

# **Minister and Minstrel**

## ***A Critical Analysis of the Plays of Jim Nolan.***

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The author hereby declares that, except where duly acknowledged, this thesis is entirely his own work and has not been submitted for any degree in Waterford Institute of Technology or in any other technical college or university.

Pat McEvoy.

*To Maeve, Niamh, Niall, Kevin & Deirdre.*

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# **MINISTER AND MINSTREL**

## **A CRITICAL STUDY OF THE PLAYS OF JIM NOLAN**

**Pat McEvoy**

### **ABSTRACT**

A professional playwright since 1985, Jim Nolan has written seventeen plays, thirteen of which have been professionally produced and five have been published. However, little academic research has been undertaken into his work. This thesis addresses this gap in research by providing a critical analysis of all of Nolan's plays and examines the contribution that he has made to contemporary Irish drama. In assessing Nolan's contribution to contemporary Irish drama, the thesis considers published and unpublished texts, critical analysis of the work of other contemporary Irish playwrights and theatre reviews. It contends that, though his work is expressive of similar concerns to playwrights such as Brian Friel and Thomas Kilroy, Nolan's dramatic focus is unique and is driven by different concerns that merit consideration. The thesis argues that, through his exploration of social and political issues in the Waterford region, Nolan's work provides a unique insight into the manner in which the prevailing social, economic and cultural conditions from 1956-2010 impacted upon the lives of working-class people. In particular, the study considers the theme of redemption which is manifest throughout the work. The dissertation argues that redemption is experienced by Nolan's characters through sharing, or participating in an act of creative performance. The thesis is relevant to researchers interested in the value of regional theatre to contemporary Irish drama.

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## INTRODUCTION

Jim Nolan has worked professionally in theatre as a writer, artistic director and text director since 1985 and his plays have won critical acclaim, and toured nationally and been performed internationally. Nolan has written seventeen plays, eleven of which have been professionally produced and five of which have been published. In addition to his dramatic work for the theatre Nolan has written radio dramas and documentaries some of which were based on his theatre work but all but one of which describe, imaginatively or factually, life in County Waterford.<sup>1</sup> However, very little academic analysis has been conducted into this substantial body of work and this research has uncovered little more than passing references in paragraphs and even phrases in academic work on contemporary Irish drama. The only articles of significant note relate entirely to *Blackwater Angel* by scholars such as Csilla Berthe, Christopher Murray and Patricia Lynch (which will be discussed in Chapter 4) and a minor dissertation thesis entitled *The Theatre of Redemption: The Plays of Jim Nolan* (Dunbar, 2001) which deals with the single theme of redemption and covers a small number of early plays. Such a substantial and critically acclaimed body of work as Nolan has created merits consideration and this thesis addresses this existing deficiency in Irish theatre research making a useful and timely contribution to the critical discourse in the field. After a brief introduction to the main themes and concerns within Nolan's work, this introductory chapter provides a description and justification of the methodological approach and methods before concluding with an outline of each chapter.

Dunbar's research argues that the central concern of Nolan's published texts is that of redemption and that this redemption originates from a Christian perspective.<sup>2</sup> Since 2001,

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<sup>1</sup> These radio dramas include: *The Black Pool* (1984) for RTE Radio 1; *The Boathouse* (1986) for RTE Radio 1; *The Missing Postman* (1998) for WLRFM; *The Salvage Shop* (1999) for RTE Radio 1. Radio documentaries include: *The Glass* (2006) for WLRFM and *Brass* (2011).

<sup>2</sup> Dunbar considers only *Moonshine* (published in 1992), *The Salvage Shop* (published in 1998) and *Blackwater Angel* (2001).

when Dunbar completed his research, Nolan has written a further four plays and has made his unpublished dramatic texts available for analysis. This research supersedes Dunbar's useful study by analysing all Nolan's published and unpublished dramatic work in greater detail and challenges Dunbar's argument that Nolan writes from a Christian perspective. The study examines how Nolan's work is expressive of similar concerns to other major Irish playwrights particularly Brian Friel, Tom Murphy and Billy Roche but contends that Jim Nolan is a unique voice in Irish theatre. Though he may share some interests with his contemporaries, his writing is driven by particular concerns of his own that deserve consideration.

Amongst such concerns is a curiosity for and interest in the South East region, a region that is not widely understood or recognised. Nolan's understanding of the regional and local is firmly rooted within an urban environment in a trilogy of plays set in Waterford. *The Black Pool*, *The Gods Are Angry*, *Miss Kerr* and *The Boathouse* are concerned with how the prevailing social, cultural and economic conditions impact upon the lives of Waterford's working class as experienced by characters who face repeating the bleak existence of the pattern of their parents' lives. Subsequent plays including *Moonshine*, *The Guernica Hotel*, *The Salvage Shop*, *Blackwater Angel*, and *Sky Road* are set mid-way between urban and rural places and engage with an exploration and representation of Ireland in transition from a predominantly rural to an urban culture and from a primarily religious to a secular society. Thus, Nolan's work is informed by the region in that his dramatic plots are frequently based on incidents from there and his characters' voices are frequently in its regional accent and its urban and seaside locations provide the settings for his dramas. Finally, *Brighton*, Nolan's penultimate play to date, is located outside of Ireland and marks another transition point in his concerns as a writer. Nolan's most recent work *Dreamland*, which premiered in 2014, is considered to be too late to be included in the study. This thesis explores the relevance and resonance of the local Waterford landscape, examines significant changes and developments in Nolan's representation of Irish society as reflected by issues such as religion or marriage in the lives of his characters

and, through comparison with other playwrights, chronicles and critiques Nolan's contribution to Irish theatre and literature.

Christopher Murray comments on Nolan's style of writing:

[...] in retrospect these plays [the plays of Jim Bourke of Galway and Jim Nolan of Waterford] may be seen to parallel in technique and direction the ambitions of Irish drama produced in Dublin. They are plays sharply engaged with traditional styles, themes and issues. [...] The intertextuality of such work lends them a voice in the ongoing debates on the Irish tradition (1997, p.239).

This research interprets Murray's description of Nolan's 'traditional style' as an ostensibly traditional story-telling style, which is sometimes subverted by comedy and metatheatre. Nolan's dramatic texts follows an Aristotelian structure and technique in telling a story, where each scene advances a plot-line with the play climaxing in the penultimate scene. Chemers, referencing Donatus, explains the mechanics of story-telling in Aristotelian theatre:

Once the action of the play begins, we move into the protasis, the introductory part of the play, wherein exposition occurs (that is, part of the argument is revealed but part is concealed to build tension). In the next part, the epitasis (or the 'intensification'), the plot is 'complicated' as the conflict is increased. In the final part, the catastasis (literally, the 'settling'), events reach their final outcome; occurring within this part is the catastrophe (literally, the 'down turn'), which is the event that resolves the play's action and completes the argument (Chemers, 2010, pp24-25).

Nolan's work follows this sequence of events employing a two-act structure in which several scenes written in an ostensibly naturalistic and realistic style, with a linear narrative that leads to a final resolution. While the city of Waterford is the location for the early work, single locations in small rural seaside towns within comparatively short time-

spans dominate the later dramatic texts frequently using casts of six or less. The tightly-knit structure of a brief time-span, single location and small cast facilitates the development and resolution of concentrated themes that subsequently remain to the fore in the dramatic texts. Conversations are broadly duologues and language moves from the colloquial to the lyrical between people who are largely intelligent—but denied access to second-level education in the early work—or educated to third level in the later plays. It could be argued that the lengthy and polemical monologues of the political plays require revision and editing. However, at crucial moments, Nolan introduces aspects of metatheatre making the style more interesting and complex than naturalistic representations of Waterfordians. By drawing attention to their artistic form, the plays raise questions relating to how art and culture contribute to and shape individual experience and collective identity.

By considering Nolan's dramatic work in the context of other Irish playwrights, such as Friel, Murphy and Roche, the thesis seeks to identify what makes Nolan unique among his contemporaries while analysing the concerns and interests shared with his peers. Of particular interest are the connections and similarities between *Faith Healer* and *Blackwater Angel* in which both Friel and Nolan examine the internal crisis of faith undergone by their respective faith healers— Frank Hardy and Valentine Greatrakes. Similarly, the exploration of healing and redemption through music in Tom Murphy's *The Gigli Concert* resonates with similar themes in Nolan's *The Salvage Shop*. The use of eccentric characters—thought to be innocent, or simple, by society—as interpreters of truths denied to others, connects characters such as Michael in Nolan's *Moonshine* with Dominic in Billy Roche's *Belfry* both of whom are given the licence of a jester to speak truths openly and, by so doing, articulate such truths in an open and frank manner. Thus, a comparative critique of Nolan's work, alongside these three playwrights in particular, presents interesting possibilities for critical comment and analysis—all the more interesting, perhaps, as these comparisons have not been researched heretofore.

While the experience of redemption in Nolan's work could be described as spiritual, the act of healing originates in the creative power of the artist who illuminates truth through the facilitation of an artistic experience. This thesis traces the evolution of the redemptive process in Nolan's work and demonstrates the uniqueness of Nolan's characters' quests for redemption. Characters in Nolan's plays often search for meaning or purpose in what frequently appears a hostile and unjust world while the device of a second character, diametrically opposed to the emergent resolution, is sometimes used in order to establish conflict and a subsequent need for resolution. While his early plays portray pessimism and despair through characters that face a bleak existence in a world of low wages, unemployment and narrow-mindedness, a tone of optimism leading to redemption emerges to inform the later works. Nolan's eliciting of redemption is crucially different to other contemporary Irish dramatists because a poetic sense of mystery, expressed in lyrical and metaphorical language informs the spiritual element which underlies it. Thus, language in Nolan's plays is often portrayed as inadequate in describing or enacting the moments of redemption. At such points language in Nolan's drama language is replaced by the creative act (such as music or puppetry for example) which acts as a device to enable a journey towards, and a bridge to, the character understanding himself and his place in the world.

Characters in Nolan's plays do not espouse a Christian philosophy that centres on the single historical act of Christ's crucifixion (an act from which all meaning derives) but neither are they entirely atheistic. Characters such as McKeever in *Moonshine* and Sylvie Tansey in *The Salvage Shop* embrace a philosophy of ongoing hope which not only gives their lives meaning but enables them to transcend the difficulties and damage they have experienced. The way in which these, and so many other characters in Nolan's dramas, do this is through their engagement with creative acts which both embody that philosophy of hope and lead to the possibility of redemption. However, redemption is not found through the Christian gift of hope. Instead, characters must first undergo a process that involves an initial loss of hope and subsequent acceptance of the state of despair (deemed sinful by the Catholic church) before finding a different route to redemption.

Paradoxically, by freeing themselves of the traditional religious sources of hope, Nolan's characters find redemption in a different way.

Nolan's theatre of redemption concurs with Fintan O'Toole's description of Thomas Murphy's apocalyptic theatre (1994, p. 222-4) where there is always an awareness of more than one world onstage (e.g.: the world of the theatre and the real world in *Moonshine*, *Brighton* and *Blackwater Angel* or the world of music and the real world in *The Flowers of May*, *The Boathouse* and *The Salvage Shop*). Nolan's dramatic climaxes involve a leap of imagination. Action here is not sequential and healing comes, not from the single historical act of the death of Jesus, but from an imagined and creative act. Thus, in plays such as *Moonshine*, *The Salvage Shop* and *Brighton* an understanding of redemption evolves that involves characters gradually moving towards appreciating the concept of imperfection and acknowledging that life offers, through art and the imagination, moments of enlightenment and beauty. Here his narratives connect with the narrative of Murphy's *The Gigli Concert* where, while they may take a philosophical form, the logic is essentially a theatrical one and 'where the impossible becomes possible, not as an idea but as an action, on the stage' (O'Toole, p. 224). Plays such as *Dear Kenny*, *Moonshine*, *The Salvage Shop*, *Blackwater Angel* and *Brighton* find connections between events and understanding that are outside of cause and effect, where faith is found in the unexplained and the miraculous, but remain just as important. And because these connections take place in a theatre, in the presence of an audience, the actor's experience of change and hope, which is born of the fundamentally unchristian acceptance of despair, seems a leap on behalf of the audience also.

While epiphanic moments of understanding are crucial to Nolan's work, his theatre is not a theatre of epiphany. His universe is no monistic or deterministic one where effect follows cause and where the climax occurs on the same plane as the rest of the action to reveal a predetermined truth. While Christian thinking is frequently referenced, principally through biblical allusion, epiphanic moments that bring comfort and redemption arise

through creative engagement with the arts rather than through engagement with traditional religions. Nevertheless, the criticism expressed by some critics (addressed in later chapters) that these epiphanic moments arrive too easily and are dramatically weak must be acknowledged.

As mentioned above this thesis challenges Dunbar's theory of Nolan as a Christian dramatist and proposes instead that Nolan's work presents a largely secular world view. Central to this argument is the fact that sympathetically drawn characters are always critical of the representatives of the Catholic faith. Nolan's plays explore the view that the role of the Catholic church in Irish society, and in individual attitudes to faith, amounts to a struggle for a controlling vision of Irish life where a religious elite seek to silence dissent in the interests of theocratic control over individual and societal freedom. Thus, in *The Gods Are Angry*, *Miss Kerr* cinemas and dance halls in Waterford must close in order to prevent any diminution of public worship during the annual Corpus Christi procession. A stifling vision of a small-town parochial mind-set, dominated and defined by the prevalent view of a narrow-minded church in the early plays, is seen to gradually give way in later plays to a more open and modern world of ideas, money and foreign culture much of which is spiritually empty. Nolan, unlike Kilroy or Friel whose work is deeply critical of proscribed religions, presents an awareness of the marginalised influence of the church and the manner in which the so-called 'religious experience' is often to be found elsewhere.

Nolan's dramatic texts resonate with social and economic issues that concern the body politic since 1979 as it affects the lives of his characters. He is a writer with a social conscience whose concerns are those of the working class, and particularly the working class in Waterford. Nolan's concerns connect with Nicholas Grene's argument that : 'These are lives that no one is watching. The impulse to bring to mind lost lives, to give voice to the voiceless, has been endemic in Irish drama of the last century' (2,000, p.219). In the early plays he identifies the nexus of class, privilege, political patronage and human despair and shows how religion is implicated in the collapse of human aspirations.

