

A Comic Portrayal of the Troubles in Contemporary Drama

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Abstract: *This article aims to introduce a PhD research on the comic depiction of the Troubles (1968-1998) in Northern Irish drama. It will outline the issues of the diverse forms of the comic in the representation of the thirty-year-conflict. Amid the different tones for portraying the subject, the comic acquires a combination of satirical, ironic and black humoured tonalities in the work of Marie Jones, Martin Lynch, Tim Loane, Abbie Spallen and David Ireland.*

Keywords: *Troubles, Northern Ireland theatre, comic representation.*

Nothing is funnier than unhappiness, I grant you that... Yes, yes, it's the most comical thing in the world. (Beckett's Endgame, 1957, 26)

The aim of this paper is to introduce a doctoral research in progress named “Humour in Times of Troubles: the Comic Representation of the Conflict in Northern Ireland” and to offer an overview of the various types of the comic, in which the Troubles appear in the plays *A Night in November* (1994), by Marie Jones; *The History of the Troubles (Accordin' to my Da)* (2002), by Martin Lynch; *Caught Red-Handed* (2002), by Tim Loane; *Lally, the Scut* (2015) by Abbie Spallen; *Can't Forget About You* (2013), and *Cyprus Avenue* (2016), by David Ireland.

These plays present an alluring manner of representing sorrows as the source for humour and arouse questions on what forms the comic embodies in them. It is also important to consider whether the poetics of humour in drama indicate a sense of closure in relation to the Troubles, or if the comic mode is a disguise for tears in those works.

Throughout this article, the terms “humour” and “comic” have a near-synonymic relation linked with the techniques that produce laughter in dramatic situations. This definition is based on *The Dictionary of the Theatre: Terms, Concepts, and Analysis*. According to Patrice Pavis (2000), the comic relates to the “man’s love of joking and laughter, to his ability to perceive unusual and ridiculous aspects of physic and social reality.” (66) And humour is a form of the comic, a technique of playwrights. In Pavis’ words “It seeks out the hidden philosophical aspects of existence” (68).

This work emerged from my MA dissertation, “A Presença de *As Aves* de Aristófanes em Literaturas de Expressão Inglesa”¹, which analysed three contemporary plays based on *The Birds* (414 BC) by Aristophanes. The research observed that the contemporary texts of *The Birds* by Gwedolyn McEwen, Sean O’ Brien and Paul Muldoon showed a fresh view on the aristophanic; as a result, these plays are new and creative works of art. Humour was not the focus of my previous research, nevertheless it stood out from the plays, particularly, from the version by the Irish poet, Paul Muldoon.

Although the version of *The Birds* (1999) by Paul Muldoon maintained the play set in 414 BC, the text brings the atmosphere of the Troubles through helicopter sounds among the birds, a remind of an aspect of daily life during the Troubles which is the hovering of army helicopters. In this sense, The Peloponnesian War in Aristophane’s comedy becomes a mirror in which Belfast parodies its own conflicts.

It is worth mentioning that mocking at the Troubles takes place in different ways in Northern Ireland: cartoons, television shows and cinema have been revisiting it recently with humour. For instance, “Laughter in the Dark – Illustrating the Troubles” (January 2018)² is an exhibition that shows the timeline of the political cartoon in this country. Along with that, the television series “Derry Girls”³, a sitcom set in the 1990’s, has premiered in January 2018 and depicts the life of an adolescent and her family/friends’ relations, during the Troubles. In cinema, “Breakfast on Pluto” (2005), based on Patrick McCabe’s (1998) homonymous novel, balances sorrowful events of the conflict with humour, this way of depicting through the comic belongs to a tradition in Irish literature.

With regard to the book *The Irish Comic Tradition*, Vivian Mercier (1962) traces a continuous line of this tradition in oeuvres written in Gaelic and English from the 9th century to 1960s. The preface considers as part of the Irish comic tradition a “wild humour, a delight in witty word play, and a tendency to regard satire as one of the indispensable functions of the literary man” (vii). In this book, tradition means an unbroken chain from Gaelic to Anglo-Irish comic literature and it encompasses authors as Jonathan Swift and James Joyce. *A Modest Proposal* (1729) by Swift stands out as an illustration of this kind of humour since this text presents a solution for the famine in Ireland in a satirical tone suggesting that “the remaining hundred thousand [of children] may, at a year old, be offered in sale to the persons of quality and fortune, through the kingdom, (...) so as to render them plump, and fat for a good table”(194). Although the study dates from the ’60s, Mercier’s work is relevant nowadays because of its deep analysis and definitions of humour, the macabre, the grotesque, the irony, the satire, and the wit; and it engaged the subsequent discussions about Irish humour. On this matter, it is worth mentioning *The Profane Book of Comedy* (1982) by David Krause, *The Comic Irishman* (1984) by Maureen Waters and *The Comic Tradition in Irish Women Writers* (1996) by Theresa O’Connor.

