, artists and reporters whenever they challenged the political process (and not the peace) that has played out over the past decade. This stifling of dissent and debate has been aggravated by the media's complicity in perpetuating and protecting the peace process (as well as those parties who have profited from it). From the republican perspective, one of the most significant critics is Anthony McIntyre, an IRA ex-prisoner who spent 18 years in Long Kesh and four years on the blanket protest, who left the Republican Movement when Sinn Féin signed up to the GFA. He went on to co-found *The Blanket*, an online journal that rigorously critiqued the peace process and accused Sinn Féin of rebranding the IRA's revolutionary struggle for a united Ireland as a reformist campaign for civil rights and equality. Though peaceful, his opposition to Sinn Féin, like that of other republicans such as the Irish Republican Writers Group set up in 1998 in opposition to the GFA, led to harassment and intimidation from erstwhile comrades. McIntyre's claims about (republican) censorship resonates with those made against the media by myriad others, like Gary Mitchell, who claims, "BBC Northern Ireland told me I wouldn't be working with them any more unless I wrote about the peace process and it would have to be positive." (qtd. in McDonald, "Playwright Hits Back Against Intimidation"). Several journalists and politicians have made the same complaint, notably former Northern Ireland editor for the *Irish Times*, Ed Moloney, who believes the peace process has had a "corrosive effect" on Irish journalism with reporters self-censoring their work to protect the process from inconvenient truths that might imperil its progress. For Maloney, journalists have fundamentally compromised their professional integrity by becoming players in the process, rather

than impartial observers; none more so than RTE's Northern Editor, Tommie Gorman, who acted as a secret "go-between" the DUP and Sinn Féin during the delicate period of their recent behind-the-scenes negotiations.¹⁹ Another journalist, Jim Campbell, admits self-censorship happens because "some reporters feel they have good police contacts or contacts with government officials and don't want to jeopardise them", especially when they see how other reporters have become *personae non grata*:

Among certain politicians and establishment figures—and even in the mainstream press—[and are] branded "Journalists Against the Peace Process" (JAPPs). These are reporters who seek to unearth inconvenient truths that may be unpalatable to leading figures of the peace process. Even government officials have been heard referring pejoratively to certain journalists in such terms (qtd. in *Reporters Sans Frontières*).

Other writers are even more forthright and excoriate the "bulk of the Irish media during the years of the peace process" for the fact that it:

simply failed to do its job, which is to dig out the truth and challenge those with the power and motives to tell lies, no matter how uncomfortable or unsettling the end result. Instead too many of them have become court jesters in a kingdom of deception. (Luby, "The Thing About History", *The Blanket*)

Even one former Taoiseach has expressed concern over the editorial decisions shaping the Irish media's coverage of the peace process, gnomically noting how some observers attribute this editorial timidity to "political pressure not to rock the boat of the Northern Ireland settlement" (Fitzgerald, *Irish Times*). It is against this context that Loane's plays are so important. Not only do they set out to "rock the boat" by asking awkward questions, but they also offer different,

difficult, dissident answers, something which imbues his work with an ethical aesthetic integrity. After all, as Belfast's greatest playwright, Stewart Parker, observes, "the easy answer constitutes an artistic abdication" (Parker, *Dramatis Personae* 18)

A decade after the Good Friday Agreement and the North is moored in more peaceful waters, even though Heaney's "longed for tidal wave of justice" never materialised and we have some way to travel to "the far side of revenge". Nonetheless, the opening lines of *Caught Red-Handed* still resonate, as "history is being forged before our eyes" and as the peace process enters the final furlong of its "tortuous journey" (14). As for its future course or final destination, who knows? Perhaps, some day, there might be cause to concertina this comic double act into a trilogy with a new satire on the peace process? Though, I suspect, such a scenario would be more a cause for tragedy.

Notes

1. This article is an extended version of my introductory essay to Tim Loane's plays, published as *Comedy of Terrors: Caught Red-Handed and To Be Sure* by Lagan Press. At time of writing, the book had not yet gone to press and so all references to *Caught Red-Handed* are taken from the original programme in which the text was published, and all references to *To Be Sure* are taken from a hard copy provided me by the author.
2. See Hugh Denard, "Seamus Heaney, Colonialism, and the Cure: Sophoclean Revisions." *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 22.3 (2000): 1.
3. 'Your great Nobel Prize winning poet, Seamus Heaney, wrote the following words—(applause) [...] that some of you must know already, but that for me capture this moment. He said: "History says don't hope on this side of the grave, but then, once in a lifetime the longed-for tidal wave of justice can rise up. And hope and history rhyme."' "Remarks by the President to the Citizens of Londonderry, 30 November 1995." See <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/events/peace/docs/pres2.htm>.
4. 'Peace on Earth', from U2's tenth album *All That you Can't Leave Behind* (2000), was written in the immediate aftermath of the Omagh bombing and critiques the pious rhetoric of republican dissidents and the peace process as a whole: 'The

words are sticking in my throat/ Peace on earth./ Hear it every Christmas time/
But hope and history won't rhyme/ So what's it worth/This peace on Earth?