Characters in these plays attempt to understand and find fulfilment in a world that denies them opportunity, marginalised by an established ruling coterie whose value system is anti-meritocratic and rooted in nepotism and vested interest. In creating such characters Nolan explores voices, attitudes and stories that feature infrequently in Irish culture. Later plays develop themes and motifs from the early work and explore the social damage caused by the political greed and cronyism of the ruling classes which defend and protect clientalism. The emergence of a more prosperous society, lacking in critical, social and political awareness, provides the opportunity for further critical analysis of Irish political governance in times of affluence, in light of the warnings given in the earlier plays, and arising from the direct criticism of politicians throughout the Celtic Tiger era in plays such as *The Boathouse*, *The Guernica Hotel* and *Sky Road*. These three plays feature fictional local politicians who seek to manipulate and organise local government to create their own sphere of influence for personal gain and add substance to Christopher Murray's thesis that 'All drama is in some way political, whether it is ideologically conscious or unconscious' (1997, p. 179). Such plays are, in some ways, reminiscent of the plays of Hugh Leonard whom Christopher Murray asserts 'was among the first playwrights to expose the potential for corruption in the new access to affluence' (1997, p.183). Nolan's work differs from Leonard's, however, in highlighting the injustices experienced by the people who are the victims of this new order. Nolan's political drama constitutes a critique of how political order is manipulated for personal gain and his attempts to create dramas that centre on Irish politics, politicians and political events while perhaps, not always successful, mark his work as uniquely interesting and important in Irish theatre practice in the twenty-first century.

The manner in which the themes of marriage and family feature within Nolan's work offers an opportunity to critically appraise family life in a post 1937 Irish Constitution setting. Marriage is depicted within Nolan's dramatic work as dysfunctional particularly in *The Salvage Shop*, *Moonshine* and *Sky Road* and it is destroyed or threatened by financial circumstances as in *The Gods Are Angry*, *Miss Kerr*, *Dear Kenny* and *The Guernica Hotel*. The family is identified in these plays as incomplete and often self-destructive. The effect

of marital dysfunctionality on children within Nolan's plays, and, in particular, the breakdown in communication between father and child, can be critically compared to Brian Friel's consideration of family life in *Philadelphia Here I Come* where a father's inability to communicate meaningfully with his son is pivotal. While Friel deals with the process of non-communication, Nolan, on the other hand, deals with the outcomes of this failure to communicate. Nolan's fractured families arguably represent the emergence of a changing society in which marriage and the family unit are no longer seen as the only acceptable paradigm in a changing social landscape. Thus, Nolan's unique treatment of the emergence of the modern family whose members are not necessarily related to one another, as is the case in *Brighton* and *The Guernica Hotel*, is explored.

Central to Nolan's work then are the themes of redemption, otherness, political corruption, religion and family life. His treatment of these themes, his situating of them in Waterford and how they compare with the thematic concerns of contemporary Irish drama are all central to this study. His plays highlight the perspectives of people who are regarded as different to their peers and, while such concerns are not unique to Nolan's drama, he differs from other contemporary Irish playwrights by creating characters who are either professional or theatrical practitioners such as MacKeever in *Moonshine*, Amelia Caffrey in *The Guernica Hotel*, Jack Dunhill in *Brighton*, Bessie in *Dear Kenny*, actor Matthew Everard and singer Angel Landy in *Blackwater Angel*, and writer Lily Thompson and actor Jack Dunhill in *Brighton*. These characters create a quasi-spiritual bridge to a higher truth that enables them to find or create meaning within the chaos of their lives. As such Nolan's drama explores the role of the artist and the significance of the creative act. Like James Joyce, Nolan creates epiphanic moments of understanding but unlike Joyce, whose characters often remain paralysed in their narrow world, as in *Dubliners*, Nolan's are freed from their binds and frustrations. The way in which they find freedom is often through theatre, drama and the imagination. Nolan's later work employs metatheatrical devices such as role-play or plays-within-plays in which self-consciously theatrical characters, by commenting reflexively on their own theatrical experiences, indicates the power of art, and specifically of artistic performance, to bring healing and comfort to

those engaged with the performative act. Thus, theatre in Nolan's work frequently becomes both the subject and the form of the work. Such explorations and experimentations with dramatic form and content are unusual in the history of Irish playwriting and require, therefore, the in-depth critical attention that is found in the later chapters of this thesis.

Prior to summarising the chapters of this dissertation, a brief description and justification of the methodological approach, methods and research data is appropriate. The study has considered various methodologies in the analysis of dramatic texts. Despite Denzin and Lincoln's comment in 1994 that 'dramaturgy has failed to inspire methodological discussions' (1994, p.378), work undertaken in subsequent years by academics, practitioners and theorists such as Mark Fortier (1997), Lennard and Luckhurst (1998), Wallis and Shepherd (1998), Anne Fliotsos (2011) and the many authors and practitioners in Baz Kershaw and Helen Nicholson's *Research Methods in Theatre and Performance* (2011) has usefully expanded and informed the field of critical and practical approaches to theatre research and informs this study.

Tyson explains that the reader cannot be omitted from the understanding of literature because readers do not passively consume, but actively create the meaning they find in literature (2006, p.154). Roland Barthes uses the term 'dialogue' to describe this active relationship between the critic and the author. Barthes' 'dialogue' is arguably a conversation between critic/scholar and the author, in which the scholar seeks to interpret one meaning from a variety of meanings within the text, rather than making an attempt to impose one unalterable meaning on the text. In so doing, the critic remains paradoxically both subjective and objective, thus lending validity to the discourse (Barthes, 1987, p. 85). This approach informs the study in seeking to 'dialogue' with Nolan's plays, isolating one from amongst many meanings. Fortier, referencing Saussure (1997, p.25), points out the advantages of the structuralist approach in carrying out a scientific and objective analysis of the basic abstract patterns that underlie and activate all cultural activities. Thus, as the intention of this research is to produce an objective

analysis of Nolan's drama (as far as this is possible when using the necessary language of criticism), this approach is deemed useful and appropriate in that it subjects the texts to informed critical analysis but does not categorically impose meaning where multiple interpretation is not only possible but useful within the field. In acknowledging Barthes' position that the author is dead, the methodology does not seek to trace character or events within the dramatic texts back to biographical incidents of Nolan's life. Instead the dissertation considers how the social and economic conditions from 1956 to 2010, are manifest in Nolan's characters, plots and settings and how his plays provide opportunities for critical analysis to potentially reveal a unique perspective of the experience of Irish life and culture during this era. The thesis does not seek to reduce the plays to historical documents, however, but to comment on the dialogue between plays and setting, highlighting the ways in which Nolan's plays react to, interpret and challenge their historical circumstances. In turn, of course, the plays are further challenged themselves by the changed historical circumstances in which they are read, challenges that are acknowledged and explored below.

The dissertation is concerned not only with Nolan's approach to playwriting but with how his characters experience, perceive, and behave in, the world. These characters occasionally find it possible to exist in the world and achieve an understanding of self that is both meaningful and spiritual. Fortier, in a statement that is particularly relevant to Nolan's work, states that:

Phenomenology and phenomenological theatre, therefore, not only search out a fully present human existence but also the failure to achieve this existence, which is more often than not the condition in which we live (1997, p. 44).

Given Nolan's themes and, in particular, the theme of redemption which is central in his work, it is arguable that though Nolan has never professed any intention to create 'phenomenological theatre', phenomenological concerns are, nevertheless, at the core of

his work, and thus, a phenomenological line of critical enquiry into the texts is justified and appropriate.

The critical and analytical approach is to investigate the text as a dramatic entity considering not only the literary aspects of the dramatic text (i.e. the written text) but the non-literary aspects of the theatrical text (i.e. the performed text). Fortier points out that theatre has a particularly rich relation to reception as reader-response and reception theory taken together are concerned with how people other than the author contribute to the meaning of a work of art (p.132). In this sense, dialogue is central to how plays work. 'Authorship in theatre-making is complicated' (Lennard and Luckhurst, 2003, p.157) and while Jim Nolan may have written a particular dramatic text and imagined that text in production, he is but one of the authors of the resulting theatrical text. In order to address these two specific challenges of critiquing dramatic literature this study makes reference to Nolan's plays in performance through the use of contemporary theatre reviews in order to critique the performed text. Such contemporary reviews, not previously accessible for research purposes, were made available through the Red Kettle archive, the Abbey Theatre archive, Jim Nolan's personal archive.

The dissertation involves a close textual analysis of the dramatic play scripts that Nolan has created for theatre—five of these scripts are published and the remainder exist in the archives of Jim Nolan and Red Kettle Theatre Company both of which were made available for this research project. The study examines the unpublished work of Jim Nolan as this work sheds light on themes and concerns within Nolan's career, his development as a playwright and is particularly indicative of his developing explanation of existential redemption. This unpublished work makes the research more complete by providing an historical and developmental context to Nolan's development as a playwright.

Other approaches to investigating Nolan's work were considered. A full production of *Moonshine* or an in-depth analysis of *The Salvage Shop* including interviews with professional theatre practitioners engaged with the original production were debated at

the project design stage. However, while theatrical practice as research and in-depth study prioritising a single play presented interesting challenges and opportunities, a detailed examination of the complete archive of Nolan's dramatic texts was deemed a more useful contribution to the existing field of scholarly research at this point. Consequentially this dissertation will analyse the dramatic texts written by Nolan and other Irish dramatists while secondary critical commentaries on Irish theatre informs the dissertation. Theatre criticism of productions of Nolan's work also informs part of the data set considered and analysed in this research. While an interview with Jim Nolan was considered as a possible data gathering approach, it was not undertaken primarily because the aim of the thesis is to undertake a critical consideration of Nolan's writing and development as a writer through a close reading of the dramatic texts and contemporary production reviews.

A thematic approach offering interesting opportunities in analysing texts of similar concerns was considered at the design stage. A chronological approach was deemed more suitable, however, in exploring Nolan's development as a playwright in view of the thirty-five year period of writing from 1979-2014. While many of the themes recur throughout the work, the study concentrates on single aspects of the dramatic texts in order to avoid repetition while recognising that the overlapping of some issues cannot be avoided.

Thus, Chapter 1 explores significant social issues experienced by ordinary working-class characters in the third quarter of the twentieth century in Ireland. The study explores the representation in Nolan's plays of unemployment, poverty and the pivotal role of the other as a communicator of truth in Nolan's first full-length play *The Black Pool*. Marital dysfunction and the stifling power of clerics that seek to exercise control over an increasingly questioning public is addressed in the analysis of *The Gods are Angry, Miss Kerr* while the ineluctable fate that awaited young citizens in Ireland in the 1980s is addressed in *The Boathouse*.<sup>3</sup> The chapter, in establishing these themes, is crucial to

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<sup>3</sup> These plays are henceforth referred to collectively as the Waterford trilogy.

understanding Nolan's background and development as a playwright as it prefigures their development in his subsequent political plays. The thesis argues that, throughout the Waterford trilogy, there is a search for healing and comfort in a world that characters experience as economically and socially repressive. The power of art to heal is addressed as characters seek escape through creative forms such as fantasy, cinema and music although no creative bridge to understanding is yet mooted. Nevertheless, this chapter argues that Nolan's search for a bridge to understanding through art, as a source of healing and comfort, can be detected throughout the Waterford trilogy.

Chapter 2 explores the emergence of the concept of redemption through the creative act that is facilitated by theatrical practitioners in *Dear Kenny* and *Moonshine*, presenting it as a logical development of the search for healing and comfort as expressed in the Waterford trilogy by characters deemed to be the 'other' such as Billy Cass in *The Black Pool*, or Janey Mac in *The Gods are Angry*, *Miss Kerr* or Claire in *The Boathouse*. The chapter argues that *Dear Kenny*, originally written for a schools audience, introduces the concept of artistic performance as a bridge to healing and understanding. The chapter explores the significant introduction of metatheatres in *Moonshine*, with its performance of a play-within-a-play and its associated metatheatrical characters, as a device to make explicit the fact that theatre and art are routes to healing and comfort. The decline of the Protestant community and the consequent marginalisation of all religious influence is explored as part of societal change in Ireland in the early 1990s as redemption is sought outside the traditional routes of religious faith and observance. Nolan's development of social issues such as the changing nature of marriage, homosexuality and the modern woman are also examined.

Chapter 3 explores the emergence of Nolan as a forthright political commentator, as issues of social injustice raised in his early work find fuller expression in social and political criticism of the Irish body politic in *The Guernica Hotel*. The chapter acknowledges the lack of clarity in providing a successful political alternative to contemporary politics—thus weakening the dramatic texts. Nevertheless, the study expands on the importance of

Nolan's role as a political playwright and proposes that this role identifies him as unique among his contemporaries. This chapter examines Nolan's developing concept of redemption in *The Salvage Shop* where the importance of the Wabi Sabi philosophy of the human flaw in all works of art is seen as crucial in accepting the self's flawed humanity as a necessary step on the journey towards self-forgiveness and healing. The extensive use of music as a metatheatrical device, as father and son attempt to salvage the breakdown in their relationship, is analysed here while the use of image-metaphors as signifiers in the dramatic text is investigated.

Chapter 4 explores Nolan's most extensive use of metatheatre thus far in *Blackwater Angel* and finds connections between the art of theatre in performance and the act of faith-healing in bringing comfort and healing to those who suffer. The chapter finds connections between the political and redemptive strands of his work as Nolan explores the loss of the central character Valentine Greatrakes' gift of faith-healing as a result of attacks by political opponents during the Puritan era in which the play is set. Similarly, the chapter investigates the same connections in the narrative of a politician seeking to reform the Irish body politic, as he seeks personal healing and forgiveness in *Sky Road*—a play that returns to social issues of injustice first raised in the Waterford trilogy. The chapter considers Nolan's portrayal of idealistic people as politicians and explores the emergent conclusion that all those who are associated with politics, are ultimately corrupted by it.

Chapter 5 provides the fullest exploration of Nolan's spiritual philosophy through his penultimate play *Brighton* and argues that this philosophy is a humanist philosophy that still acknowledges his characters' spiritual needs. The chapter analyses this work in which wounded people in crisis search for a spiritual pathway towards personal redemption, arguing that Nolan's humanist philosophy is one that combines faith with tradition and is based on personal experience. This chapter explores Nolan's use of location and of personal, religious and place names as signifiers of meaning along with further aspects of metatheatricality.

Nolan's plays move from a mood of despair in the early work, as characters face ineluctable futures of hardship that repeat the pattern of their parents' experience of life, to one of hope and redemption as characters transcend their personal circumstances to find healing and comfort through participation in artistic performance. This thesis traces the process of such an outcome while exploring the changes in Irish society that are reflected in the plays from 1979-2014. Chief among these is Nolan's passion for highlighting social injustice in the Irish body politic that reveals him as a political playwright searching for an alternative political model.

Jim Nolan's work divides into two categories: the political and the redemptive. Remarkably both vary considerably in style. While the political work is direct, pointed and frequently polemic, much sympathy resides with characters that are seen to remain idealistic as they engage with political forces that outwit and defeat them. On the other hand his redemptive dramas are poetic in the nature of their concerns and explorations as they journey through forests of the imagination in search of insight that brings healing and comfort. In these plays, all manner of artistic performance are central to Nolan's subject and narrative as they create the moment of transfiguration where healing and comfort can occur. His dramas, over a period of 35 years, have searched for individual and spiritual truth, alongside consideration of social and political factors that impact on ordinary citizens of the Irish state.

