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Human Rights and Theatre Practice in Northern Ireland: A Round-Table Discussion

This round-table discussion, edited by Eva Urban and Lisa FitzGerald, took place on 5 July 2019 as part of the conference 'New Romantics: Performing Ireland and Cosmopolitanism on the Anniversary of Human Rights' organized by the editors at the Brian Friel Theatre, Queen's University Belfast. **Lisa FitzGerald** is a theatre historian and ecocritic who completed postdoctoral fellowships at the Centre de Recherche Bretonne et Celtique (CRBC), Université Rennes 2 and the Rachel Carson Centre for Environment and Society, Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich. She is the author of *Re-Place: Irish Theatre Environments* (Peter Lang, 2017) and *Digital Vision and the Ecological Aesthetic* (forthcoming, Bloomsbury, 2020). **Eva Urban** is a Senior Research Fellow at the Senator George J. Mitchell Institute for Global Peace, Security, and Justice, Queen's University Belfast, and an Associate Fellow of the Institute of Irish Studies, QUB. She is the author of *Community Politics and the Peace Process in Contemporary Northern Irish Drama* (Peter Lang, 2011) and *La Philosophie des Lumières dans le Théâtre Breton: Tradition et Influences* (Université de Rennes, 2019). **Rosemary Jenkinson** is a Belfast playwright and writer of five short story collections. Her plays include *The Bonefire* (Rough Magic), *Planet Belfast* (Tinderbox), *White Star of the North*, *Here Comes the Night* (Lyric), *Lives in Translation* (Kabosh Theatre Company), and *Michelle and Arlene* (Accidental Theatre). Her writing for radio includes *Castlereagh to Kandahar* (BBC Radio 3) and *The Blackthorn Tree* (BBC Radio 4). She has received a Major Individual Artist Award from the Arts Council of Northern Ireland to write a memoir. **Tom Maguire** is Head of the School of Arts and Humanities at Ulster University and has published widely on Irish and Scottish theatre and in the areas of Theatre for Young Audiences and Storytelling Performance. His heritage research projects include the collection *Heritage after Conflict: Northern Ireland* (Routledge, 2018, co-edited with Elizabeth Crooke). **David Grant** is a former Programme Director of the Dublin Theatre Festival and was Artistic Director of the Lyric Theatre in Belfast. He has worked extensively as a theatre director throughout Ireland and is co-investigator of an AHRC-funded research project into Arts for Reconciliation. He lectures in drama at Queen's University Belfast.

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THE YEAR 2019 marked the 230th anniversary of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen in France (26 August 1789), which asserts that 'Any society in which no provision is made for guaranteeing rights or for the separation of powers, has no Constitution'. In 2018, we celebrated the seventieth anniversary of the Declaration of Human Rights (1948), which was heavily influenced by the former as well as by the United States Bill of Rights (1789/91) and England's Magna Carta (1215). Human rights were born of great international political upheaval as well as of the revolutionary philosophical, political, and literary ideas and ideals coming from Enlightenment humanism. The ideals of reason, religious and cultural tolerance, scientific discovery, cosmopolitan values, and human sympathy, empathy, and compassion continued to be reflected in the European literature and drama of Romanticism and in a diverse range of revolutionary ideas of social and political reform.

Since the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, literature, drama, and theatre have been

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associated with ideas of moral philosophy, cosmopolitan humanism, and human rights, and theatres have been public spaces for promoting social and political reforms. Much of modern Irish drama and performance has dealt with political and social issues related to human rights in Ireland and within a wider European context, and there is a substantial body of contemporary literature, theatre, performance, and life art concerned with human rights activism in Ireland. The following discussion is based on the intersection of politics and performance and examines how practitioners have used theatre space to analyze the balance of power and its impact on individuals and cultural communities.

Eva Urban Could you discuss your own perspectives on how your theatre work relates to human rights issues and to ongoing debates in the field?

David Grant I'm part of an evaluation team for the Peace Academy currently being run out of the Playhouse in Derry as a follow-on from its long history of Theatre of Witness work, which was led by Teya Sepinuck, an American facilitator. A central tension in the attempt to try and build on her work is that the emphasis of Teya's approach is to put the witnesses to their own trauma on the stage, which is quite contentious in some ways. I have discussed the ethics of this elsewhere – it could be re-traumatization, as distinct from using the theatre as a mediating instrument.

I was struck how in Natasha's description of the youth theatre project [in Natasha Remoundou's conference talk on 'Human Rights Theatre in Education: Performing Refugeeness in "Fortress Europe"', which preceded this discussion], it seemed that for this project they relied substantially on the imagination, although maybe they did have access to people with direct refugee experience. So one way of framing this discussion would be to ask the question: To what extent are we filtering out?

I think that the role of the gatekeeper that came up [in Remoundou's talk] is a really important one in this sort of testimonial theatre work as well. Who regulates who you get access to? Whose stories are told? I know that the poet Damian Gorman has spoken out quite strongly against this tendency to pretend that we are giving people a voice. People have their voices. But what we are actually doing is giving other people ears. The supposedly authentic direct communication, albeit through theatrical means of individual stories and the mediation of those stories by writers or through a kind of editorial process, is preoccupying me at the moment.