5. Jennifer Cornell, "Walking with Beasts: Gary Mitchell and the Representation of Ulster Loyalism," *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 24.2 (2003): 27-34; Karen Fricker, "A World Apart: A Protestant Playwright Evokes the Unromantic Ireland," *American Theatre* 16.6 (1999): 54-7; Billy Gray, "'The Fragments they Shore up Against their Ruins': Loyalism, Alienation and Fear of Change in Gary Mitchell's *As the Beast Sleeps* and *The Force of Change*," *Etudes Irlandaises* 32.1 (2007): 127-39; Wesley Hutchinson, Gary Mitchell's 'Talk Process'," *Etudes Irlandaises* 56. 2 (2003): 206-18 and "Engendering Change in the UDA: Gary Mitchell's *Loyal Women*," *Estudios Irlandeses* 1.0 (2005): 67-76; Martine Pelletier, "Marie Jones et Gary Mitchell: Deux Belfastois à Londres," *Cynco* 18.1 (2001): 145-61; Richard Rankin Russell, "'Loyal to the Truth': Gary Mitchell's Aesthetic Loyalism in *As the Beast Sleeps* and *The Force of Change*," *Modern Drama* 48.1 (2005): 186-201.
6. Founded by Ian Paisley, the staunchly conservative Democratic Unionist Party always opposed the Good Friday Agreement and the peace process, and only recently, and reluctantly, became participants in it. They now share power with Sinn Féin, the political wing of the IRA, who have abandoned their "armed struggle" and committed themselves to "exclusively peaceful means" in their pursuit of a united Ireland.
7. The Social Democratic and Labour Party: for decades the largest nationalist party in the North, the SDLP vehemently opposed to Sinn Féin's advocacy of physical force republicanism. However, Sinn Féin's involvement in the peace process and adoption of constitutional politics enormously increased their electoral appeal and they rapidly outgrew their SDLP rivals to become the largest nationalist party in the North.
8. The Ulster Unionist Party shared the same fate of the SDLP. Historically the largest unionist party, they were decimated by the DUP in the 2005 elections when their beleaguered leader, David Trimble, lost his seat along with all but one of their Westminster MPs. This collapse in support for the mainstream moderate parties made a mockery of predictions that the political compromises enshrined in the GFA would bolster the North's middle ground and allow "consensus" politics to develop, as post-1998, the "middle-ground" collapsed as the two more extreme strands of nationalism and unionism predominated.
9. Like the GFA, Sunningdale established a power-sharing executive between nationalists and unionists with cross-border arrangements with the Irish Republic,

but was unacceptable to both hard-line unionists and republicans, before the former brought down the short-lived executive through the infamous Ulster Workers' Strike, spearheaded by Paisley. The similarities between the Sunningdale Executive and those political structures inaugurated by the GFA prompted the SDLP's Seamus Mallon to dub the Belfast Agreement as "Sunningdale for slow learners".

10. See my article, "The Fantasy of Post-Nationalism in Northern Theatre: Caught Red-Handed Transplanting the Planter", Special Issue of Australian Drama Studies on Performing Ireland 43 (October 2003): 89-108.
11. The Real IRA, a dissident republican splinter group, shot two Catholic PSNI recruits within five days of each other in November 2007 to demonstrate their opposition to Sinn Féin's support for the police and their participation in policing bodies. Throughout 2008 the RIRA specifically targeted Catholic recruits to the PSNI, although it was another dissident group, the Continuity IRA, who killed the first PSNI officer in March 2009. Only a few days before this, the RIRA shot dead two soldiers in Co. Antrim and wounded two more; the first such killings in more than a decade.
12. Sunni and Shi'a leaders from Iraq attended a series of secret meetings in Finland with political leaders from Northern Ireland and South Africa in August 2007. Sinn Féin's Martin McGuinness and the DUP's Jeffrey Donaldson were involved in the discussions where the Iraqi delegates signed up to a draft set of principles resembling the protocols that shaped the peace settlements in Northern Ireland and South Africa. See: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern_ireland/6977190.stm>
13. See Patrick Lonergan, "Too Dangerous to be Done? Martin McDonagh's *Lieutenant of Inishmore*", *Irish Studies Review* 13.1 (2005): 65-78.
14. See "Victim's Family Reject IRA Offer", http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern_ireland/4330445.stm
15. LiaO'Ruairc, "The Agreed Truth and the Real Truth: The New Northern Ireland," *Variant* 29 (2007): 14-7.
16. Honourable exceptions to this are Gary Mitchell as mentioned earlier, and Derry playwright, Dave Duggan whose *Plays of the Peace Process* was published by Guildhall Press in 2008.

17. This account was related to me by the author and referred to by Loane at the formal launch of his collection of plays at the Linen Hall Library in late 2008.
18. This is all the more ironic as Morrison, as a republican and an "apprentice playwright", (his debut play, *The Wrong Man*, was staged in London in 2005), has long been an outspoken opponent of censorship (see http://www.dannymorrison.com/?page_id=298).
19. See Ed Moloney, "RTÉ and the Northern Settlement", *The Irish Times*, 12 July 2008; also his essay in *Britain and Ireland: Lives Entwined II*, (London: British Council, 2006).

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