## CHAPTER ONE

ANGRY GODS IN A HOSTILE WORLD: *The Flowers of May; Doorsteps; The Black Pool; The Gods are Angry, Miss Kerr and The Boathouse.*

This chapter synthesizes, explores and critiques Nolan's early work from 1979 to 1986 and seeks to establish themes that recur throughout Nolan's plays. Analysis of the early work is crucial in establishing, in particular, the origins of the redemptive and the political threads in the writing in order to further explore their development in his later work. The chapter here examines regional issues that are important to, and typical of, Irish society in general. The chapter argues that Nolan's writing during this period provides a damning social critique of an Ireland whose Gods of authority seemed hostile to its citizens. Contemporary issues explored include unemployment, poverty, clientalism, otherness, family, factory life and the signs of decline of the Catholic Church's influence on Irish society. The chapter examines how Nolan's work reflects the type of society that prevailed in Ireland from 1956-1986 and establishes a significant desire for social change, encouraged by outside influences such as returned emigrants, Hollywood and foreign radio stations. This chapter explores the search in his early work for hope and healing through art, specifically through artistic performance. In so doing, the chapter considers the role of the artist as outsider and revealer of truth and the role that art plays in personal redemption. The establishment of the origins of such concerns are seen as crucial to in analysing their development in later plays. Because of the absence of any significant academic treatment of Nolan's work, the research considers it essential to provide synopses and critical analysis of all Nolan's plays beginning with the unpublished work in this chapter. The chapter explains Nolan's decision to move from short one-act

plays—performed largely in pubs—to mainstream theatre and explores his role in establishing Red Kettle Theatre Co. Unfortunately no critical reviews of the plays examined in this chapter were uncovered.

### *The Flowers of May*

Jim Nolan began writing drama in his late teens and moved on to writing more seriously when working as a temporary librarian in Dublin in 1977. He wrote nothing during a two-year period from 1977-79 while working in London. On his return, he began writing again when he became involved with the Waterford Arts for All project. *The Flowers of May*, a one-act drama set on VE Day, is Nolan's first play and was performed in 1979 in the Theatre Royal, Waterford, as the winning play in a one-act drama competition organised by local newspaper the *Waterford News and Star*.

Set in London on VE Day 1945, Arthur and Nettie Simpson have been married for over twenty years. Their marriage is a silent, loveless relationship where all communication has ceased. Nettie now wants a divorce from her indifferent husband who spends his nights listening endlessly to classical music. Arthur's offer of more social interaction fails to convince a wife with whom he has not slept in over a decade. Nettie's complaints reveal a different Arthur who explains that his indifference and retreat into his reclusive self began with her boring, predictable and monotonous behaviour following their marriage. Arthur and Nettie accompany each other to the divorce court where they both express the details of their failed relationship. The marriage ends in divorce despite Arthur's assurance that he still loves Nettie.

This play establishes dramatic themes and concerns such as dramatic representation of the lives of contemporary working-class people, lack of communication within a family, use of a character who is 'other' as an independent teller of truth, therapeutic value of artistic performance and music as a signifier of meaning. Such themes, among others, link Nolan to a new wave of modern playwrights such as Brian Friel, Thomas Kilroy and

Bernard Farrell who gave expression to those people, described by the poet Eavan Boland as 'outside history' (Boland, 1995, p.160); people whose lives were largely unrecorded and who were seldom represented on stage. Nolan's work recognises that these largely unnoticed people have a story to tell, and the dramatic representation of that story, constitutes a form of personal exorcism for the speaker where a form of redemption is found in the telling. Characters such as Arthur and Nettie Simpson are not hugely significant in that they do not influence the shape of the world. However, their stories, like others in Nolan's dramas, reflect the truth of their experience of the world and so are a telling barometer of societal issues and models. Nettie's determination to divorce, for example, and the appalling state of the Simpson relationship recognises the decline in marriage as the modular unit of society and the growing demand for divorce in the late seventies.

The revelation of such truths through portrayal of the world of the characters is the most important aspect of the early work. Their disillusionment and need for cathartic escape anticipates future plays. Arthur, for example, anticipates later characters that are inclusive of, yet significantly different and puzzling to, the people that surround them and who retreat into a world of their own imaginations for healing and comfort. An exasperated Nettie asks 'why can't you be like other men?' (p.17) and answers her own question with 'he was like no other men' (p.18). In this Arthur Simpson establishes Nolan artist-types who act as significant social and philosophical commentators on the world as they experience it as the following explanation of his reclusive behaviour reveals:

**Arthur:** Love was all I had. Don't you understand? I wanted nothing only to celebrate it; it was all I ever wanted to do. We were heroes then, Nettie and me. We walked with Gods (p.17).

The consequence of the breakdown in understanding and familial communication is his retreat into a world of classical music as a form of spiritual escape. He purchases a gramophone and attends lunchtime war concerts where Nettie witnesses him, on one

occasion, moved to tears (p.18). *The Flowers of May* anticipates the use of music as an index of thoughts and feelings in Nolan's work and suggests that healing, comfort and personal redemption may be found through artistic activity. The healing power of art now continues in Nolan's next work *Doorsteps*.

### *Doorsteps*

*Doorsteps* is Nolan's second play and his only monologue—a form of drama that was quite rare in 1982—and premiered in the Waterford Dramatic Society's Little Theatre in Waterford in November 1982. Set in Waterford in 1982 and in times past, Annie's monologue describes a woman's ineluctable life of hardship and monotonous housework. Born in poor circumstances, and of limited intelligence, Annie recalls that her father took both her, and her brother Johnny, to England during the war in search of work. Following a brief period as a child-domestic, all three return to Ireland and Annie returns to school but remains illiterate, attending only on Fridays when laundry is taught. Her grandmother tells her tales of sea giants, locked behind great doors on the ocean floor. One summer she falls in love with Miko, an itinerant singer, who speaks to her of poetry and myth and opens her mind to a life filled with beauty and meaning. They make love but Miko, like the sea-giants, disappears at the end of the summer. Annie settles down to a life of limited contentment—but not fulfilment. She dreads getting old and despairs of her monotonous life in a housing estate on the edge of a city, bounded by a cemetery and an abattoir.

The drama introduces themes and techniques that become crucial in later work. For example, Annie condemns Irish society for its treatment of the poor in general and of women in particular and her restrained and 'matter-of-fact' monologue becomes a powerful and understated narrative of Irish life during the forty year period from 1940 to 1982, exploring issues that find greater dramatic development in a trilogy of plays set in Waterford.

*Doorsteps* portrays a typical working-class woman's experience of life in Ireland during the third quarter of the twentieth century and holds it up to scrutiny. It concentrates on the boring, ineluctable fate that awaits all women in a land without opportunity. Annie's only coping strategy is to grin and bear it—a stoic response to a situation that cannot be altered by the powerless. *Doorsteps* anticipates the despairing response of a number of Nolan characters in the early texts as the young are condemned to repeat the pattern of their parents' experience of life, trapped in patterns of behaviour that are dictated by gender inequality and economic circumstances. The drama introduces the legend of the sea-giants who live behind 'great golden doors at the bottom of the sea [and who] swim ashore' (p.9) every night; a recurring theme in the early work expressing the belief that man was born great but diminished by social forces outside his control. It is a theme Nolan expands upon in *The Gods are Angry*, *Miss Kerr* and *Moonshine* which will be considered in Chapter Two. Through the use of myth, to which Nolan returns, he creates an awareness of a better world than the one experienced by his characters. This awareness anticipates subsequent exploration of the corruption of idealism at the heart of Irish politics in his later political plays. Nolan's use of location here, as Annie describes the monotony of her life through a picture of endless rows of identical houses, anticipates the use of location as a device in later work.

*Doorsteps* marks the introduction of religion—a major theme in Nolan's work—as a force that offers no consolation other than superficial. Persistent use of religious figures of speech such as 'thanks be to God', which is expressed as a continuous figure of speech, for example, indicates a mind-set that has been conditioned to expect little and demand nothing from the Lord. The concept of redemption in the play is excluded from religious experience and religion, as represented by the character of a 'sadist for a nun [...] her face, white with rage and her hands tearing at the veil' (p.8-9), is depicted as hostile and negative. Annie's rejection of her nun's religious message anticipates the marginalisation of Nolan's future religious figures as young people face an absurd world, largely hostile to their own experience of it. This superficial influence is especially reflected in Annie's recollection of their emigrant prayers said in St. Patrick's Church, Waterford in 1942 before

the Great Western boat journey to a rain-swept London that was devastated by war, and a lodging in a fourth floor 'room like an over-grown egg box on the Kilburn Road' (p. 4) where prayers for a better life were clearly ignored.

Annie connects with other characters in Nolan's work who find healing, comfort and redemption through theatrical performance. She finds fulfilment in her short-lived romance with Miko, a traveller who is drawn to creative acts of poetry, song and nature:

**Annie:** He knew the name of all the flowers, blue-eyed Marys, madworts, bleeding hearts and lavenders [...] like word out of poems in every field (p.12).

Miko represents the sea-giant of her imagination but his love, and with it Annie's potential for fulfilment in life, dies that summer and her grandmother's grim warning of loss and loneliness comes through:

at night the sea giants rise up out of the waves and swim ashore [...] and one of them must always die [...] and each dawn brings a new death (p.9-10).

Annie is doomed to repeat her mother's experience of life and fears that her sons, in turn will replicate their father's—a fear that returns to haunt subsequent characters in the Waterford trilogy of plays. Thus, in these short one-act plays, Nolan has already established themes that will recur throughout the work. The theme of unemployment and poverty now finds greater development in Nolan's first full-length drama *The Black Pool*

### *The Black Pool*

*The Black Pool* (1983) is the first of a trilogy of plays, similarly linked by theme and a location based in and around Waterford city and, for the purpose of this research, will be referred to as the Waterford trilogy. All three plays produce a snap-shot in time of one of

Nolan's main concerns: the culture of which its characters are products and casualties. Nolan's early work is important because, in its depiction of this culture, it challenges many taboos about issues such as priests, unmarried mothers, gender, self-deception, unemployment and emigration.

It is Waterford in 1983 and a revenant Billy Cass is found guilty of suicide in a local court. Billy and his four friends subsequently outline the details of what led to Billy's suicide: his girlfriend's decision to end their relationship because of his poor prospects, Billy's fear that he will be forced to replicate his father's experiences of unemployment and poverty, and his general sense of despair brought about by his employer's treatment of him as a casual docker. The four gather at the Black Pool, a local bathing spot, where Billy drowns himself.

This issue-driven drama based on the drowning of a young Waterford student was first performed in local pubs in Waterford in 1983. The play fictionalises the incident in order to critique contemporary Irish society. Although set in 1960, the events really describe the hopelessness and the harsh economic reality of life in Waterford in the 1980s, where fortune and opportunity remain determined by cronyism and nepotism and where the poor were ultimately exiles within their own world. By locating the play a generation earlier, Nolan achieves a sense of distance and objectivity. *The Black Pool's* opening anticipates the metatheatrical openings of the other two plays of the trilogy by isolating characters that acknowledge the audience but not each other. Their on-stage separation and failure to relate to each other replicates a small-town attitude, where opinion is formed by prejudice and an abiding mistrust of any independent thinking.

Nolan articulates this prejudice through the character of the judge—the representative of 'official Ireland'—in a parody of a mini-ruling elite. The judge's treatment of Billy and his friends, for example, indicates contempt and disrespect for those who are poor and powerless. He contemptuously insists on being called 'your honour' (p.1-2) four times

while addressing the others by surnames only. Billy, however, is addressed as 'boy' (p.1). The linguistic counterpoint between the authoritative official language of the court and the dialectic slang of the young dockers indicates the chasm between these worlds. Thus, Nolan's use of language to disempower emphasises the order of class and officialdom, and reflects the disregard by official Ireland for the desperation of a younger generation. *The Black Pool* through the character of Neptune O'Mahony, who abuses his power as foreman-employer of casual dockers, re-enforces this sense of privilege of a self-perpetuating mini-ruling elite, by restricting employment to a small nexus of docker-families.<sup>4</sup> Billy explains the daily humiliating ritual of the hiring fair on the docks which was common at the time:

**Billy:** We went down the docks today and Neptune didn't like the smell of us. Who knows, tomorrow we mightn't smell so bad (p. 23).

Thus, *The Black Pool* connects unemployment with exclusion and systemic poverty, that forced people like Billy to eke out an existence somewhere along the edges of Irish society as is clearly seen in 'The Poor Children's' Outing'.<sup>5</sup> In dialogue that anticipates Nolan's later political work, Billy expresses the bitterness of social disgrace for all those who attended the outing:

**Billy:** two bloody thousand of us. Like the flight of the Jews in the Railway Sq. (p.9)

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<sup>4</sup> In 1983 restrictive employment practices had led to a bitter four-year dock strike. The strike lasted throughout the eighties leading to a Dáil question by Waterford TD Austin Deasy to Bertie Ahern, Minister for Labour on plans for its resolution (1987).

<sup>5</sup> From 1928-1944, the local trades council, local charities and the employers of Waterford organised a yearly outing for deprived children from Waterford to Tramore by rail that became known as 'the Poor Children's Outing'. Waterford was a city of great unemployment and poverty where poor children never got to visit the nearby seaside resort of Tramore.

The Poor Children's Outing to Tramore indicates a level of despair and poverty from which it was impossible to escape. The ironic use of the phrase 'thanks be to God' (p.9), which echoes Annie's in *Doorsteps* (1982), links religion with civic appeasement and is repeated throughout, emphasising gratitude to an ungenerous God. Billy's bitterness, cynicism and outrage is a political rejection of de Valera's vision of a land where materialism would matter little as was the massive emigration figures that rejected this absurdity. F.S.L.Lyons explains that

'net emigration for 1951-56 was 196,763, for 1956-61 it was 212,003. These rates were nearly three times the pre-war rates and for the decade 1951-61 in particular were higher than for any other comparable period in the twentieth century' (1985, p.625).

Although Nolan is describing Waterford in the fifties, the parallel with the Ireland of the eighties is obvious. Economic connections link the decades and provide a sense of context. Historian JJ Lee connects both decades in *Ireland 1912-1985* when he states that current budget deficits in the early eighties were running between 46-81% and that:

By 1985 Ireland had the second highest real unemployment in the OECD. It probably had the highest real unemployment, if one were to take into account the renewed emigration, as well as the variety of 'make work' schemes devised to artificially deflate the unemployment statistics, to say nothing of the unemployment of a significant proportion of potential women workers (1998, p.519).