Eva Urban I would like to invite Rosemary to comment on the issue of the gatekeeper in the research and writing process for her play *Lives in Translation*, directed by Paula McFetridge and performed by Kabosh Theatre Company in 2017–18 (Figure 1).

Rosemary Jenkinson If you are an asylum seeker, you're a supplicant, speaking to everyone from a really low position, and that really was something I found out through writing this play; they have to suppress themselves so much. So, yes, I definitely came across gatekeepers during the research process.

When I first went to Paula about this idea, I was wondering how to get the information, so I went to a local women's group for asylum seekers and the gatekeeper there said: 'What if you traumatize these women when you talk to them? I'm not comfortable because we have so many journalists asking to talk to them too.' So, really, I was put on the same footing as a journalist.

Another thing I was asked was: 'What if you take all their stories and you don't use some of them? How are they going to feel?' And that really surprised me. I asked 'Why?' because I knew I'd probably use an element from each interview. If I was going to write a fictional piece, all of their testimonies would inform it in some way, so I didn't understand why she was suggesting that I would be excluding certain people. I found that so defensive. And I thought that's not the way I would approach it because, in my writing, I include everything that I hear, to some degree.

So that was one route that was totally closed to me. However, she also said: 'You can always put a query out to the network of

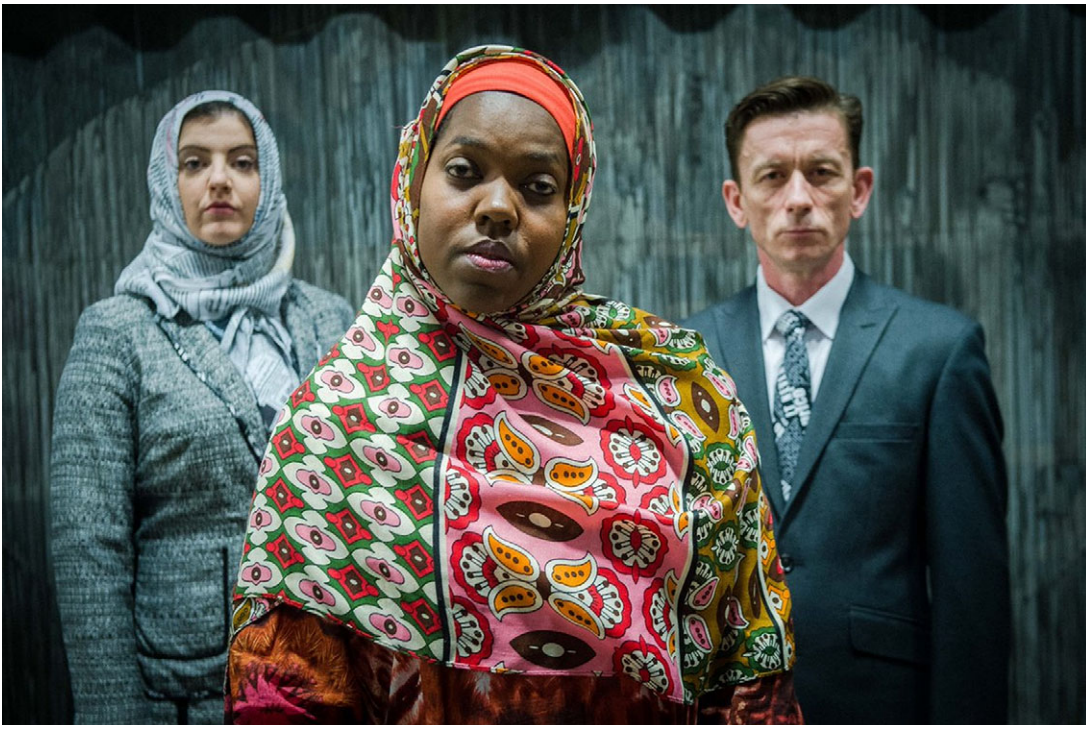

Figure 1. *Lives in Translation*, Kabosh Theatre Company, Belfast. Julie Maxwell (left), Raquel McKee (centre), and Tony Flynn (right).

asylum-seeking organizations and see if you can get a response.' So I sent a general email out, explaining what I was looking for, and, as advised, I wrote: 'I guarantee your anonymity and privacy' – nothing personal would be revealed. I got only one response, which was from a Christian mission working with a Somali organization, but I said I was specifically interested in women, as the idea at the start was that it would be women's stories . . . because I just think it was probably more difficult for them with children and family – that wrench from their own country. Anyway, they got back to me, and through them I gained access to the Somali community.

With Brexit, you knew things were going to be more difficult for immigrants and the attitudes against them were going to harden, so I thought that would encourage asylum seekers to tell me their stories. But why did I get into writing this play? It was because I have a friend who is a translator. She is French and she was translating in prison for an asylum seeker from Guinea. She didn't trust what the asylum seeker was saying and it made me question asylum seekers myself. Asylum wasn't something that I wanted to shout about politically, but I wanted to understand the translator's perspective as well, which is why we called it *Lives in Translation* (Figure 2).