In a dialogue with V. Mercier, D. Krause observed the absence of the study of dramatic texts in this book and developed an analysis concentrated on William Butler Yeats, John Millington Synge, Sean O’Casey and Beckett. Maureen Waters focuses the

study on the character, more specifically, the comic hero and the representation of the Irishman on stage in Flann O'Brien, James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, and Sean O'Casey. In a stimulating contribution to the reflexions on comic tradition in Irish literature, Theresa O'Connor establishes a direct conversation with Mercier's text and proposes a redefinition of this tradition by examining the fiction of Elizabeth Bowen, Iris Murdoch, Molly B. Keane, Edna O'Brien, Julia O'Faolain, and Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill.

Although these scholars provided a vivid and enlightening treatment on the issue, none of them had a view on the singularities of drama produced in Northern Ireland. It is important to remark that the theatres in Belfast did not close their doors even during the darkest times of the Troubles, which is a subject that reverberates in post-conflict.

Northern Irish playwrights portrayed the conflicts since *The Flats* (1971) by John Boy, the first play that openly explored the theme. Subsequently, *We do it for Love* (1975) by Patrick Galvin offered a satirical version of the violence in the conflict. This play certainly has a relation with a comic tradition outlined by Krause, Mercier, O'Connor and Waters, therefore one may ask what this relation is, and how it shapes the humour in plays related to the conflict. This concern was the core query for the search of the plays that compose the *corpus* of this research.

The initial criteria for establishing the *corpus* was looking for plays with a comic tone that dealt with the Troubles. Pursuing this objective, the reading of the article "'Pack up your troubles and smile, smile, smile': comic plays about the legacy of 'the Troubles'" (2010) by Tim Miles was important because it mentioned *A Night in November* (1994), by Marie Jones, *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* (2001), by Martin McDonagh, *The History of the Troubles (Accordin' to my Da)* (2002), by Martin Lynch and *Caught Red-Handed* (2002) by Tim Loane. The article mostly alluded to the texts; on one hand, this caused a superficial view of the plays, but on the other hand, it allowed reading the texts more directly.

Consequently, this approach led to the beginning of the *corpus* of this research that, at first, included all the plays mentioned by Miles. Thereafter, the contact with the dissertation "Violência, intolerância e confronto no teatro de Martin McDonagh" (2009)⁴ by Fabiana Rodrigues Dias, from the University of São Paulo, showed that *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* had already been studied in Brazil. Despite the fact that the analysis of Dias highlighted the theme of violence in the play and not humour, this doctoral research elected playwrights and texts that have not been examined yet.

To verify if the Troubles remained as a query for contemporary plays after 2002, I observed the plays performed in Tinderbox Company and Belfast's Lyric. When looking at some past productions, two plays were outstanding: *Can't Forget about You* (2013) and *Lally, the Scut* (2015). Both texts bring resonances of the Troubles, rather than the conflict itself. The Abbey Theatre also presented a play on sectarian issues with *Cyprus Avenue* (2016) which had a lot of repercussion as "the most shocking play on the London stage"⁵, or a "complex study of sectarian paranoia"⁶ according to *The Guardian*, and the actor "Stephen Rea's masterful performance" as *The Irish Times*⁷ wrote.

After this brief context of how the issues of this research and its *corpus* started, this paper narrows down the period studied. *A Night in November* (1994), by Marie Jones; *The History of the Troubles (Accordin' to my Da)* (2002), by Martin Lynch; *Caught Red-Handed* (2002), by Tim Loane; *Lally, the Scut* (2015) by Abbie Spallen; *Can't Forget About You* (2013), and *Cyprus Avenue* (2016), by David Ireland cover the period between the end of the Troubles and the beginning of the Peace Process. This timeframe favors the view on the subject, simultaneously, considering its closeness to the end of the conflict and the process of understanding it by a temporal distance. Thus, the scope provides a combination of voices from past and present that seem to share the taste for a comic representation of the conflict.