*The Black Pool* is an angry portrayal of the lives of those families who remained trapped, as witnessed by the playwright during his formative years. Billy shows enormous empathy towards his father, who represents the poor and the despairing, and whose humiliation is well described. Interestingly, a similar sense of despair exists in Brian Friel's *Philadelphia Here I Come* (1965) when Gar's friend Ned comments on the hopelessness of their own similar situations where grown men remain dependent on their fathers for an allowance:

**Ned:** I meant to buy you something good, but the auld fella didn't sell the calf to the jobbers last Friday...and he could have, the stupid bastard, such a bloody stupid bastard of an auld fella! (Friel, 1965, p.76).

Nolan's use of the specific detail of such circumstances repeated throughout *The Black Pool* generates empathetic understanding of these times. For example, the play identifies Billy's father's presence at the Poor Children's Outing as a humiliation, as does Billy's bitter recollection that his unemployed father couldn't afford to go drinking with the rest of the Barrack St. Band who led out the Poor Children's Outing, forced instead to go 'picking cockles [with] his legs like purple matchsticks in the cold':

and I wanted to go with him, Alfie. I didn't want to stay with the Vincents Men, and I didn't want their generosity and their "there I go smiles, their lemonade and sandwiches". I wanted to go with me father, Alfie. But I didn't (p. 10).

The inability of father and son to express their love for each other here, which connects Nolan with Friel, is the first expression of this theme in the playwright's writings and connects poverty with familial tensions. Billy's father is in another train carriage coming home. His father's decision never to play another note, following Billy's death, is a moving example of this lack of connection. Paradoxically through silence there is communication.

In experimenting with landscape as a metaphor, as in his previous play, Nolan uses the train journey home to describe the grimness of Irish society. Billy's recollection that 'the sun was going down' (p.10) indicates the end of optimism as 'the smell of diesel and the smell of the sea mix' (p.10) with the smell of his father's polish on his trumpet indicating that ugliness was destroying beauty in Billy's world: 'It was like it was the end of everything [...] it was the end of everything' (p. 10). Billy's suicide rejects a world of fathers that he imagines he will be forced to replicate and a country that affords no place for a sensitive soul. All the onlookers—the Vincents men with their smug smiles and their halos, the old

women sittin' on the Little Sisters' Wall' (p.10)—know that poverty is cyclical and that Billy, in turn, would be forced to replicate his father's life and his child too would make the journey on The Poor Children's Outing.

The questioning of religion, begun in *Doorsteps* (1982), continues and is expanded upon in *The Black Pool* where Billy and his friends openly dismiss the institutionalised church which seems to falsify their experience of life. Billy Cass describes the Poor Children's Outing as an act of public hypocrisy where official and religious Ireland doles out charity to its poor—an entirely inappropriate response to the level of systemic poverty that led to despair and emigration. For example, the 'Vincent's Men' (p.9)—members of the Christian organisation known as the St. Vincent de Paul—combine with the City fathers to lead the children in a public procession to the train station like the Mayor of Hamelin ridding his town of the rats. In response, Billy repeats the phrase 'Thanks be to God' (p.9) four times in ironic gratitude. During his homily at Billy's requiem mass, the priest's false description that their 'lives were like oyster shells'(p.10) with 'pearls within' (p.10) is met with the blunt statement that: 'There were no pearls, was there, Casser? For any of us and least of all for you' (p.10). An everyday life of social deprivation and an economy based on cronyism destroys the priest's credibility: 'the priest was wrong, Billy, wasn't he?' (p.10). *The Black Pool* questions the alignment of clergy with elected state representatives and anticipates the gradual dissolution and marginalisation of the power and influence of Catholicism on Irish society in Nolan's later work. For example, Alfie dismisses the priest's funeral valedictory that 'Billy Cass had led a short but full life' (p.10) as empty rhetoric. Neptune O'Mahony's reaction to the pantomime of the cranes 'kissin' [and] huggin' like lovers' (p.20) is a source of great amusement as is his confusion regarding his response:

**Billy:** In the name of St. Jude, says Neptune, give up that kissin' before I cut the necks off ye, and the auld bugger didn't know whether to call for a priest or a Fire Brigade to cut 'em loose!

**Jo-Jo:** What happened then Cass?

**Billy:** He called for the Fire Brigade! (p.20).

Crucially, Neptune's decision to call the fire-brigade—and not the priest—is a further indication of the growing marginalisation of religion among even older people in Irish society.

Billy's character, as a representative of the poor, establishes a significant beginning in identifying a post-war Ireland of exclusion, where significant emigration and endemic poverty was the new republic's reward to its citizens for its independence. Victor Merriman connects the role of the poor with the role of the other:

The poor perform the historical role of the other, simultaneously desired as idealized peasants and despised as economic outcasts. Among the pietistic tropes of liberal dramas of 'man's inhumanity to man', they return time and again as themselves, as metaphors of state failure, [...] and as figures of fear and contempt (2011, p.97).

Billy Cass is significantly different or 'other' to the grouping of which he is a member; because he articulates his vision of the world in a way that is significantly different to theirs. In other words his sense of otherness enables him to deliver penetrating insights into small town Irish life in 1960, establishing Nolan's early work as plays of conscience and self-examination. *The Black Pool*, for example, is constructed from guilt, anger, pity and a desire for subversion. Self-parody defines Billy's otherness in articulating his need for self-fulfilment and purpose in his life, while recognising the impoverishment of his circumstances, and the unlikelihood of achieving them. Billy, then, anticipates subsequent Nolan characters that express otherness through the artistic self, as in his fictional 'dream of cranes' (p. 19-21), for example, where the machinery on the docks refuse to carry out their operators' instructions in an act of subversion. The image of the 'neckin' (p.20) cranes making love is an image of extraordinary beauty; amidst ugly industrialisation that prioritises brute strength and ignorance. The awkward and ugly cranes assume an aesthetic beauty denied to them by the world which they inhabit. It is they in turn who become butterfly-beautiful as the world is revealed for what it is. *The Black Pool* rejects

employers' prejudices of workers as brutish and unfeeling, incapable of aesthetic thought or aspiration. In this imagined world Billy devises his own fantasy, in which beauty has meaning and rebellion is acceptable, as the only means of defiance. In writing of Tom Murphy, as the creative mind who comments independently and speaks the truth, Nora M. Murphy, in a comment similarly applicable to Nolan, suggests:

This creativity is a form of retaliation against the helplessness of the human predicament, saying what one wants to say is of paramount importance (1995, p.7).

Billy prefigures other such characters in the work that use their creative minds as a source of escape or comfort in a hostile world.

However, the power of 'otherness'—of 'saying what one wants to say' (Murphy, 1995, p.7)—leads to distrust of the outsider, the intellectual who is in contact with a higher truth and who understands and articulates the actual plight of those around him. Such distrust is not confined to those in power but extends to the immediate circle and anticipates the threat posed by intuitive and creative knowledge expressed throughout Nolan's work. For example, Phineas tells Billy that he must be 'nuts...it must be all them books you're readin' (p.20) while Jo-Jo's father in identifying Billy as a threat comments that 'too much learnin' is bad for you'(p.20). Similarly, Phineas pinpoints Billy's problem: 'the problem with you Casser is ye think too much' (p. 22). Alfie, however, recognises that Billy the dreamer understands too much about a present reality over which he has no control and identifies Billy's innate intelligence and understanding as the core of his being. Forsaking it, while it may be the only way to survive in a world dominated by greed and cronyism—a view that will be echoed throughout the trilogy—will ultimately destroy him: 'cos if that dream ever goes away on him, Billy is fucked' (p. 22). Billy's capacity to imagine his world in a different way is what makes him powerful; his inability to realise that dream is what ultimately destroys him.

*The Black Pool* explores the consequences of the loss of hope and the dreamer's inability to reconcile himself to a world of sharp practice where power and aggrandisement are everywhere. The other characters come to terms with a life that is no more than 'a kick in the arse' (p. 23) and from which there is no release. Unlike later Nolan plays, the creative act does not lead to redemption but to self-annihilation because the act is imagined and not performed. There is no resolution, no divine intervention, and no redemption. Billy dies and the play ends. The drama's conclusion leaves the other characters desolate, in a state of inescapable poverty and permanent social exclusion. Such themes are further explored in Nolan's next work.

### *The Gods are Angry, Miss Kerr*

By 1985 Jim Nolan had tired of the limitations of pub theatre. In an interview with Michael Dunbar, he refers to an epiphanic moment in his development as a playwright that occurred during a performance of *The Black Pool*:

I think the night I knew it was finished, was the night when I was acting in a play in a pub and there was a football match on and they wouldn't turn it off and someone else was playing darts and a dart nearly caught me, and I said fuck this you know, it's time to move on. I wrote a full-length play then, 'The Gods Are Angry, Miss Kerr' which I specifically wrote to put on in a theatre, thinking that it's a better space for plays (2001, p.94).

Nolan felt that it was time to bring people, who professed no interest whatsoever in drama, to the theatre and expanded on the subject matter and purpose of the work:

I also wrote it with a particular subject in mind. It was linked to a desire to bring people into the theatre who wouldn't normally go to it. My sense was that they would have nothing in common with what was being presented on stage. My belief was that there was much in common but it wasn't clear or told in such a way that could be made clear. And so I wrote this play, which I set

deliberately in a factory here in Waterford, with a view to basic mathematics. 400 or 500 people worked in that factory at its height, it had closed 4 or 5 years before, but it was in the folk-memory of the city. So I wrote the play set in that environment and it packed the Theatre Royal [Waterford] (Nolan in Dunbar, 2001, p.95).

Cottons Connors is determined to emigrate to London in order to find and care for his down-at-heel father who deserted their family. In order to break the news to his sister Julia, who has declared that she wants nothing to do with their father, Cottons enlists the help of his best friend Tommy, who is attracted to Julia, to tell her of his imminent departure. However, he fails to do so. Tommy is also a boxer and is coached by Albert 'the liar' O'Brien whose preposterous inventions fool no-one. Janey Mac is a simple-minded factory worker with an obsessive passion for the cinema and a former patient of St. Otteran's Psychiatric Hospital in Waterford and is largely protected by the other factory workers. Julia's friend Gertie and fairground worker Billy complete the sextet. The jute factory workers travel to Duncannon on their annual factory-works outing. Here all issues and fictions are confronted: Julia disowns her father to Cottons, Gertie informs fairground owner Billy of the death of their infant daughter, Tommy dismisses his boxing ability as nothing more than a hobby, and Albert acknowledges that all his stories are no more than that and that life is a gradually disillusioning process. Finally, Janey Mac sees that life is cruel and is not as it is represented in the cinema. Despite all this, the determination of the sextet to survive dominates the end of the drama, reflected by the dance band who continues to play on as the lights fade.

*The Gods are Angry, Miss Kerr* was the first Waterford play in the professional theatre to represent the lives of ordinary, working-class people and to give a voice to those who felt voiceless. Here Nolan's dramas connect with that of Conor McPherson in acknowledging that working-class people, who were not normally represented on stage, had stories to tell and that telling it constituted a form of redemption—imbuing profane lives with a

sense of the sublime. A letter from a group of children of former Goodbody Jute Factory operatives, adds to this argument:

We would just like to thank you for a brilliant play. The majority of our mothers worked in the Jute Factory at some time or another. All our lives we've listened to stories about their work. We decided as a group to go and see your play [...] It was just as our Mammys talked about factory work, and the way each worker got involved with the rest of those working with them. It was our first time at a play in the Theatre Royal. We really enjoyed it (Kay *et al*, Letter to Jim Nolan within Red Kettle Archive, 1985).

The title of the drama connects with Gloucester's comment in *King Lear* (1603) that

As flies to wanton boys are we to th' gods.  
They kill us for their sport (Shakespeare, 1603, p. 132-3).

in referring to the harsh treatment of ordinary workers by fates that seems to constantly conspire against them, condemning them to a life of drudgery and aimless labour in fifties-Ireland. Each character reveals their story as they constantly suffer reversal: Janey Mac has been damaged by her time in St. Otteran's Mental Asylum (p.53), Albert was 'on the wrong end of a punch that turned his skull inside out' (p.17), Gertie has endured the trauma of giving birth to an illegitimate baby that died in childbirth (p.42) while Julia and Cottons have suffered because of their father's desertion (p.65). Even if the characters fail to understand the underlying factors behind their circumstances, the socio-economic reasons behind their situation emerges in the snap-shot of Waterford in 1956, suggested by the black-and-white picture of the sextet, taken by a Brownie camera in the prologue (p.2).

*The Gods are Angry, Miss Kerr* moves beyond criticism of individual clerics such as in *The Black Pool* to examination of interference by the institutionalised church, as represented by Fr. Coady, who illustrates the desire and power of the church to demand complete and

public obedience and to restrict individual freedom. For example, the sextet's forced attendance at the annual Corpus Christi procession on Ballybricken, Waterford dominates the play's opening sequence where the church's closure of private businesses and public places of entertainment, to facilitate a public display of obedience to mother church, indicates the power of the church over Irish domestic affairs. Closure of the Coliseum Cinema, which Janey Mac attends nightly, prompts her letter of protest to Pope Pius XII in which a traditionally simple and intuitive character, in tune with a profound truth, articulates the concerns of a society, if not in the process of change, then certainly aware of the need for it:

**Janey:** I think it was very forward of Fr. Coady to stop the people going where they want to go. The people is old enough to make up their own minds and I think you should write to Fr. Coady before he does the like of that again. If you don't, I will (p.22).

This speech predates the social, cultural and sexual revolution of the sixties and anticipates the marginalisation of church influence and the subsequent pluralisation of Irish society in Nolan's later work. Nevertheless, despite her criticism, Janey's position is both ambiguous and typical of a Catholic of that era, caught between a traditional, rigid faith and a desire for a more liberal society. She confesses that the Pope's picture is on her bedroom wall, for example, and that she regularly attends church and that her mother would not tolerate her criticism of Fr. Coady. Julia warns:

**Julia:** Janey Mac! You'll never see the face of God.

**Janey:** If he's anything like Father Coady, I won't be sorry (p.37).

Janey Mac has a cosmic sense that Ireland must break free of a clerically-dominated mind-set and embrace new ways of understanding the world. Her simple and innocent rejection of religion, and Julia's subsequent lack of contradiction, further develops the emergence of a hostile questioning attitude towards religion in Irish society.