Paula was particularly interested in the asylum seeker's view filtered through the translator's translation of what she says. We quoted from my translator friend in the play – 'There is always something lost in translation' – because the translator cannot capture and convey all that is said accurately. Asylum seekers' stories are so complicated that it's impossible. Even in this play, the main character's name is Asha, but in Somali it's a different spelling, and the translator questions her name from the very start of their encounter: 'Your name isn't right because it isn't spelled right.' There are different variations of her name. The translator is such a fundamental part of the system because they are trying to catch you out, you are basically interrogated with the view that you are

Figure 2. *Lives in Translation*, Kabosh Theatre Company, Belfast. Julie Maxwell (left) and Raquel McKee (right).

presupposed to be a liar. So that was what was interesting.

Eva Urban *Lives in Translation* also draws attention to class in relation to who exactly the translators are, and highlights that they are often from the same country as the asylum seekers. In this play, the asylum seeker and her translator were compatriots, so, in theory, from the same culture, but, at the same time, they were presented to be from different social, political, or class backgrounds. So they were both immigrants from the same country, but divided according to class and socio-political culture.

Rosemary Jenkinson In the context of asylum seekers from Somalia, there is fear and suspicion that they could be fundamentalists. So that's the complication. Most of the translators tend to be pro-Somali government and from a higher class. So that pushes the asylum seeker even more into the role of a suppliant because of this whole class thing.

Eva Urban It completely undermines the idea of asylum.

Rosemary Jenkinson That's it exactly. There are political tensions between translator and asylum seeker, which, obviously, the Home Office doesn't understand. Yes, it's fascinating.

Eva Urban Tom, what's your perspective on these issues?

Tom Maguire I speak from one of the most privileged positions because I come from the West, I pass as white, and I work in academia. But even part of my work with the youth theatre sector with young audiences and in organizing a national festival relates to these matters. Theatre for Young Audiences has in itself a cosmopolitan dimension, but often we have problems with visas for artists and academics coming to participate in events. And at that point, you suddenly feel the yank of where you come from, regardless of your diaspora, as you become a member of the security-threat community [for whichever state you are seeking to enter].

Eva Urban There are visa issues for students, too.

Tom Maguire This concerns students, as well. We saw this in Turkey as Erdogan cracked down on academics so that they weren't going to get out, so this kind of crisis was generated . . . The [very] use of [the term] 'crisis', this discourse of 'crisis' about migration, seems itself to be itself pernicious because migration happens and has [always] happened historically. But by calling it a crisis, suddenly we shed our responsibility for it [and pass it] to the migrants. And then we also mark it as irresolvable so that, when we start thinking about the 'crisis of refugees', the 'crisis of migration', it's almost as if to say: 'Well, can we do anything about it'? It's kind of on a par with global warming: "It's really bad but –" I don't know – "I'm not going to stop using the car".'

These kinds of things are specific to this place of privilege [within the West]. But you have also got to realize that people in these privileged places are visiting China [for example] . . . and China has the most suspicious character [about its own citizens and foreign visitors]. During a recent visit for a TYA festival, we were under constant surveillance from a Chinese minder . . . This Chinese minder was watching what the European academics were doing because we were the likely security threat. So it really brought home to me that, even within an ecology as resolutely [marginalized] as Theatre for Young Audiences, that's [regarded as] some threat.

TYA is important about the principle that children are human beings not human becomings. And the extension of the rights of being a human being to children, which you see in youth theatre, is absolutely critical. There's a massive shift in how we think about what it is to have rights, and that shift has moved in terms of age [through] the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child that we signed up to in 1989. But the point to make is that states have to sign up to the Convention, so states continue to act as the gatekeepers for people's ability to exercise their rights.

Eva Urban I wonder if you could all talk a little bit about the challenges you face in educational theatre and drama projects, as well as in working with other communities in terms of different ethical issues such as gatekeeping. How would you combine professional theatre work with community drama, and what are the challenges that you face?

I have seen various productions, which have combined the two aspects more or less successfully. Some have included large community choruses of young performers who, in some cases, may well have been young professional actors who could not get paid work and chose to volunteer for the opportunity of performing as part of a 'community chorus' instead. So, because they were recruited on that community basis, they were not paid performers even though these productions received substantial funding support; and there tended to be two or three professional actors in the cast who were fully paid, as well as the production team. That can present challenges to theatre-makers and academics as well. I just wonder if you have faced similar or related issues in your work with different communities and in helping to realize human rights.

Tom Maguire Part of the thing for Theatre for Young Audiences is that it's professional actors who perform for children, and that makes a very clear division between TYA, Theatre in Education, and Youth Theatre. I've not got the information to prove it, but my sense is that the first experience of theatre outside of a pantomime for most of Northern Ireland's population is likely to be a big international production that is part of a festival. Because of subsidies, you get schools to attend the Belfast Children's Festival. It means that this might be the only thing they get to see . . . so they could well be seeing something which really challenges what they do. That doesn't always result in the kind of much more engaged participatory workshops and outreach programmes that our local companies will do. So, in fact, on the one hand you have the local sector that is resolutely for local people, like Cahoots or Replay, and then, on the other hand, you've got international companies that come in through festivals.