This analysis of portraying the Troubles with humour concentrated on an aspect that contrasts with a tendency in Irish drama, according to Shaun Richards (1995), of representing the conflict through translations and versions of ancient Greek tragedy, such as Brendan Kennelly's *Antigone* (1996), Tom Paulin's *The Riot Act* (1984), and Seamus Heaney's *The Cure at Troy* (1991). The comic tone brings a different perspective, which contributes to the current discussion of the plays about the Troubles.

The critical role of humour takes place not only in irony and in satire, but also in black humour. In the plays examined, irony is a form of saying something through the opposite way, and it needs a comprehension of this inadequate correspondence to happen successfully. In *The History of the Troubles (accordin' to my Da)* the term "home" is an example of this mechanism: "Seamus: They were there to give Felix, Fireball and Gerry a brand new home./Derek: A cosy little compound on the outskirts of Lisburn./Seamus: Long Kesh" (33). Since Long Kesh is a prison, it means a contradiction with the idea of a comfortable home. The technique of creating irony to provoke laughter relies on the incongruence of the idea of what home is.

Alongside with irony, satire emerges from the plays when the comic points towards a political meaning. In this sense, all the plays examined present satiric characteristics in different levels. *The History of The Troubles (accordin' to my Da)* expresses its satirical mode widely, considering its title as an evident reference to the Troubles. The play relies on "my Da's side" version of history to portray it as a joke, in contrast with the serious tone in official speech. The voices of Seamus and Derek structure the play; they are characters that narrate what is happening with the protagonist, Gerry Courteney, and address the audience. They interrupt the illusion of the scenes expressing opinions connected with jokes.

Although expressing violence, *The History of the Troubles*, by Martin Lynch, is more playful than *Cyprus Avenue*, by David Ireland, and *Lally the Scut*, by Abbie Spallen, which intensify the representation by the hyperbole of the violence and a darker tone of satire. Eric, the protagonist of *Cyprus Avenue*, is a political extremist who thinks that his newborn granddaughter is Gerry Adams. In addition, he strongly wants to maintain what he calls his cultural heritage by eliminating the mixture of his future generations with people he addresses as "Fenians". In order to accomplish that he wants to exterminate

the baby and asks Slim to accomplish that. In this request, the comic is based on the character, Slim is a loyalist paramilitary who joined the cause after the peace process and has anger management appointments in a week basis. The darker tone appears when both are discussing the change in plans of the murder of the baby. Slim argues that he cannot kill a celebrity; it is his only rule.

The figure of a terrorist has certain characteristics related to violence that do not associate logically with a moral code such as not killing celebrities; therefore, it brings laughter when this expectation is broken. This technique, broadly applied in this text, provides a discontinuation of the heaviness in the action by inserting an absurd element.

In a slightly different treatment, *Lally, the Scut* also stages a child as the center of the play, the protagonist's son has fallen into a hole and this event calls the attention of the media. The play is set in a village on the border between north and south, on the north side. Gav and Owen are two journalists who arrive to cover the accident. The past connects with present because the fall of Lally's son repeats the story lived by her in the years of Troubles. Moreover, the television news, which had profit from the first time a child fell, has a single story to tell: the suffering, the tears and tragedy of a mother who is nearly losing her son. The satiric element arises through the idea of the characters as journalists interested only in selling news.

Whereas *The History of the Troubles (accordin' to my Da)*, *Cyprus Avenue* and *Lally the Scut* largely stage violence as a commodity, some scenes in *A Night in November* and *Can't Forget About You* portray the brutality of the Troubles in a sphere of normality as if the conflict were something usual, and of less importance. This displacement of the tragic dimensions of the troubles allows an emotional distance. In this sense, the comic happens, as theories of humour state, when there is a distance from the object of laughter. According to A. Peter McGraw (2012), "prior research on psychological distance and humor is consistent with the intuitively appealing suggestions of Mark Twain and Mel Brooks: distance helps transform tragedy into comedy." (1261). It is possible to include playwrights as well in this statement.