The change in Irish society in the 1960s is best explained by liberalising outside influences referenced in the text. Both Cottons and Tommy read comics (p.20) indicating a connection to a different culture with a different set of values—mostly heroic. Cottons is aware that there is another world beyond the one in which he lives and he longs for escape. By listening to foreign radio stations such as Paris, Luxemburg and Ankara (p.29), he implicitly rejects the world into which he was born:

**Cottons:** Did it ever occur to you Tommy, that there might be more to life than walkin' up the Yellow Road to the Jute Factory?  
(p. 19)

Lionel Pilkington finds similar emphasis in Louis d'Alton's play *This Other Eden* (1953) stating: '...emigration may be considered, not so much as a national scourge, but as an opportunity for young people to escape Ireland's stultifying conditions [...] and so emigration is necessary for the purpose of self-discovery and freedom (Pilkington, 2001, p.147).

However, the greatest outside cultural influence was America, as defined by Hollywood.

Declan Hughes writes:

It is understood that the 20<sup>th</sup> century had been, and would continue to be, for better or worse, the American century, and that culturally, again for good or ill, we had been colonised irrevocably by the first beam of light Hollywood had shone on us (Hughes in Jordan, 2009, p.9).

The America of the movies was largely secular, hedonistic, liberal, adventurous and glamorous and became a colonising agency of the Irish mind. American influence on Irish society was really the only outside influence on a country that was insular, narrowly-religious, conservative and where the underbelly of society was not acknowledged. Many of the characters are only capable of articulating their inner-most needs by referencing

Hollywood films. Albert's lack of education, which deprived him of the language with which he might have been able to express himself more fully, can only articulate his loneliness through comparison with the Lone Ranger: 'I'm a bit like the Lone Ranger y'see [...] Mr. Lonesome, that's me, Janey. Keep in be the wall and meself to meself' (p. 55). The shared fantasy of Tommy's success as a new boxing 'champ' can only be expressed through the sextet's familiarity with boxing films that all seemed to carry the common theme of heroic failure with Janey referencing boxing films where the champ dies in the ring, and Gertie comparing Tommy to boxer and actor Jack Doyle (p.23-24). Tommy's boxing match needs to be understood figuratively where boxing and training are seen as metaphors for survival in a hostile world and where fighting represents the only opportunity that people like him have of escaping the social milieu into which they were born. Albert, however, is incapable of articulating his own ambitions of managing Tommy without recourse to a movie-scene of his own creation, with Tommy as hero and himself as mentor—complete with a monologue in his own version of a Bronx accent:

**Albert:** 'You talkin' to me, Mr. Shwartz? Why, of course, I'm talkin' to you, ye dumb cluck. Who d'ya think I'm talkin' to: The Statue of Liberty?' (p.15).

In dramatizing the influence of Hollywood on the minds, ambitions and language of the characters, the play gives expression to disadvantaged characters determined to escape the limitations of their lives.

While boxing might have provided an isolated ladder of escape from the financial circumstances of class, for many emigration was the only option. Nolan's first-hand experience of life in London from 1977-79, advances the argument for a more realistic understanding of the life of the emigrant. His emigrants leave to escape poverty or unemployment. Christopher Murray argues that the dramatic purpose of the returned emigrant is to function as a kind of ghost, a revenant whose incomplete knowledge, due to his absence, enables him to act as a device to define, or re-define, 'home truths' (1997,

p.168). Nolan's depiction of returned emigrants, however, is different to Murray's because it defines the returned emigrant in universal, rather than local, terms: another worker struggling against the circumstances of his birth. Thus, the humbling of Cottons' father to beggar-man status advances the argument that poverty is endemic in all societies and Tommy reminds Cottons that England was often a poverty trap for Irish emigrants:

**Tommy:** the suits on their back are not paid for and the coins in their pockets are counted. That they dream the year round in an English-doss house of the night they can come home and lie about it all [...] The streets of London are just the same as here, Connors. Walkin' up the Yellow Road to the Jute Factory or down some side street to a bean factory in Harlseden—there's no difference (p.21).

Friel advances the conversation that the experience of the working-classes is universal:

**Ben:** It's [America] just another place to live, Elise. Ireland—America—what's the difference? (1965, p.62).

*The Gods are Angry, Miss Kerr* connects with Friel in using the issue of emigration to examine local and international states of pain, isolation, poverty and the breakdown of family both before, and after, the event.

Nolan's work is significant because it avoids stereotypical allocation of blame in its depiction of the fracturing of the relationship between father and family. *The Gods are Angry Miss Kerr* debunks the myth of the deserting, emigrant father of Cottons and Julia, dispensing with the legend of the family stage-villain by lyrically associating him with a small patch of flowers called 'Julia's Acre' (p.40). The drama moves behind a father's flight to give the sense of the day-to-day despair of the working classes that fuelled the engine of emigration of the 1950s. Cottons refuses to condemn his father's desertion and explains it as a loss of pride and identity:

**Cottons:** Pride was havin' a job to go to and comin' home in the evenin' with the stench of jute in his hair [...]a day's work behind him and a day's work ahead (p.40).

An inability to communicate this raw emotion led to a father's isolation and ultimate withdrawal from his family. It was not the desire for freedom from his responsibilities that drove him away but his failure to live up to them. On the other hand, the play depicts traditional stay-at-home Irish fathers as sometimes hostile to daughters. Gertie's lover Billy appears utterly unconcerned when he learns of her plight as a pregnant single woman in the fifties: 'you were hardly on the bus out of this godforsaken village when I forgot all about you' (p.47). He, in turn, sees his own father as caring only about money declaring that 'he has a cash-register for a heart' (p.44) while Gertie reveals that her 'ma and da said I was a slut and a whore' (p.46) before banishing her in shame to 'The Sisters for Fallen Angels' (p.46) in London. Thus, *The Gods are Angry, Miss Kerr* presents lack of responsibility as indicative of a wider sense of parental failure in Irish society of the fifties.

Depiction of a factory community, where the generosity of ordinary working people in caring for each other compensates for familial dysfunction, offers some form of consolation and comfort in a hostile world. The text dramatises many examples. Tommy, a humble factory operative of little means, offers Cottons 'shillins' (p. 67) when going to England, Julia and Gertie comfort a clearly distressed Janey Mac when she complains that 'Everybody's crying. Not like in the pictures' (p.66), Cottons emigrates to find a penniless father in order to look after him (p.67), Tommy protects Albert from the humiliation of discovery by collaborating with his claims to be the 'Ballroom Champion of the World' in 1941 with the eponymous Miss Kerr.

The play's depiction of Irish society anticipates the profound cultural change which would engulf the Irish nation before the end of the 1960s. Nolan's dramatic representation of the 1950s answers the criticism that the past is best forgotten, as if the struggles of this community no longer have any relevance. Despite the fact that the play was written with a

specific target audience in mind, the issues raised are universal to all workers left behind by modernisation. While the closure of the jute factory (due to the introduction of asbestos sacks) fractured the identity of those who worked in it, this dramatic representation of Waterford in the fifties not only gives these people a voice but also gives reference points towards self-discovery to other workers in similar circumstances. The clear need for healing and comfort that arises from these works is further explored in *The Boathouse*.

### *The Boathouse*

*The Boathouse* is the final play in a trilogy of plays set in and around Waterford and was inspired by the demolition of Waterford Boat Club's old boathouse beside the river Suir. In the play the last day of the Leaving Cert exam in June 1986 presents a time for reflection. Students Claire and Debbie meet in the old Boathouse that is due to be demolished and are subsequently joined by fellow-student Joe and Billy, a local tannery worker and early school-leaver. Here they explore the ugliness of life in, and the impossibility of escape from, small-town Ireland where butcher-shops and abattoirs dominate the landscape. It is the story of how four young school leavers, aware of a better life, each construct a coping strategy to deal with futures of low-level wages and meaningless employment that have been determined by parental choice.

The argument for Nolan's growing reputation as a playwright is advanced by Team Educational Theatre Company's commission of *The Boathouse* as an issues-driven drama that would appeal to a target audience of senior-cycle students and reflects a shift in Nolan's writing from the local to the national. This argument is advanced by TEAM Theatre's investment, in association with Dublin County Council, in designer Barbara Bradshaw's spectacular and expensive set that stood on stilts surrounded by water and by the play's inclusion in the Dublin Theatre Festival which opened in the SFX theatre on Oct.

6<sup>th</sup> 1986 (Cassin, 2012, p.217-8). *Boathouse* director Barry Cassin, aware of Nolan's previous work, described the young playwright as 'a gifted writer' and referred to 'the quality of the writing' (Cassin, 2012, p.217-8).

*The Boathouse* reveals a developing playwright experimenting with form to express context. For example, Nolan expands upon his previous use of landscape to express the grimness of Ireland in the 1980s. Clare follows her description of a town of 'fourteen butcher shops, two slaughterhouses, a factory that makes glue from the blood of dead horses' (p.46) with eight further references to 'blood' and a fictionalised streetscape of 'Line Bone Road, Pork Chop Street, Roast Beef St. and Chucks Crescent' (p.46). *The Boathouse* dispenses with any traditional antagonist to impel action and introduces a conflict that is entirely societal. With little to determine change in plot or characters, the entire focus rests on the circumstances of the young quartet. Nolan's given circumstances of time, place and setting prevents the characters from either embarking upon, or turning away from, any particular course of action thus suggesting that the picture of stasis that emerges, and which connects with previous texts in the early work, is both systemic and endemic in Irish society. The ineluctable fate of young Irish people, which is the central theme of the play, is reflected in the societal and parent-determined futures of the characters: Billy will remain at the Tannery, Debbie will work at Superquinn, Clare will take up employment at McGrath Butchers while Joe will replace his father as the local undertaker. *The Boathouse* reflects a world of stasis in Irish society in the 1980s, suggesting that the cycle of lives is endlessly repeated in a manner that is subtly Beckettian.

Nolan expands the contemporaneous portrayal of women by writers, such as Friel and Roche, in using Clare as the intellectual other of the piece: the outsider whose understanding of life challenges conventional wisdom. Claire connects with Billy Cass in *The Black Pool* and Albert O'Brien in *The Gods Are Angry*, Miss Kerr in her otherness and anticipates other characters in Nolan's later work that are subversive of current wisdom and mistrusted by the society they challenge. Interpretation of the dramatic text could

also suggest that Claire's sexual orientation is very much a closet, though not ashamed, lesbianism in a society where secrecy was required while homosexual acts remained illegal. Comments such as: 'you'd look lovely in white' (p.36) or 'are you lonely now, Debbie?' (p.36) or playful conversations such as:

**Debbie:** Everybody loves me. I'm the belle of the ball. Deb's Ball

**Clare:** I do.

**Debbie:** What?

**Clare:** Love you. You know that, don't you? (p.36-7).

might be interpreted as nothing more than expressions of friendship. However, this research argues these expressions may be also interpreted as subtle declarations of homosexual love. Such an interpretation of the dramatic text suggests that Clare's otherness of homosexuality actually strengthens her otherness as an individual thinker and ideally places her as a character to challenge conventional standards of living. The frequent textual references to 'two swans on the river' (p.10/11/31), with their Leda associations of lesbianism, can be interpreted as a metaphor for Claire and Debbie.<sup>6</sup> While *The Boathouse* is not necessarily a polemic in favour of gay rights, lyrical dialogue and artistic connections identify Claire as a sympathetic character and thus her comments critique acceptable social norms and anticipate a society in need of change.

However, the most significant aspect of *The Boathouse* lies in the introduction of the concept of redemption. While an existential message of redemption is sounded however, no mode of redemption is proffered. The play uses the imagery of the gliding swans to indicate Claire's continuous search for an aesthetic understanding of life, which will bring some form of redemption from the absurd cruelty of a world she is forced to endure. Thus, *The Boathouse* posits a choice between a life of ugliness and brute insensitivity and

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<sup>6</sup> Many painters such as Moreau, Correggio, Wertmuller, Kalmakov, Rubens etc. found it more acceptable to depict the female form in the sexual act by connecting with the Leda myth. Thus, Leda could be interpreted as both swan and female. Also *Spring Fire* (Packer, 1952), the first lesbian pulp fiction novel, which features lesbian sorority sisters Leda and Mitch, cleared the way for hundreds of lesbian pulp fiction novels since.

a life of aesthetic beauty as represented by ‘two swans on a summer’s day’ (p. 11) on the river. Learning to swim—a metaphor for survival in a hostile world—must come from within, however, and cannot be taught as suggested in the following exchange:

**Clare:** Two swans on a summer’s day. [...].

**Billy:** And we can’t swim. Not a stroke between us.

**Clare:** We could learn.

**Billy:** Then teach me.

**Clare:** Teach yourself Billy (p. 47).

Thus, redemption is existential and totally based on man’s ability to redeem himself from within. The play suggests that while comfort is available through love and friendship, personal salvation must come from within. In *The Boathouse* Nolan, for the first time, sidesteps traditional religious thinking and seeks to establish new modes of healing and comfort with ethical/moral beliefs based on personal experience.

Personal experience now points towards the importance of the creative act in redemption and is the natural conclusion of the experiences of Annie’s tales of Miko’s singing in *Doorsteps*, Billy Cass’s Dream of Cranes in *The Black Pool*, Albert’s Legend of the Sea Giants in *The Gods are Angry*, *Miss Kerr* previously referred to in this chapter. Redemption in the Trilogy does not occur, however, because the creative act remains merely a dream—and not an act—of performance: Billy Cass drowns himself in *The Black Pool*, the Sea-Giants return to the ocean floor and a closing curtain on Claire alone in *The Boathouse*, fingering the scarecrow, dispels any optimism. Aesthetic beauty alone can only sustain—but not redeem. She is limited to the role of announcer at her school’s performance of *The Bohemian Girl* because ‘I couldn’t sing, so it was my job to announce it’ (p.51). Claire is thus denied participation in the creative act because she cannot sing and can only hope to survive the ugliness of life through a sustaining vision of artistic beauty. Clare elaborates on this crucial development in Nolan’s writing—the introduction of redemption as the major theme:

**Claire:** And do you know, Billy, it was the first time I felt touched by beauty. And in the presence, for the first time, of something...almost sacred. Gracenotes tumbling round me and thinking, thinking I'd be safe as long as I could hear them, as long as they didn't go away (p.52).

Thus, Claire's vision of a performance of *The Bohemian Girl*, with all the townspeople in attendance (p.52,) may be interpreted as a metaphor for the establishment of Red Kettle Theatre Co. (1985) where redemption will occur through participation in the creative act. Redemption through the arts is now established as a significant theme in the work and aligns Nolan with the work of playwrights such as Thomas Murphy in *The Gigli Concert* (1994) and Billy Roche in *The Cavalcaders* (1993).