The interesting thing around participation is that we're quite good at involving children in workshops but we don't involve children in the governance of the sector. So it's theatre for children, but it's not actually in any sense using children's expertise to make decisions about it. In work by international companies such as Gob Squad, children as experts are actually engaged in work. The only exception to that locally is work with children with disabilities. For example, Replay has done work with children with learning disabilities; a key part of the work is the engagement of children as experts. Or in some of the work that you see in youth theatre there is more interaction between performer and spectator, dissolving the traditional binary between them.

As you progress into primary school theatre, you would have much less audience involvement. The Northern Ireland Children's Commission has a youth panel. The Ark in Dublin has its own youth council. But we don't have any governance of children's theatre like that. So, in a way, it's a sector for children in which children are still excluded from agency. They keep getting things that adults have written [or produced]. That doesn't make them bad; it just means that children don't have the role of being agents in their own lives.

Eva Urban It would be amazing to get children to write their own plays.

Tom Maguire It's not about writing their own plays, but about saying . . . 'How do they decide what kind of topics are chosen, how do theatre-makers engage with young audiences in the developmental process?' There's a European model [in which] lots of work in workshops have been developed with child audiences. Children are there as key parts in that kind of feedback loop. We don't work in the same way, broadly within the UK and Ireland – in that interactive development of work. Then there is also the role of children as critics of the work: there are sporadic young-critic interventions, but no sustained involvement.

Rosemary Jenkinson Well, I don't work in youth theatre. The reason why I don't want to do a verbatim or documentary theatre play is because I think that the writer can make words more beautiful. I fundamentally believe in that. A company can do verbatim pieces very easily, but it wouldn't interest me. I always think that in literary or dramatic writing the artist translates something, makes it more heightened, whatever that is – more funny, more lyrical. That's what always interests me.

David Grant I think verbatim, testimonial theatre is such a broad spectrum. I wouldn't be a particular expert in this field, but I'm struck by the contrast between someone like David Hare, who draws material from interviews to write a play– and he really has no particular regard or sense of responsibility to those original witnesses – and, at the other extreme, the Theatre of Witness model, where you get the people to tell their stories, but not in a theatricalized or a conversational way. It is set up as a purist approach.

Just responding to some of the ethical concerns about re-traumatization and so forth: I have spoken to a lot of participants in those programmes about the fact that they are performing a learnt, scripted, edited version of their own words. Still, it creates, I suppose, in Brechtian terms, a kind of critical distance. It stops it being immediate, and allows them to share it again and again. But then, I also can see value in the kind of mediation that a writer can offer in the way that Rosemary has described. I suppose one big question that links all these ideas together for this discussion of theatre and human rights is: What is it that theatre brings to the stage – brings to the table – that isn't possible through this discussion or, even more directly, through journalism, or whatever it happens to be? And it clearly is this appeal to empathy.

The reference to translation makes me think that translation is quite an interesting metaphor for what the arts are doing. This was conveyed explicitly in the project *Truth in Translation* by Global Arts Corps and the American director Michael Lessac.[1] They brought a a piece to Belfast, about the experience of translators in the South African Truth and Reconciliation scheme, and what I took away from it was the powerful effect of those translators having to speak in the first person. The policy was that those translators would say: 'I attached the electrodes, I was beaten . . .'; and what they reported, and what seemed based on facts, was that those translators began to assume physical symptoms, physical problems, themselves. I think there's something there that does inform the logic of this discussion – what is happening when actors engage in that immediate way. I know that's what we have been addressing in the last two days, embodying that experience . . . but equally in terms of that empathetic response from an audience. What is happening there?

My favourite story about empathy and educational theatre was a production about the land clearances in Irish history called *Two Houses* by John McArdle. I remember going to see it as an adult critic with a class of nine-year-olds in a school in Dublin. I was sitting in the classroom, and a man came in, in period costume, and explained he was the landlord, the absentee landlord, and he explained about the rent system and how people had to grow crops to pay their rent; and that, if they didn't pay rent, they had a problem. He asked the nine-year-olds, 'So what would you do if people weren't paying their rent'? And they effectively worked with him to say, after rejecting calling the police as an option in the nineteenth century, that they would have to throw them off their land; and then how to stop them going back to their house – they told him they would have to strip the roof off the houses. They worked this all out fairly logically and then we went to the gym where we saw a cottage with a family – parents and children – and we got to know them and discovered their lifestyle, and then the landlord's agents arrived and started evicting them, and this little boy next to me says, 'What are they doing that for?' 'But you told them to.' 'But I didn't know it was going to be like this!' That's a very simple example, but I think we are all subject to these incredibly powerful empathetic and sometimes momentarily rational responses, but doing this kind of work also carries a huge responsibility.

