

Shannon Bugos

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### **The Role of the Imagined “Fifth Province” in Northern Ireland’s Field Day Theatre Productions During the Troubles**

Sectarian violence exploded in Northern Ireland in 1968. For the next three decades, shootings, bombings, and kidnappings drove society into a time of fear, suspicion, and revenge. In the midst of this conflict, the Field Day Theatre emerged. Founded in Derry in 1980 by playwright Brian Friel and actor Stephen Rea, this traveling theatre company dedicated itself to producing and performing dramatic literature that commented on the divided Irish society.

These founders pursued what an earlier Irish publication termed “the fifth province” – an imagined place formed out of a belief in the lost secret center of Ireland where prejudices fell away and harmony thrived. The ultimate goal of the founders of Field Day was to encourage those involved in “the Troubles” to forge a new sense of cultural identity for Ireland through the creation of a space in which Protestants and Catholics could imagine and build a peaceful existence free of past prejudicial and violent realities.

My research examined the extent to which the Field Day Theatre succeeded or failed in the pursuit of their goal. Through archival research and more than a dozen interviews with well-placed theatre and peace academics, I sought to understand how two incompatible world-views, translated into political goals, could be put in conversation with one another in order to work to establish a single reality of peaceful coexistence.

The concise conclusion of my research question is that there exists no simple “yes” or “no” answer. As regards the Field Day Theatre, I uncovered a creative ambiguity in that the

creative arts, such as theatre, attempt not to present solutions to conflict, but rather to recast and to rephrase the question so as to invite inclusive participation and multiple interpretations by the opposed parties into a conversation for which the daily social and political order has no space.

I know that when the Field Day Theatre Company emerged in 1980, Friel and Rea discussed how they did not have immediate plans for continuing the work of their company. The premiere Field Day play *Translations* underscored the deeply rooted opposition between Catholics and Protestants, Irish and English, nationalist and loyalist in the north of Ireland. Though hopeful, Friel and Rea were by no means certain if those entrenched in the conflict would be open to using literature as a way to highlight injustices on all sides and to negotiate a peaceful path forward. If the reception of *Translations* confirmed their hopes, Friel and Rea said they would continue to work for cross-community understanding and discussion through Field Day. As it turned out, *Translations* garnered much attention, even internationally in places such as South Africa and Thailand, and the Field Day Theatre officially maintained production until 1998, the year of the Good Friday peace agreement.<sup>1</sup> Over the course of its theatrical run, Field Day did not attempt to determine who was right and who was wrong in the conflict. Rather, the plays were meant to highlight the pains suffered by all communities, to give voice to those trapped in a violent society, and to imagine and ultimately construct a peaceful future – all through the power of storytelling.

During our interview, Seamus Deane, the main philosophical voice on the Field Day board of directors, discussed the importance of “the story” in Irish culture. Stories, specifically ghost stories in his case, were the main line of communication between his “antiquated” parents and his “modern” self. This paralleled what was happening among groups in Northern Ireland:

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<sup>1</sup> Some observers claim that the 1990 departure of Friel from the company marked the theatre’s end.

Those ghost stories [told by my mother] were in fact political analyses of where we were and how those people of the earlier generations had lived and how they had understood their experience.... It was a world within another dimension, and to be modern you had to give up that dimension, or any dimension other than the secular. It really dawned on me halfway through my connection with Field Day that to tell a ghost story is very often to tell a story about a wrong that has never been righted...A ghost story cannot end until the ghost stops coming back, and it is like saying that the past will keep on coming back because there is too much injustice in this system for the system to endure or for people to endure or put up with it, even if it means dying.

What this means, then, is that Field Day proved successful in opening a fifth province between the opposed communities in Northern Ireland by the very fact that it told stories that drew in Catholics as well as Protestants, nationalists and unionists. The presentation of a story on a public stage gave light not only to past injustices suffered by each community, but also to a way forward through the presentation itself. Field Day intentionally thrust the troubled past of the island onstage so as to encourage people to see, to understand, to react, and, most importantly, to work together for an end to the violence and for a peaceful future.

By its end after the Belfast Agreement, the Field Day Theatre demonstrates its success: peace has made the theatre obsolete. On the other hand, the theatre was only partly successful because inequalities continue in housing, education, as well as voting rights, and intergroup tensions still abound, particularly during the summertime marching season. Whether full peace will come to Northern Ireland, I have learned, remains very much open for debate – a debate founded on the works of the Field Day Theatre that set the idea of creative ambiguity in the context of conflict transformation.

My experience this summer was both inspiring and frustrating as I attempted to intertwine my literature and peace studies majors in my project. Interviews with those such as prominent academic Seamus Deane, governmental peace worker Tim O'Connor, and former Republican prisoner Joe Watson proved extremely influential on my thoughts about my future academic and career goals. Through intensive interviews and dozens of informal conversations with a range of Irish citizens, I learned personal histories and perspectives only available through the immersion experience that I had. Most significantly, I learned about the struggles of growing up in Derry/Londonderry, a city notorious for its gerrymandering practices; the great challenges faced by those negotiating a peace agreement and how they strove to overcome them; and the horrors of spending 15 years in prison and of desperately choosing to participate in the hunger strikes. From this, I have learned that I would like to focus on human rights in a society entrenched in violent conflict. My first steps with this knowledge is, first, to apply to the Notre Dame peace conference in April, given the theme is hopefully related to my topic, and second, to evaluate my postgraduate opportunities with my academic advisors.

In order to achieve these goals, I will write – write about how my experience this summer has taught me to be open to ambiguity; to engage with those who live with fear and conflict every day; to try to understand conflict through a lens shaped by the past, present, and future; and to work towards making a society better but knowing that my effect is limited, that in the end peace comes from those who have experienced violence at its worst yet can still imagine a peaceful future.