Naturally, much of Nolan's early work exhibits many of the flaws of an apprentice writer including a heavy reliance on monologues which are often overwritten. Nonetheless this early writing is deserving of critical attention. Analysis of the early work is important in understanding the development of Nolan as a writer and in establishing significant themes. These early plays are important because their portrayal of social and economic stasis in Waterford is in itself a significant analysis of Irish society in the third quarter of the twentieth century. For example, the trilogy registers significant societal issues such as the violent contrast between the potential for lives of enrichment and the crude reality of existence in social narratives of entrapment. The depiction of such lives is reminiscent of the portrayal of the lives of the tenement dwellers in O'Casey's trilogy a generation earlier. By the end of his Waterford trilogy, Nolan has exhausted the urban issues which he wished to explore. In fact it could be argued that the final play in the trilogy is merely an expansion of issues such as poverty and unemployment previously raised by him in the earlier two plays and that his work needed a new direction.

However, certain key issues emerge in the early work that indicate this new direction. For example, theatrical and creative characters that are other, and think differently, emerge as signifiers of truths denied to those around them. These truths are achieved through a sense of spiritual connection with and intuitive understanding of, the world as they experienced it and are largely expressed in creative terms. For example Billy Cass in *The Black Pool* imagines a revolt by dockside cranes—a metaphor for fellow-workers—that communicates a sense of understanding beyond words. Similarly, Albert ‘The Liar’ O’Brien in *The Gods are Angry, Miss Kerr* imagines a mythical race of sea-giants that come ashore and take on human form as a means of finding spiritual healing in an uncaring world. Equally Clare in *The Boathouse* imagines a performance of Balfe’s *Bohemian Girl* (1843), which would be attended by townspeople who then become transformed by the creative act of opera.

However, while these three experiences connect in their search for healing and comfort through the power of artistic imagination, they exist only in their creators’ minds and therefore the creative act never actually takes place. Nolan has come to understand that without performance, transformation is not possible. It could be argued that Clare’s imagined theatre of transformation was the engine of creative performance that Nolan co-founded in Red Kettle Theatre Company—the theatre where Waterford people would go to find enlightenment and healing and thus be transformed by the creative act they witnessed. Nolan will now turn his attention towards the possibility of redemption through participation in the creative act.

## CHAPTER TWO

### BETWEEN THE ISLANDS OF TRUTH AND ILLUSION: *Dear Kenny* and *Moonshine*

This chapter focuses on the emergence of the concept of redemption through artistic performance, established in *Dear Kenny* (1988) and developed in *Moonshine* (1991) that is now articulated for the first time in Nolan's dramas. In doing so the thesis considers the importance of the artistic other as a mediator and the role of theatrical performance and play as a bridge to metaphysical healing and redemption in both these works. It explores societal issues and changes from 1988-1991 in Ireland and the manner in which they relate to the plays under consideration, while providing a summary and literary critical analysis of both works. In particular the chapter examines issues such as the plight of the homosexual in a hostile world, the increasing marginalisation of the clergy in Irish society and the decline in religious attendance for both the Protestant and Catholic churches as reflected in the dramatic texts. The chapter considers the depiction of stronger female characters in the work as part of a changing Irish society. The study is in a position, for the first time, to consider theatrical and scholarly reviews of the work as Nolan's reputation as a dramatist grows with his work now being performed in the capital.

#### *Dear Kenny*

*Dear Kenny*, a play written for TEAM Theatre with a target audience of primary school children was first produced at St. Salem's National School, Bailiboro, Co. Cavan on 19.04.1988 as part of a tour of schools. In the play, twelve-year-old Claire, who works in her father's caravan park in 1988, is distressed at her mother's sudden departure to London. She refuses to believe her father Christy's explanation that his wife Helen has gone to care for her sick sister. Christy's mother Bessie, a professional actress, rents a

caravan in the park and tensions emerge as Christie complains of Bessie's lengthy absence and his embarrassment at her intended cabaret performance at the local hotel.

Claire, accompanied by teenage friend Bill, meets Bessie in her caravan. She challenges Bessie, whom she has never met, about her long absence but is gradually won over by her grandmother's love and bohemian lifestyle. Bessie's reference to her mother on holidays contradicts Christy's version of events, sowing further doubt in the uneasy Claire's mind and prompts a desire to visit her mother in London.

Bill's soccer team, managed by his father, has suffered many humiliating defeats. Convinced that the team can improve with proper coaching, Bill writes to Liverpool manager Kenny Dalglish offering to pay for coaching for his father while Claire needs money for a visit to her mother. Bessie suggests a Punch and Judy show on the beach to raise funds. While setting up on the beach, a disgruntled Christy accuses Bessie of betraying him by involving his daughter in theatrical activities and orders the dismantling of the puppet booth. Bessie and Claire decide to continue.

The Punch and Judy show, with Bessie as Punch and Claire as Judy, which takes place on the rainy deserted beach resembles Christy's family issues. Despite the absence of an audience, Bessie insists on continuing, believing artistic performance more important than commercial success. Despite mishaps, traditionally associated with puppet shows, order and love are restored to the family. Christy is transformed by the creative act when he revives his role of policeman and informs Claire that mother will return next week and that communication between father and daughter will improve. Bessie decides to retire and Bill summons up the courage to write to Kenny Dalglish. The possibility of repeating the puppet show, with Christy's participation, becomes a distinct possibility as artistic creativity leads to familial healing.

The drama introduces, for the first time in Nolan's work, the creative and theatrical other: a priest-actor character with a thespian background that mediates, signifies, and identifies

a profound, if obvious, truth. Because the play was originally written for a young audience, the concept of redemption is less complex than in Nolan's other dramas. The deliberate lack of subtlety in a play written for a young audience, presents an interesting and obvious portal to this new stage in the writing. Sean Moffet explains:

Obviously *Dear Kenny* is a play with a strong narrative and a number of easily determined messages. [...] Imagination versus commonsense and, in its own way, imagination is the winner. [...] Claire's father discovers this literally when he allows himself to be cajoled into a game of Punch and Judy. In an instant he becomes a warm human being and the transformation is one of the most convincing and rewarding aspects of this drama. The power of playing, of opening ourselves up to a world brim-full of possibilities is the message at the heart of this play (1988, p. 55).

The potentiality of transformation, through the creative act of play, is brought about by the bohemian and creative character of Bessie who suggests a performance of *Punch and Judy* as a means of raising funds for granddaughter Claire and her friend Bill. The character of Bessie provokes a natural societal fear—hinted at previously in the characters of Billy Cass in *The Black Pool* and of Claire in *The Boathouse* and anticipating others in later works—of the character of the other in the play because it disturbs an accepted view of certainty. For example, Bessie challenges the certainties that surround the accepted societal view of the aging matriarch through her bohemian lifestyle. Moreover, her refusal to wed, allied to her determination to pursue a wandering artistic career on little means, disturbs a societal belief in security and fixity as a norm. Christy articulates this fear when he dismisses Bessie's professional career as an actress as 'gallavantin around the two-bit halls of Ireland with some godforsaken play or other' (p. 8), describing her puppet show as 'madcap' (p. 37) and 'nonsense' (p.38). Similarly, Claire states that 'there's something funny about her. I think she's not like other people's grannies' (p. 14); repeating her father's natural prejudice that those who live their lives through the arts should be distrusted and regarded as subversive of social norms. Fearing social disgrace, Christy

refuses Bessie's request to accompany her on piano in her cabaret performance and her attempts to involve him in the puppet show fail. Although a natural puppeteer in the fashion of Nolan's creative and theatrical characters, the play suggests, therefore, that Christy's initial decision to turn his back on the creative act of puppetry creates an inner distance between himself and his own natural creative self, leaving him without access to healing and redemption.

In stark contrast Claire, who has inherited her grandmother's talent and attitudes, is rewarded when she openly embraces and defends the puppet show. Her invention of free script for the Punch and Judy performance reveals a performer, naturally in touch with her creative sense, and her caring approach to her father during the performance demonstrates the suggestion of redemption in her character. Her innocence connects her with other theatrical Nolan characters that adopt the role of other, articulating truths normally hidden by conventions of manners and polite conversation:

**Claire:** I'm fed up being patient with him and so was my mum and that's why she ran away.

**Bessie:** I'm sure that's not true.

**Claire:** It is true. He told you that she was on holidays and they told me she was minding my auntie 'cos she was sick, but I know she ran away because she doesn't like Dad any more (p. 33).

As the creative other of the drama, Bessie is the first Nolan character to articulate the potential for the release of creativity to be a healing and transforming force. Significantly Bessie's single-minded dedication to, and her understanding of, the transformative power of art, determines that the show must be performed on a rain-sodden and deserted beach irrespective of its merits, detractors and lack of audience. This scene anticipates other acts of creative heroic failure—in spite of empty or hostile audiences—in Nolan's plays that reflect the power of art to transform all those involved. For the first time in Nolan's plays,

a character articulates the fundamental reason for proceeding with the creative act that appears futile:

**Bessie:** Like doing what we set out to do—because we believed in it. Even though we were told it was silly and it would never work. We said we would do this because we believed it would.

**Bill:** But it didn't Bessie. It's not going to work.

**Bessie:** Maybe believing it would was more important, Bill. [...]

**Claire:** Maybe she's right, though. Maybe we have to do it. Maybe that's more important (p.42).

Here Bessie articulates the importance of the 'doing': irrespective of an audience, artistic and creative fulfilment only comes through the transformative power of performance—however flawed—which then acts as a bridge between incomplete and intuitive understanding of the world. Believing it would work, and actually working towards that goal, becomes more important than the end product because as Eamonn Jordan argues:

Play is the ingredient that helps the characters shift consciousness. [...] Through laughter, parody, incongruity and through the ridiculous, the momentum to overcome the trauma can be found (2009, p. 203).

In other words, 'play' becomes the single most important feature of the redemptive process.

Therefore the puppet show in *Dear Kenny* that combines laughter, parody and incongruity expresses, in the most obvious way, the role of performance as a creative bridge to understanding in Nolan's work. Rosy Barnes, in '*Puppet Panorama*' (2000, p. 63) observes:

Puppetry has neither the highbrow status of its more fashionable relation, physical theatre. [...] This is a shame because puppetry is just bursting with untapped potential (p. 51). [...] More simply than any other theatrical image, the puppet symbolises the human condition. Dependent, vulnerable and utterly powerless, the puppet is a metaphor for us, embodying profound human truths

simply and without ceremony (p.62). [...] The point here is the act of transformation itself (Barnes, 2003, p. 63).

Transformation then becomes possible because Christy participates in a puppet show that Nolan uses as a metatheatrical device to comment on issues in Christy's own life. Christy, aggressive towards his family, connects with Mr. Punch, a former Everyman character, who traditionally deals with troublesome family members by knocking them on the head. However engagement with the creative performance of the puppet show transforms the fractured family by reflecting the truth of their circumstances. Thus, lives are redeemed as Christy accepts responsibility for his fractured marriage and troubled relationship with his daughters, opening up the possibility of further healing with future puppet shows.

The role of metatheatricality in establishing the power of the creative act to affect transformation receives fuller exploration and development in Nolan's next play *Moonshine*. Here characters that perform in the metatheatrical play-within-a-play bring about healing and redemption in yet another deserted theatrical space.

## *MOONSHINE*

*Moonshine* premiered at Garter Lane Theatre on 29<sup>th</sup> October 1991 before a national tour that began in the Abbey Theatre in March 1992. In the play, it is mid-day on Good Friday 1991 in the village of Ballintra. Undertaker and amateur theatre enthusiast McKeever ('Mac'), accompanied by his young autistic apprentice Michael, have come to the Church of Ireland to discuss the funeral arrangements of Rev. John Langton's dying wife Margaret. Before Langton's arrival, Michael expands on the mounting problems of Mac's production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Shakespeare, 1593), scheduled for Easter Sunday night at the parish hall. Langton, wearied by the loss of his congregation and the church authorities' decision to close the church, now doubts his faith.

Later Michael meets schoolgirl Bridget and discusses the forthcoming production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Neither of them attends the Good Friday religious ceremonies. Despite Bridget's enthusiasm, Michael fears public humiliation for the cast of four playing multiple parts. Griffin, another cast member, enters and ridicules McKeever. Mac's plans for *A Midsummer Night's Dream* fall into disarray. With the parish hall no longer available, Mac reallocates the part of Helena to Bridget who seizes the opportunity of rehearsal to make her feelings known to the startled McKeever. Later that evening, Elizabeth Langton returns to meet her father after an absence of five years. Mac confesses to Elizabeth that he loved her but never explains why he failed to respond to her letters and phone calls. Langton agrees to Mac's request for the use of the church for a performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* on Easter Sunday night. After rehearsals on Easter Sunday, he explains to Elizabeth that he rejected her love because he was too frightened to embrace the hope and happiness it offered. Finally, Michael withdraws and Mac abandons the play as news arrives of Margaret Langton's death. In a confrontation with Mac, an angry Griffin is revealed as a lonely homosexual seeking love and hope. Langton and Elizabeth decide to bury Margaret in Ballintra despite the church authorities' instructions. When a doubting Langton fails to complete the funeral service, Mac continues with the homily, urging faith in the resurrection. Inspired by Mac's words, Michael, Bridget and Griffin transform the service into one of healing and redemption as they speak the lines of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Reviews were largely hostile. Desmond Rushe questioned the credibility of the drama in the *Irish Independent*:

Ritualistic parallels between religion and theatre, and between make believe and belief, abound: they are everywhere. But they are generally too contrived and they stretch way beyond the bounds of credibility (Rushe, 1992).

Patsy McGarry in the *Irish Press* agreed: 'too much was attempted, too much was contrived, too much was forced beyond the acceptable limits' (1992, p.16) and rejected the 'too obvious intent of showing the common redemptive powers of religion and theatre'. *The Phoenix* questioned the production values: Ben Barnes [Director] stages the play with such inattention as to make it all rather heavy-going [...] but the production trivialises Jim Nolan's potentially moving play (unknown, 03.04.1992, p.17).<sup>7</sup> However the *Sunday Tribune* described the work as 'a modern day mystery play' (Theodores, 1992), describing the second act as 'dense and original and rich'. The *Sunday Press*, found connections with other works:

This unusual work has many echoes of Tom Murphy's '*The Gigli Concert*' (1983) and the late Stewart Parker's '*Nightshade*'(1980) but it is sufficiently original to set it apart (Harding, 29.03.1992).

However Harding found that 'it was an ambitious play which perhaps attempts to cover too much ground and certainly contains longueurs'. Nevertheless, the number of reviews and a production in the Abby Theatre, followed by a national tour, indicate Nolan's growing reputation as a playwright of national prominence.

After the final play in the Waterford trilogy, Nolan's writing undergoes significant change as issues raised reflect a more modern and urban Ireland in the last quarter of the twentieth century. Ireland is changing and Nolan's work reflects changing times. Unlike the urban settings of the Waterford trilogy, locations are now half-way between urban and rural, old and new, conservative and liberal. Issues such as poverty and unemployment no longer dominate the dramatic text and characters are decidedly more modern, urban and liberal, representing a more outward-looking country yet still retaining a somewhat traditional rural base.