Rosemary Jenkinson I was saying last night that, when we had a few Somali asylum seekers come to an early reading of the play with Kabosh, I looked across at one asylum seeker, and she looked at me with what I thought was hatred, and I thought, 'Oh my goodness, does she really hate what I've done'? But it was just the turmoil and the hate for the authority figures in the play. Paula and I were really very, very nervous about the reactions. Because I always said it was fictional, and I would never presume to represent the whole thing exactly as it was; I can't even understand everything that happened to everyone. It almost doesn't make sense because it is so monstrous and crazy.

As a writer, when you listen to an asylum seeker's story, it's very hard to take in. But it is about character, the human character pulling you through. The most interesting thing that I found out was the Kafkaesque, labyrinthine nature of the system, and I think I can totally relate to that in relation to being on the dole and other experiences. I've been deported myself from Israel, so I actually know what it means to be told to leave a country. I understand quite a lot of things through my own experience.

David Grant Tell us more about that.

Rosemary Jenkinson Yes, well . . . (*Laughs.*) I don't really want to say why. I was in Palestine for some time and, when I returned to Israel I was put in a detention centre overnight and sent back to the UK the next day. I know what it is like to be in a detention centre, so I could put my own experiences in the play as well, which was great. It was a fusion and, as I always said to the asylum seekers, 'No, it's not purely you . . . it's a fusion of you and me.' And that's the way I explained it.

Tom Maguire I can pick that up a little bit and relate it to one of the things that deals with youth theatre. The actor, the person who is asked to take to the stage, whether they are speaking imagined words or real words, somehow has to shape their mouth, and their body, and therefore their brain, to the experience of another, and that experience obviously involves that distancing effect that David was talking about. There's a spectrum. Some actors take on a job, they do the job brilliantly, and it leaves them unchanged. But there are profound changes for others, and that's where the educational benefit comes in.

In terms of working with my own students, sometimes speaking the words of another person allows them to reshape their mind, to experience something about another life, and it's an active affiliation. Not just witnessing what this person has gone through, but actively saying, 'I will stand for you, and therefore stand by you.' I call that, in critical writing, the 'Spartacus effect', where I say the words, using that 'I' voice similarly to a translator.[2] Actually, you are declaring, 'I take responsibility, and in my actions.'

Theatre itself can become a political action. It is the act of taking someone's side, taking someone's place, and I think that's really, really powerful educationally. I've seen students' minds expand because we are taking them through the practice of drama where they take that on; whereas it can remain a kind of slightly removed, critical-theory thing that they do – read about refugee theatre. But ask them, say, to work on a script and suddenly something can happen.

It doesn't happen for all of them. We were doing *The Vagina Monologues*, and someone would say, 'What? Are we really going to do this'? The most infamous piece in that is 'Reclaiming Cunt' – we had some students who could not say it because the threat to their personal identity of saying the words, even in character, was so extraordinary; they just could not do it. Here is a little bit of a sense of the transformative power of putting someone else's words into your mouth.

Rosemary Jenkinson I think that what I didn't expect about this experience was to be almost clothed in somebody else's personal experience. The majority of my research was based on one person who was stuck in the system for so many years. In a way, I didn't necessarily want this or set out to write this, but the play became a bit of a vehicle for highlighting the plight of one person. It was totally transformative for me. I know I wrote an appeal for support on a website, drawing attention to this person's plight of being trapped in the system: it mobilizes you in a way that you never expected. Because it is so real and violent, it affects you and makes you want to change people's lives.

David Grant I would respond to that by thinking in terms of the power that the mediating force of theatre brings and the accountable balancing of responsibilities [that comes with it]. Again, without going into details, I'm aware of situations through this testimonial theatre work where the notion of an unreal story has been a really serious issue. These stories are sometimes unused, perhaps because the individuals themselves aren't prepared to actually put themselves out there. Or perhaps because they don't fit within some kind of overarching editorial shaping that has to go on to make a piece theatrical. But I think I'm becoming increasingly aware of the need for a kind of clear strategy to address those people whose stories aren't used because the way it's been expressed to me is that those people somehow feel doubly abused: somehow their story hasn't seemed worthy, and so, once you begin that process of trying to collect these stories, it carries with it the most enormous ethical responsibility, and I don't know yet whether, as a sector, we are dealing with that.

Rosemary Jenkinson But I think the fictional content then makes the story, creates something new beyond the original story as the writer adds something.

David Grant Well, I think that's an argument in favour of authorial mediation.

Eva Urban I think with *Lives in Translation*, the function of this authorial mediation was also to protect the privacy of those whose stories were told. Could you tell us a bit more about that?

Rosemary Jenkinson Well, yes, there was one man I interviewed, some of whose testimony I used in the play for a sort of brother character, but mainly I interviewed one woman. We conducted about six or seven interviews. Also, a support worker told me the story of another woman who wasn't willing to talk to me because she really feared it would re-traumatize her, so I got her story second-hand, which also fed into the play. It was very difficult because people didn't really want to talk, and the people who have gained asylum don't want to delve into it again because they've finished with it. They've moved on with their lives. The ones who are seeking asylum are still in trauma because they're reliving it – it's fresh. They still have to do the interviews with the Home Office. On either side of asylum, they don't really want to talk about it.