For example, Marie Jones creates this distance in *A Night in November* by treating the problem as less important, whereas *Can't Forget About You* is far from the conflict in a temporal dimension. In the opening scene of *A Night in November*, Kenneth says

That day started out like every other day starts out . . . check under the car for explosive devices . . . you have to be a step ahead of them bastards . . . they keep advancing their technology, gone are the days of the good old-fashioned learnt-at-their-mother's-knee trip wire attached to the ignition" (Kindle's position 983-985).

This monologue blends irony, satire, and black humour when describing his ordinary morning. It is ironic because checking for explosives cannot be an ordinary act. Its satirical tone on how bomb technology has advanced reminds the way Swift speaks about the famine in Ireland calling the attention for details in cooking in *Modest*

Proposal. Black humour is present when the protagonist of *A Night in November* states that the good days were the old types of explosives, that could be made even by children, were over.

Black or dark humour means using themes as death, bombs, and disability to create a comic scene – Andre Breton (2002) coined the term in his *Anthologie de L'humour Noir* in 1935. In his preface, Breton observes the relation between the celebration of the dead in Mexico and amusement: “[Mexico’s] with its splendid funeral games stands above all as the land of black humour.”⁸ (14)

Although depicting the Troubles in a very different manner, *Can't Forget About You* also applies the technique of detachment to bring up the troubles. In contrast with the other titles mentioned in this paper, this play is a love story. The main character, Stevie, meets Martha in a café, she is reading (and laughing about) a book called *Overcoming Grief*, and he reads *The Holocaust*. The Troubles are not part of everyday life but remain as a memory of the death of Stevie’s father, which he tells the girl as an ordinary occurrence in life. As the following dialogue shows: “Stevie: He was killed in the Troubles./ Martha: Oh. Who by? Is it OK to talk about it? /Stevie: Yeah, yeah. It’s no big deal. It was the IRA.”(39) Stevie’s words rise a sense of the father as the everyman in Belfast. Many young people share his story, parents murdered by I.R.A, U.V.F or the British army. By putting this as an ordinary fact, the comic emerges from the association between the normality built by the ironic thought “Troubles were not a big deal” and the Martha’s response: “You’re kidding.”

This manner of presenting the Troubles as a problem of less importance intensifies the irony in these plays and is a different technique to highlight satiric aspects in these texts. Simultaneously, when placing a serious matter, as the Troubles, as an everyday happening, the playwrights employ mechanisms of detachment, creating a distance from the Troubles as if it were fictional rather than actual. On the other hand, when the excess of violence expressed in *Cyprus Avenue* comes onto the stage, it brings two questions, is the conflict over? And is it possible to laugh about it? When the violence gradually increases in the play, it becomes difficult to find it comic; it sets a limit for laughter.

In conclusion, the outline of these plays demonstrated that the theme of humour is used in the representation of a serious conflict. On one hand, some plays are set in times when deaths, explosions, and extreme violence were an everyday matter; on the other hand, playwrights choose to depict the resonance of the Troubles until the present days and how it shaped ordinary lives. Although every play is a unique portrait of this historic period, they share an inclination for black humour, self-derisive irony and political satire, and they are part of a comic tradition that creates laughter from sadness.

Notes

- 1 In English translation: The Presence of *The Birds* by Aristophanes in English Literature. Available at: <http://www.teses.usp.br/teses/disponiveis/8/8147/tde-29092015-152044/pt-br.php>

- 2 Available at <https://www.nimc.co.uk/whats-on/event/1207/laughter-in-the-dark-illustrating-the-troubles/> (access in 19th February 2018)
- 3 Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2018/feb/10/real-derry-girls-channel-4-tv-comedy-northern-ireland> (access in 19th February 2018)
- 4 Available at <http://www.teses.usp.br/teses/disponiveis/8/8147/tde-10022010-160552/pt-br.php>. (access in 19th February 2018)
- 5 Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/theatreblog/2016/apr/11/cyprus-avenue-david-ireland-belfast-play-royal-court-theatre-upstairs>. (access 19th February 2018).
- 6 Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2016/feb/18/cyprus-avenue-review-peacock-abbey-dublin-abbey-royal-court>. (access 19th February 2018).
- 7 Available at <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/stage/cyprus-avenue-review-stephen-rea-delivers-a-masterful-performance-1.2538443>. (access 19th February 2018).
- 8 My translation into English. In the original language: [du Mexique] avec ses splendides jouets funèbres s'affirmant au reste comme la terre de l'humour noir.

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