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<sup>7</sup> *The Phoenix* has a policy of not identifying any of their contributors (confirmed in an email to this researcher on 03.04.2014).

Although *Dear Kenny* and *Moonshine* are set in rural seaside towns, independent-minded and assertive female characters now emerge as evidence of a changing Irish society. *Moonshine* carries on the development of female characters such as Christy's mother Bessie, for example, a modern and independent actress who cares little for convention or a narrow-minded, conservative, rural mind-set and dismisses rural prejudices that she and Christy's father never married as a 'sin in some people's eyes' (p.20). Similarly, Bessie's feisty and independent twelve-year-old grand-daughter Claire services her own bicycle, indicating a subtle shift towards a modern, independent generation of women. On the other hand, characters such as Bill's mother, for instance, who 'can't drive' (p. 1) now begin to appear out-of-place and anachronistic. *Moonshine's* student Bridget advances these characters in appearing even more independent and defiant, spitting at Griffin, for example, when spurning his unwanted sexual advances (p. 27). Bridget is ambitious and unwilling to accept religious, social or sexual conventions. In pursuit of sexual pleasure, she breaks social taboo by courting the autistic Michael, convincing him to kiss her—and not for the first time:

**Bridget:** [...] D'you want a kiss, Michael?

**Michael:** (*Pause*): No.

**Bridget:** I thought you liked them?

**Michael:** I do. Not here. Someone might see us.

**Bridget:** They're all above at the Stations. There's no one here only the sea-giants. They won't tell.

**Michael:** All right so.

*He remains where he is. She leans over and kisses him. Once. He waits, eyes closed. She smiles, then kisses him again. He responds and she encourages him (p. 27).*

Bridget makes her feelings known to the married, middle-aged undertaker when rehearsing the seduction scene in *Pyramus and Thisbe*. Here Nolan's stage directions specifically indicate a shift towards a more modern and less conservative Ireland where social and religious boundaries are disappearing as Bridget, for example, takes the

initiative in a violently paradoxical image of romance, with a prone McKeever on his own mortuary slab:

*She throws away script. Grabs McKeever and violently lowers him onto desk. [...] She straddles him and begins to unbutton his shirt. [...] Bridget, consumed as they say with passion, plants a smacker on McKeever's lips (p. 39).*

The good-humoured comic nature of the scene invites approval of the violation of such social boundaries and is indicative of a social shift in the mores of a modernising Ireland.

Elizabeth Langton recalls an identical previous scene, when she was also seventeen, in more sombre and realistic terms:

**Elizabeth:** Only there was no princess, was there Mac? And the man, our erstwhile Prince Charming was revealed in all his glory—a frightened middle-aged mortician with his trousers round his ankles on an embalming studio trolley. Not a pretty picture, is it? Not the stuff of fairytales (p.61).

Left alone to contemplate the end of their relationship, Elizabeth Langton has had time to think. She has little regard for older, conservative conventions and has embraced the changing culture of the nineties, declaring that 'We were lovers Mac—it's not a crime' (p.48). A non-judgmental Rev. Langton articulates this changing moral perspective when addressing a daughter apologising for her behaviour: 'For what? For daring to love?'(p. 72). The older and more intelligent, educated, cultured character of Elizabeth Langton addresses the violation of social taboos in a thoughtful, reflective and mature manner:

**McKeever:** Didn't you give tuppence for the consequence?

**Elizabeth:** Didn't you? For the public disgrace?

**McKeever:** No!

**Elizabeth:** For the pointing fingers, the sneering faces?

**McKeever:** Couldn't care less.

**Elizabeth:** For what my father would think?

**McKeever:** Didn't care.  
**Elizabeth:** Didn't you?  
**McKeever:** (Shouts ) No! Not them! Not that!  
**Elizabeth:** I didn't either, Mac. Because I loved you.  
(*Silence*) (p. 62).

This exchange should be seen as a further indication of Nolan's interest in reflecting significant change in Irish society in his plays.

On the other hand, desire for societal change in attitudes towards homosexuality remains unchanged as old taboos remain in place, emphasised by the depiction of the homosexual character Griffin. An angry, spiteful Griffin, who disguises his homosexuality with misogyny, is explained in terms of a closet repressed homosexuality that forces and twists his character inwards, creating a brutal and cynical façade. While Michael and Bridget need McKeever's play to give them a voice, Griffin's vicious attack on the project reflects his desire to remain quiet. Thus, Michael is humiliated as 'Scaldyballs' (p.25), Bridget is a 'Bitch. Fuckin' bitch' (p.27) and McKeever is 'a fuckin' nobody like meself' (p.74). However when faced with the discovery that Mac was witness to his homosexual encounter with a German student on the beach the previous summer, Griffin's terror of discovery reveals Irish society as homophobic and unforgiving, afraid of 'that shower of cunts down the town.' (p.76). Griffin's cry for 'real company [and] Love, y'know. Just the once. Love' (p.76) articulates a desire for acceptance, denied to homosexuals—especially in rural Irish society—who have the courage 'to love, in that way, in this place' (p.76). Griffin's attendance on Easter night and willingness to participate in the speaking of Shakespeare's lines, illustrates the transforming power of the creative act in revealing a voice that needed to be heard.

Location is now crucial to meaning in Nolan's work in *Dear Kenny* and *Moonshine*. For example, the impermanence and lack of fixity of blank stage settings of the Waterford trilogy prologues, where anxieties, neuroses and fears were bleakly declaimed to the audience without reference to the other actors, now gives way to defined settings of time

and location, as Nolan moves towards the exploration of complex familial relationships, previously suggested in the trilogy. *Dear Kenny* appears as a bridge between the urban locations of the earlier plays and the rural seaside towns of Ballintra or Seafield of the later work. Thus, *Dear Kenny* is located in a caravan park beside a seaside town—a temporal space between rural and urban that suggests changing values as leisure now begins to occupy a space in a somewhat more prosperous Ireland. On the other hand, *Moonshine* is set in a more defined location: the seaside village of Ballintra at Easter where ‘the central location is the Church of Ireland building of which Rev. Langton is the rector’ (Nolan, 1992, preface). Andrucki explores the purpose of the Easter setting and the Church of Ireland location:

The three days between Good Friday and Easter Sunday—that is, between the despairing moment of the crucifixion (“My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?”) and the surging hopefulness of the resurrection—provide the play’s temporal setting. As a result, the calendar itself seems to be reinforcing the play’s message. [...]The play’s most important location, then, is a place with a hallowed past facing a tawdry future—a temple of hopelessness. And its pastor is a man who has lost his faith. Again, these facts vividly counterpoint the play’s central theme: the necessity of faith and hope for human survival. The beach and the funeral parlor/embalming studio also play their thematic roles. The former is the doorstep of the sea, the cradle of life, and thus, a source of inexhaustible hope. On the other hand, the funeral parlor is death’s receiving room, the place we go to visit a corpse. But it is also the place where the mortician plies his skill, making the dead seem lifelike, and thus, in a small way, pointing toward the hope of a resurrection (2005, p 2-3).

Thus, Nolan’s settings of time and location now become crucial in establishing theme and meaning in the work.

The attempt to stage *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* in itself incorporating a play within a play, and an enchanted wood location where transfiguration may occur—is central to the plot of *Moonshine* and connects with the performance of the puppet show in *Dear Kenny*,

where transformation has already occurred. The previously imagined creative performances of the Waterford trilogy—Billy Cass’s cranes in revolt in *The Black Pool*, Albert’s sea-giants in *The Gods are Angry*, *Miss Kerr* and Claire’s recollection of the performance of *The Bohemian Girl* (Balfe, 1843) in *The Boathouse*—now lead towards healing and transformation through actual performances. *Moonshine* and *Dear Kenny* differ from Nolan’s previous work, such as the dream of cranes in *The Black Pool*, however, because both real and figurative landscapes now combine. A deserted beach merges with a surreal puppet world and an empty church is transformed into an enchanted wood. In other words, settings now provide both the concrete world and its metaphorical counterpart within the narratives, with the artist mediating between the physical and the metaphysical worlds, thus allowing a journey, the purpose of which is described by the dramatis personae of Pyramus and Thisbe:

**Michael:** ‘to plumb the depths of those mercurial waters between the islands of Truth and Illusion’ (p. 41).

Characters, therefore, in both *Dear Kenny* and *Moonshine* now seek out truth through a synthesis of reality and illusion because, in the moment of transformation, the real and the imagined world are never really separate.

After writing *The Boathouse*, Nolan rarely mentions the Catholic clergy in his work, indicating the increasingly marginalized role of the Catholic Church in a changing Irish society. Where priests do appear, however, they sometimes perform a role not dissimilar to the artist, so that we can identify priests as artists and artists as priests. Interpretation of the metaphysical now passes instead to the character of the creative other: the artist acting in a priestly manner, the faith-healer curing, healing, consoling, the simple jester such as Michael, whose innocence gives him license to speak openly without inhibition. Christopher Murray explains Michael’s function through comparison to a similar character in Billy Roche’s *Belfry* (London, 2000):

The politics of *Belfry* are brought more sharply into focus through the character of Dominic, a slightly retarded teenager, who is an eccentric altar boy in the church. His mental state gives him the licence of a jester to speak home truths openly. He has no sense of awe before priest, sacristan or woman. He is the voice of vulnerability within a society which decides to lock him up in a special school. It is interesting that there is a somewhat similar character in Jim Nolan's *Moonshine* (1991) staged by Red Kettle Theatre Co. in Waterford. In that play Michael is accorded an innocence at odds with the deception and death all around him and through his involvement in a production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, he assumes a voice articulating the darkness. He works paradoxically to bring light and hope into the lives of the main characters in *Moonshine*. Where priests fail, such characters supply illumination in recent Irish drama... So like Michael in *Moonshine*, Dominic knows the darkneses in the lives and hearts of those who are supposed to care for him (Murray in Jordan, 2009, p.220).

Interestingly, *Dear Kenny* never mentions a priest or any priestly intervention into Christy's failing marriage or, perhaps even more startlingly, into Bessie's failure to marry Christy's father a generation earlier. While Claire in *The Boathouse* lived under the shadow of Mother Margaret's vindictiveness, in *Dear Kenny* is indifferent to religious influence. Now *Moonshine* advances the argument of the marginalization of religious influence begun in *Dear Kenny*. For example, while the opening act of *Moonshine* takes place on Good Friday, no character attends religious ceremonies. Bridget declares a position that is indicative of the growing loss of church influence on Irish life: 'Personally I couldn't be bothered' (p. 23) and utterly dismisses the value of her convent education declaring: 'sooner I'm outa that kip the better' (p. 23).

Thus, the marginalization of the influence of the priest-character, and his irrelevance to the lives of Nolan's younger characters, indicates a significant change in Irish society. While Friel and Murphy are more direct in their criticism of the Irish Catholic Church, Nolan reflects the growing irrelevance and unimportance of the clergy in an increasingly secular society. For all his former power, the priest-figure becomes remote and off-stage,

a figure of distant and obscure relevance who is rarely mentioned. Nolan neither introduces the growing secularization of Irish society as a theme nor comments critically on it, but simply accepts and embraces it as part of the here-and-now, using it as the backdrop to his work. For example, Michael finds no succour in religion or prayer and turns instead to finding consolation and comfort in repeating railway station place names out of Ballintra, names that express a type of formulaic prayer for escape. He frequently returns to chant this litany when troubled:

**Michael:** Ardglass, Farrenstown, Ardbeg. All-change. Newport, Kilowen, Raheen and Lismore (p.22).

Interestingly, Michael chooses a list of disused railway stations over the Stations of the Cross as a litany to bring healing, remembering a comforting train journey with his father in 1974 when he 'was happy' (p.31).<sup>8</sup> Nolan explains the power of litany from the effect that the sacrament of Benediction had on him as an altar boy:

I love the ritual of all that, I love the theatre. And like to my dying day, will always hear the rhythm and the poetry of the benediction, particularly that ceremony, you know. The blessed be God, blessed be his holy name, the litany of that, like it's pure poetry, wonderful on the ear and tongue (Dunbar, 2001, p.107).

Nolan's childhood association with the theatre of religion ensures that the spiritual is never far from the writing.

Decline in religious attendance, growing secularisation of the community, and the ever-decreasing Protestant congregation (paralleled by the ever-dwindling cast of Mac's Pyramus and Thisbe Productions) provides the basis for the questioning of faith among

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<sup>8</sup> This incident recalls a similar boat-journey by father and son in *Philadelphia Here I Come* (Friel, 1965, pp 104-5) where Gar recalls that his father also 'was happy'.

the central characters. Apparently casual references add deceptively to the conversation: 'Anybody home?' (p. 13), asks McKeever in the local Protestant church, before answering:

**McKeever:** 'the Eternal Presence [...] Holy God! Nowhere to be found' (p.13)

and finally, declaiming a verse of Faith of our Fathers on Langton's organ (p. 13). Christopher Murray draws attention to the importance of Nolan's unique treatment of late twentieth-century Protestant decline in *Twentieth-Century Irish Drama*:

Jim Nolan's *Moonshine* (1991) deals with the fate of a dwindling Protestant community in a small Irish town and finds potent connection with the work of Lennox Robinson as well as, more obviously, with *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The intertextuality of such work lends them a voice in the ongoing debates on the Irish tradition. (1997, p. 238)

The collapse in church attendance that forces the imminent closure of Langton's church, raises significant questions in the debate about faith, belief and religious mystery that form the crisis and resolution of the drama:

**Langton:** [...] I stood at that altar last Sunday and waited. I waited, even though I knew that no one would come. But nothing. Silence falling on silence.

**McKeever:** Except for Big Daddy.

**Langton:** What?

**McKeever:** Himself. The man above. Holy Goddo. He was here.

**Langton:** Was he?

**McKeever:** Still is.

It is significant that the only cleric to appear in all of Nolan's work expresses personal doubt about faith and religion.

*Moonshine* further expands the possibilities of theatre and performance, begun in *Dear Kenny*, so that art, illusion and reality become constantly interchangeable. For example, Mac declares that the ‘embalmer [...] is the creator of all illusions’ (p.65) through the undertaker’s art of making the dead seem alive. Characters constantly probe, explore, examine and question faith, belief, transformation and mystery in a narrative that combines drama, religion and death. The function of dramatic performance in achieving redemption is explored as McKeever questions and answers the purpose of their production of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*:

**McKeever (Exclaims):** Da capo! Con brio! Purpose of quest?

**All:** To plumb the depths of those dangerous and mercurial waters between the islands of Truth and Illusion.

**McKeever:** Excellent. [...] Illusion and Truth, Michael. We create the illusion in order to render the truth. And we will create it. Four or twenty—believe and you shall not be found wanting (p. 41).