Also, asylum seekers are still frightened that their name will be linked with the play, or the Home Office will in some way connect them anyway, so it's just a danger to them. I had a support worker who sat in on the interviews as well, because I felt more comfortable. I felt it was being safely monitored and the support worker could assist with any misunderstandings and mistranslations, because obviously there was a language barrier. I felt more comfortable myself and the asylum seeker felt more comfortable with her support worker there.

David Grant What about the impact on you as the mediating artist? I have recently listened to someone who works in this field make the point that these systems tend to be set up as support networks for the participant or the audience. Very often if you have one of these traumatic sharing processes, there are counsellors in the audience in case anyone is affected. Clearly part of the empathetic extension of this is the ripple effect where people are reminded of their own stories. But you know, as an artist, I'm doing an interview with somebody for two hours about really, really difficult stories, and then I'm sitting on my own in a room listening back to this tape again, and again, and again, and again, and I had not anticipated the accumulative effect that this was going to have on my own mental health. As an artist, how do you shed that trauma? Is it through the creation of a piece of art?

Rosemary Jenkinson Yes, I guess it is, because, as with all traumatic things, art really is a release. So I then felt the asylum seeker's frustrations; I was a conduit for getting that out into the open. In a way that felt good and, also, I did not force her to say too much. If anything, she actually was very unemotional when talking about rape, because I suppose she's been through quite a few processes with translators in the Home Office. I could see a lot of emotion underneath, but I certainly didn't push too much. I probably invented some of what she didn't say.

David Grant But again it's the tendency Alison Jeffers identifies, in her work with refugees, that there's great pressure on witnesses to be sure to tell a consistent story.

Tom Maguire What counts as a 'good rape story'? And recently, with that trial, what's a 'good rape-victim story'? What's a credible narrator? These are are very blurred lines and structures. So that distancing, for her, I think is really an interesting process, and also for you, from both being able to see it and then imaginatively create the space that you needed to explore it as a dramatist.

Rosemary Jenkinson Yes, and I also knew she had shared her story. She had performed in a Theatre of Witness some years before, so she had already processed this and could emotionally handle it. This made it a lot more comfortable for me because I knew it was something that she already shared.

Tom Maguire There's a problem with story because story does violence to experience. It shapes and pushes in a particular way. If you look at plays like Tom Murphy's *Bailegangaire*, the inability to speak is the marker of a grave trauma. Mommo, who was eventually forced to tell that story, actually does end up re-traumatizing, so there are some elements of experience that cannot be storied, or if they're storied, they need to be made palatable, digestible, tellable, and that isn't necessarily where the original experience has left the individual.

Rosemary Jenkinson Exactly. You know, I found her very quick and unemotional, not going into too much detail.

David Grant I mean, one advantage, dare I say it, in telling the story as an outsider is that the audience comes to it with an open mind. A lot of the work that I'm investigating at the moment sets out to tell the story of one side of the community, which then inevitably creates a counter-reaction from people who perceive themselves as being from the other side of the community. That's something I would be interested in teasing out: theatre can be a mechanism for an exploration of human rights, but how do you negotiate that in a contested situation?

Eva Urban To open that up just a little bit more, and bring it back to the ideas of sympathy and empathy: Scottish Enlightenment philosopher Adam Smith in *A Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) introduces a theatrical metaphor that I find really interesting. He argues that sympathy in the real world has to be directed in a manner similar to that of a stage director who tries to generate empathy in the audience for the characters portrayed by the actors on stage. He argues that, if someone wishes to solicit sympathy from others, they will also have to show sympathy for their audience and 'direct' their own 'performance' of their plight in such a way that their real-world 'audience' can relate to it and sympathize. In that way, he applies the dramaturgical concept of tragic sympathy to the real world, and you can, in turn, bring it back to the theatre and think about where your audience has come from, taking into account any tensions between people from different communities and diverse audience responses.

David Grant Just to give two concrete examples from the early days of theatre-platforming issues that affect our society. There was DubbelJoint's play about policing, *Forced Upon Us*, which created a really negative reaction from the other side of the community. More recently, there has been Kabosh Theatre Company's work, which is ostensibly very balanced, but if you sit in an audience with people who have one-sided allegiances, it's very discomforting because of the raw kind of sectarianism that can communicate itself in the audience. I think it's too easy to think that theatre can be unproblematic in airing and presenting these ideas: once you set up one kind of position, inevitably you're going to generate a counter-reaction, and I would put it again that we've not really come to terms with some of those issues.

Tom Maguire No, because I remember talking to Martin Lynch about *Chronicles of Long Kesh*, and he tried in lots and lots of interviews with loyalist and political prisoners, but in the opening in St Kevin's Hall a group of – what were they called? – Loyalist Prisoners Association just got up and left because they just felt that their story wasn't being given a hearing. People are very wary of notions of balance in conflict in Ireland, but the most important thing that we could have in that play was to add a character, as a prison officer, say the lines, 'Fuck the hunger strikers.' For the predominantly Republican audience, suddenly the discourse shifted. Suddenly there was a challenge, and it worked.

So, within that kind of contested space of performance – we often think of theatre as this nice, pleasant, middle-class thing – suddenly there was a real sense of 'Uh-oh. Where is this one going to land?' With the loyalist prisoners walking out, there was this other challenge coming from the stage and I think people then felt it. Something shifted for me in that. So sometimes what we think of as a one-sided narrative is where some of that shifting work really happens.

Rosemary Jenkinson I agree. I think that discomfort is really good because you're actually exposed. You can't hide from it, you have to deal with it, and I think it's great for audiences too. I wrote another play, *Here Comes the Night*, where I had a Polish migrant, who is obviously Catholic, coming into a Protestant area and uncovering the past about how Catholics were previously forced out from that area. I think it's really interesting to use migrants to mix things up as well because it adds to the complication and spices up the usual boring binary (Figure 3).

Figure 3. *Here Comes the Night*, Lyric Theatre Belfast, April 2016. From left to right: Susan Davey, Michael Condron, Kerri Quinn, and Thomas Finnegan.

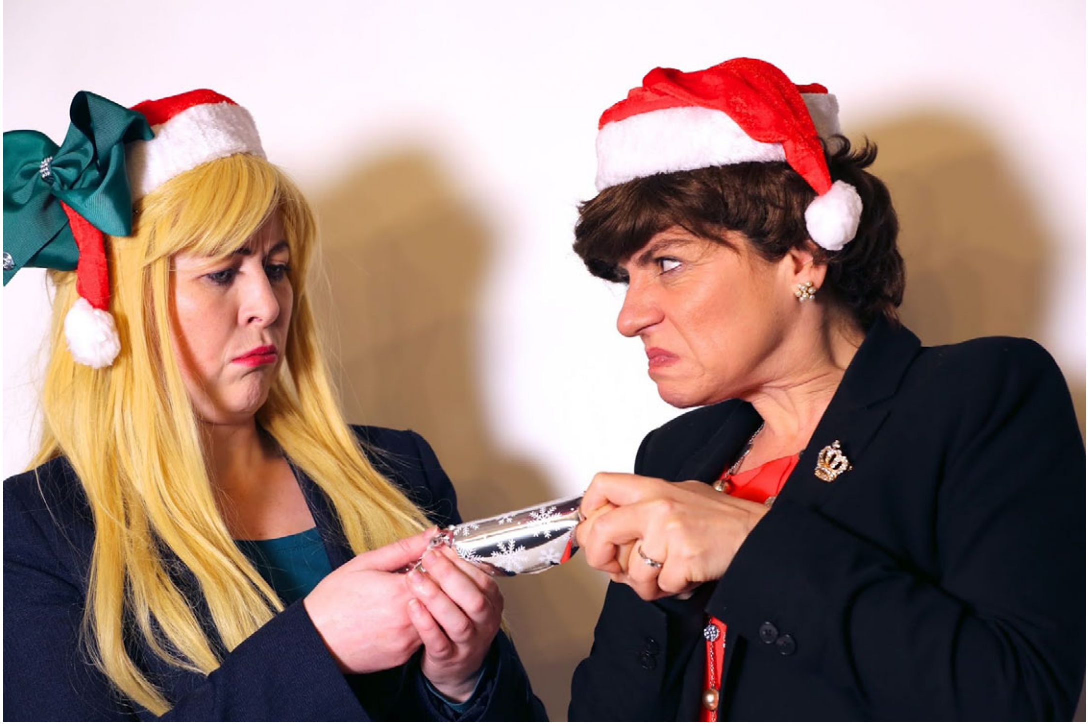

Figure 4. *Michelle and Arlene: Planes, Trains, and Tractors*, Accidental Theatre, November 2017. Mary-Frances Doherty as Michelle O'Neill (left) and Maria Connolly as Arlene Foster (right).

Eva Urban You should mention your other play *Michelle and Arlene* as well (Figure 4).

Rosemary Jenkinson Yes. *Michelle and Arlene*: well, that's very balanced. No matter what my personal bias is as a writer, the whole point is I'm against them both because they're not going back to Stormont and it's our human right to be governed, which is really the crux of the play. I tried to ensure that Michelle and Arlene equally slag each other off, but it is harder because Arlene Foster is so much more of a big character and she's more easily lampooned, I think, and maybe also because I'm a Protestant playwright I find it easier to lampoon Protestants. As writers, we have our own baggage of what we find easy to do. But I tried to get as much balance in it as possible, and I think the modern playwrights from here are more balanced – such as that play *Fire Below* by . . .

David Grant Owen McCafferty – and also, in *Quietly*, he had a Polish barman.

Rosemary Jenkinson And that was great as well. Yes.

Eva Urban Perhaps, David, you would like to talk about your drama and theatre work with prisoners in Northern Ireland as well? By the way, there is a production at the Avignon festival this year, by director Olivier Py, of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* with prisoners who have been given exceptional permission to leave the prison for the project. This may be of interest too.

David Grant Mike Moloney, who was the great champion of the prison arts, whom we sadly lost a couple of years ago, was always interested in the distinction between a kind of northern European prison theatre culture, where prison theatre allowed prisoners to interrogate their condition, and, broadly speaking, a southern European theatre culture where they did opera and created transformative experiences to allow them to imaginatively escape the bars.

My own experience of a prison theatre project was more problematic. I was working in a lifers' unit, and this was quite a progressive regime accepting that long-term prisoners were eventually going to be released, and so you had men going out of prison – this would have been about five or six years ago – having done sixteen-year sentences, and, you know, when you think of the number of changes in our society since then, even on a practical level, things like mobile phones, bank machines, there was a whole kind of way of living which those prisoners hadn't experienced. And they were institutionalized to the extent that they haven't done these things for themselves before. I think this gets us to a different kind of human rights issue which is much more everyday – the right to your own autonomy.

What this unit tried to do was to make prisoners responsible for their own cooking, shopping, laundry – that kind of thing. The argument for using drama was again that of empathetic engagement; [the idea] that, by creating a kind of story which looked at the mutual support prisoners can offer one another and by giving them ownership of that project, was a way for them to operate independently.

I've heard that prisons as systems don't encourage relationships between prisoners because, in theory, it makes prisoners harder to deal with so, in lots of small ways, this prison tried to make the [theatre] project very difficult, and it reached a climax when we were due to take it down to the Young Offenders' Centre and we got exceptional permission to take all of the prisoners out to the other prisons. It seemed like a perfect project involving older prisoners performing a piece, which got younger prisoners to reflect on rates of recidivism and the revolving door in and out of prison.

At the last minute, a security issue was raised with one of the prisoners who had a small role. He – ironically – played a prison warder, and he was refused permission to go, and we could have quite easily, in theatrical terms, gone and done it without him, but the other prisoners decided that, in solidarity, they couldn't go if he couldn't go, and so the whole project collapsed. At the time I thought, 'Well, that's been a wasted six months,' because this was the culmination of the whole project. And then, with a bit of distance, I realized that that act of defiance represented the very kind of autonomy the project was designed to promote, so we managed to find the silver lining. I suppose those would be my feelings about the arts in prisons.

Tom Maguire Can I jump in a minute? Because I have heard you speak about Dan Gordon's project about working with prisoners to stage *Observe the Sons of Ulster* and the way in which the system actually works to open up or refuse things like that.

David Grant Yes, creating a piece of theatre in a prison is never easy because you'll rarely get the same people in the same room at the same time. But I think, on the whole, that that project was singularly successful. It was a production of *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme*, Frank McGuinness's famous First World War play, very much located in a Protestant identity, but it was a mixed cast in Catholic and Protestant terms from within the prison.

What became very clear, very early on, was that the play – it consists of four pairings of two men in many cases thrown together without knowing one another – connected with these young prisoners immediately. First of all, these men were the same kind of age as they were, but also they were used to being thrown together with people they didn't know. Usually, they were paired up in two-person cells. And I do think overall that was a phenomenally successful enterprise.

Small things made it – like the security governor, who was an absolute fanatic for military history and was so taken with the curiosity that these young men had about that history that he allowed not only real guns on the set but real bayonets. Most of them, apart from those with the more serious sentences, were allowed to go out to visit the Somme Museum. It was very successful. It was good for a documentary that Brendan Byrne made. And interestingly, the whole origin of the project was that Brendan Byrne wanted to make a film about the rehearsal process and then Dan

Gordon convinced him it would be like watching paint dry. You know it had to be something that was more thematic.

The project took place in June 2007. Round about this time of year a lot of prison staff are on holiday. One prisoner who had no connection with the project made a breakout attempt shortly after the play finished, and this was used as an excuse to move a lot of the older prisoners over to Maghaberry or up to Magilligan. Half of the people who were moved were people who'd been in the play. So again, there's a sense that, for all its perceived success, for all the PR value of the documentary when it was screened on local television, there was something, whether consciously or unconsciously, in the system that could not cope with the kind of cohesion that a production brought to the prisoners within a prison, and so they were scattered to the winds. I have to say that, in my own mind, that was a kind of active policy. The prison system does not like prisoners to have that? Rehabilitative potential for the arts is always in constant conflict with the bigger security concerns.

Eva Urban This takes us back to our starting point: the wider public and the social relevance of theatre practice and its impact on how human rights are perceived and negotiated. Our discussion today has revealed that theatre practice's intervention in human rights depends on, and is limited by, specific social frameworks and possibilities. But it has also highlighted that such theatre interventions can successfully overcome various obstacles, and move beyond such limitations to achieve a liberating, humanizing, and enlightening effect; and, in a near utopian manner, it has the potential to overcome patterns of othering and to bring moments of cohesion to previously marginalized and divided communities.

Notes and References

1. 'In the world of theatre and conflict resolution Lessac is the creator and director of the international theatre piece *Truth in Translation*, which he co-produced with South Africa's Market Theatre. *Truth in Translation* travelled to 26 cities in 11 countries on four continents and led to his founding of the Global Arts Corps. GAC is a US 501c3 non-profit theatre and education foundation dedicated to using professional theatre to support reconciliation initiatives in countries emerging from conflict and which celebrates and fosters the possibility of perceptual change': <https://globalartscorps.org/who-we-are/team/michael-lessac>.

2. See Tom Maguire, *Performing Story on the Contemporary Stage* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).