Interestingly, Nolan draws attention to the purpose of metatheatre in his own play by making McKeever question Shakespeare’s use of the insert-play of *Pyramus and Thisbe*:

**McKeever:** [...] To show our simple skill, that is the true beginning of our end. Now. Let’s just...stop for a moment and examine what we’re all trying to achieve here. Bridget—purpose of Act Five?

**Bridget:** To resolve the whole plot. To denote the lapse of time. To introduce the performance of the Rude Mechanicals [...]

**McKeever:** Good. Who are the rude mechanicals? Michael?

**Michael:** [...] Simple men all. Country people just like ourselves.

**McKeever:** And what are these country people just like ourselves about to do? [...]

**Bridget:** They’ve come to perform the merry tragedy of *Pyramus and Thisbe* before an ungrateful court.

**McKeever:** Good. What is the purpose of the Rude Mechanicals play-within-a-play? (p.54).

This constant questioning and probing places the purpose of theatre and sub-text before the audience, inviting participation in the voyage of the drama between McKeever's islands of 'Truth and Illusion' (p. 41). David Grant, writing in *Theatre Ireland*, argues:

Perhaps the most attractive aspect of the play is its directness and simplicity—not that it lacks thematic sophistication. But the ideas are clearly presented in a way that completely engages the audience. To this extent, the play represents the traditional story telling values of Irish theatre. It shuns intellectual exhibitionism and obscurity. Its great strength lies in the way it so deftly manipulates its audience's response, drawing us into the world of the play and making us willing partners in its final apotheosis (1992, p.30).

Subtler than *Dear Kenny*, *Moonshine* draws its audience as willing participants in its final epiphany moment of revelation.

Church and funeral parlour interchange as stage space—McKeever begins and ends the play in the church pulpit—so that the distinction between real and illusory becomes progressively blurred, empowering the audience to find truth ultimately in illusion and mystery. In the opening scene Mac rehearses Michael in his lines in the Church that will ultimately become Pyramus and Thisbe Productions theatrical space:

Say what abridgment have you for this evening? What mask?  
What music? How shall we beguile the lazy time, if not with  
delight? (p. 16).

before crossing to the organ for a performance of *Faith of our Fathers* whose lyrics emphasise the importance of belief in the mysterious and metaphysical.<sup>9</sup> Bridget seizes

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<sup>9</sup> 'And through the truth that comes from God,  
We all shall then be truly free' (Faber, F. (1849) '*Faith of Our Fathers*'. [Online] Available at: [http://library.timelesstruths.org/music/Faith\\_of\\_Our\\_Fathers/](http://library.timelesstruths.org/music/Faith_of_Our_Fathers/) (Accessed 06.03.2014.).

the opportunity of the rehearsal of the love scene between Demetrius and Lysander to make her feelings known to Mac as performance becomes 'an inevitable part of social interaction'. (Jordan, 2009, p. 196) Specific stage directions indicate more assured and confident writing than heretofore:

[...] the events of the 'scene' are paralleled with the cat and mouse game between and Bridget, Bridget using Helena's lines to make clear her intentions towards. McKeever resists her advances, though every bone in his body would wish it otherwise. (p. 38)

Here truth is placed outside real experience in a metatheatrical comedy of Mac's unsuccessful attempts to ward off Bridget's amorous physical invitations in a scene charged with sexual tension:

**Bridget** (*As Helena*): You draw me, you hard-hearted adamant; [...]  
**McKeever**: Do I entice you/ Do I speak you fair?  
Or rather, do I not in plainest truth  
Tell you, I do not nor I cannot, love you?  
**Bridget**: (*Leaps on desk*): And ever for that do I love you the more.  
**McKeever**: (*Alarmed*): Now take it easy, Bridget. [...]  
(*She throws away script. Grabs and violently lowers him onto desk*).  
**McKeever**: Tempt not too much the hatred of my spirit;  
For I am sick when I do look on thee.  
**Bridget**: And I am sick when I do look not on you (p.39).

Here dramatic performance portrays the difference between 'Truth and Illusion' (p.41) as the actual behaviour of the actors contradicts Shakespeare's text. Instead of abandoning Helena in the wood, McKeever/Demetrius surrenders to Bridget/Helena's sexual advances. Again Jordan makes a relevant point:

The 'what if' that role-play demands takes the momentum and rhythm of the play into a different dimension, and furthermore, the spectator tends to be involved in the performance in a number

of levels simultaneously, making the experience equally demanding and rewarding (Jordan, 2009, p. 196).

As Brigid explores the 'what if' nature of a possible relationship with Mac, Nolan moves the drama onto another level to prepare us for accepting the insert play as a direct and reflexive comment on events in the real world.

While constantly referring to Shakespeare's production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Moonshine* uses only the text of the Rude Mechanicals insert play-within-the-play. Martin Andrucki comments on the complexity of the insert-play's structure:

The play is Pyramus and Thisbe, a would-be tragic tale of unrequited love, which, in the hands of these amateur players, gets farcically mangled. We should note that Mr. Nolan has created a very complicated dramatic structure at this moment. Embedded within *Moonshine* is *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and embedded within that is *Pyramus and Thisbe*, thus giving us in this scene a play within a play within a play. Moreover, in Shakespeare's play, a group of amateurs bungles the text, while in Nolan's play a group of amateurs playing a group of amateurs does the same thing (2005, p.6-7).

Mac's amateur production of *Pyramus and Thisbe*, although largely comically portrayed, needs to be taken seriously however, because the drama addresses it regularly as an issue. Interwoven within the various elements of the plot is the narrative of four people who struggle to produce a play in which the nature of performance—and understanding—and the contract between text, performers and audience is explored. The title of the Shakespearean play, for example, emphasises the importance of 'dream' and its associated methods of understanding: fantasy, imagination and magic. For example, it prepares the audience for the concept that dreams and drama (or puppetry as in *Dear Kenny*) can represent truth, understanding and healing. *Moonshine* connects truth with the creativity of the performer/artist. Paradoxes in the introduction to *Pyramus and Thisbe* such as

'tragical mirth/tedious brief/the concord of this discord' (p. 52) points out access to a temporal alternative reality, which can be experienced rather than logically explained and one that will bring understanding, clarity, insight and wisdom. In other words, a clear understanding of the relationship between text as narrative and text as metaphor exists where, what appears to be dramatic fiction is actually real, and where truth is hidden from the character who utters it. Mac explains:

**McKeever** : [...] Love and tongue-tied simplicity,  
In least, speak most, to my capacity (p. 52).

Nolan now places, at the centre of *Moonshine* the notion, begun in the trilogy, that the least important should be listened to because they 'speak most'.

McKeever's simple production of *Pyramus and Thisbe* parallels the story of *Romeo and Juliet* and resembles the love story of McKeever and Elizabeth, two characters separated by a wall—a metaphor for Mac's failure in communication. Michael, as tragic hero *Pyramus*, and also as *Wall*, will present a 'chink' (p. 85), through which the lovers will communicate. The puzzle of how to present moonshine (either as a physical embodiment or as light through a casement window) is really of no great importance. However, the discussion on the dramatic representation of moonshine draws the audience into the nature and possibility of transformation through the performance of the creative act. Through imagination the impossible is performed. Michael Mangan in *A Preface to Shakespeare's Comedies* offers an interesting and relevant observation:

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* the real-world audience are offered a glimpse of something beneath the surface of a bad performance: the *Pyramus and Thisbe* story is a burlesque, of course, but it is also a comment on the story of the lovers in the *Dream* itself (1996, p. 172).

Equally Mac's production, however poor, offers its on-stage and also real audience the opportunity to see the moonshine in the performance, to recognise that magic can

happen, and that those involved can achieve healing and transformation through their participation, whether as an active or passive agent, in the drama—as audience or as performer. Mac urges the doubting Langton to believe and hope that redemption will occur on this Easter Sunday morning:

**Langton:** ‘Believe in something. All of us, John’. [...] In hope, for something to happen. For something to make sense (p.83).

It is not through reason, but through faith in the imagination therefore, that redemption can happen. With the cast of *Pyramus and Thisbe* transformed, Michael begins the miracle of *Moonshine* where cast and audience members are rewarded with hope. Reverend Langton, whose wife has died, whose congregation has abandoned him, whose church is about to close, and whose faith is in disarray, finds faith and hope on Easter Sunday morning. Michael and Griffin find their voice while Bridget’s fleeting aspirations to fame, and artistic fulfilment through dramatic performance, are somewhat answered. Similarly, Mac and Elizabeth find faith and acceptance in each other and are reconciled. Nolan places great faith in the surface-simplicity of the character of Michael who is ultimately the source of redemption for all. As moonshine floods through the casement window, Michael invites the *dramatis personae* to play their own parts in the drama of life. Andrucki explains the process of transformation through the creative act:

[...] four players are caught up in the action of Shakespeare’s play, transforming a funeral in the real world into an island of the imagination, moving from the wilderness of the abandoned church to Shakespeare’s Athenian forest, a place populated by lunatics, lovers, and poets. As the lights fade, the actors are blissfully applying themselves to the business of transforming their world through the sacred power of art (p.9).

Grant adds to the argument:

Moonshine is insubstantial, like Langton's lost faith, but in a memorable piece of theatrical conjuring, Moonshine (the play) asserts the significance of the subliminal. Perhaps it is a statement of the role of art but more probably it is a testament to human faith, whatever its object (1992, p. 30).

*Moonshine* establishes the role of the creative process on the journey towards transformation.

Nolan in his early work establishes the need of flawed and failing human beings for faith, hope, and love. Now, a way to address that need is posited: through the creative act, transformation can occur that will lead to healing, comfort and redemption. However it is through participation in—and not quality of—the creative act that redemption is achieved. Even rain-sodden beaches and empty churches can facilitate the creative act in transforming sites of apparent hopelessness into magical forests of the imagination where priest-artists bring about healing and redemption. While the chapter has explored changing times in Irish society as the role of women expands while the influence of the church declines, the social issues of political opportunism that were raised in the trilogy remain unexplored here. However in the next chapter, Nolan's social conscience again manifests itself in works that combine familial and political issues in his continuing search for redemption.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Public and Private Politics: *The Guernica Hotel* and *The Salvage Shop*

Jim Nolan's frustration with corruption in local and national politics, begun in the early work, continues to grow and now finds full expression in *The Guernica Hotel*—his first major political work. This chapter examines Nolan's unique role as a forthright commentator on Ireland's economic and political state and presents it as a natural development of concerns raised by him in the early plays. Nolan now provides a damning critique—that was unique in 1993—of the body politic by exploring the political and economic context that resulted in the impoverishment of the characters of the trilogy. *The Guernica Hotel* does not, however, signal a move away entirely from the familial concerns of Nolan's previous works but actually expands on them by combining familial issues with political concerns. Moreover the concept of redemption through the performative act, and the need for faith in the miraculous, is posited.

The chapter examines a crucial development that now occurs in Nolan's next work, *The Salvage Shop*: the acceptance of human limitations and existential experience as the basis of self-knowledge. The extensive use of sub-text, metaphor and music throughout this drama is analysed as an integral part of the narrative. Nolan's interest in the complexity of family relationships and, specifically, the breakdown in communication between father and son, find consideration. The continuing development of female characters is considered as is the use of biblical references which suggest that the spiritual is never far from Nolan's writing.

The production history and structure of the works are considered and performances of the work are evaluated through the availability of a significant number of

contemporaneous critical reviews, housed in the Red Kettle archive, which shed more light on the development of Nolan as a national, rather than local, playwright.

### *The Guernica Hotel*

*The Guernica Hotel* premiered on February 8<sup>th</sup> 1994 at Garter Lane Theatre in Waterford. In the play Francis Shannon, retired teacher and former International Brigade member from the Spanish Civil War, lives in a shabby boarding house in the coastal village of Seafield. The hotel is contemptuously referred to by locals as The Guernica Hotel. Also living there are eldest son James Shannon who now runs the hotel and sees the business as his inheritance, Katherine and Grace McCall (James's unacknowledged daughter) and sixty-five-year-old actress Amelia Caffrey. Francis Shannon's proposal to sell the hotel in order to provide for his own retirement, and for the future requirements of his extended hotel family, causes bitter conflict with his son James, who must share the remaining proceeds of the sale with his younger brother Joseph. James wishes to enter into partnership with Martin Doyle T.D., his father's political rival and brother-in-law.

The plot revolves around the annual commemoration of the dead comrades of the International Brigade. Shannon has lost faith in his promise to commemorate Shannon's dead comrades, and to continue the struggle for a worker's republic on home soil, because of his failure to pass that message onto his own wife (now deceased) and eldest son. Ironically this has led to estrangement with his youngest son Joseph who sees it as a betrayal of principle. Conflicting ideologies lead to lively debate as positions are taken by the strongly-opinionated characters. Ultimately Shannon is convinced of the wisdom of continuing the struggle by the ceremony of commemoration of the dead comrades.

While finding much to praise in the production, critics were not slow to point out the disadvantages of the polemical nature of the script. *The Irish Times* critic David Nowlan

commented that 'much of the discussion of the issues comes across as awkward pontification' (1994, p.10) while the *Sunday Business Post* observed:

Theatre is extra theatrical as the characters declaim as often as they converse. [...]The problem with the piece is that everyone gets to say everything. These are the most talkative characters you'll find outside of group therapy or Eugene O'Neill' (Matthews, 13.02.1994).

*The Munster Express* recommended that 'the author should look at some of the dialogue and ponder whether it was too lengthy in parts and, in others, too repetitive' (Browne, 11.02.1994). Certainly ideological debates between characters that are largely in agreement (Shannon/Amelia p.21-23, Shannon/Joseph p.31-33, p.53-55 and p.63) in frequently repetitive speeches tested the critics' concentration. Theatrically the debate on 1990s Ireland is at its most engaging when Shannon's idealistic views are challenged by his son James (p.26-30) and contradicted by his brother-in-law James Doyle T.D. in a dramatically confrontational scene described as:

'one great piece of repartee near the end, when Francis and Doyle, the Fianna Fail T.D. [...] in bitter debate spell out the widely different version of Irish history since the Treaty. It was a highlight!' (Browne,11.02.1994).

The events of this play were inspired by the real life experiences of Peter O'Connor of Waterford —republican, socialist, communist and International Brigade member—upon whom the fictional character of Francis Shannon is loosely based. Nolan researched *The Guernica Hotel* with Peter O'Connor and assisted in the writing of O'Connor's memoir *A Soldier of Liberty: Recollections of a Socialist and Anti-Fascist Fighter* (1996). The memoir recalls O'Connor's experiences as a communist and republican, his decision to volunteer as an International Brigade member and, in particular, his experiences at the bloody Battle

of Jarama, frequently referred to in *The Guernica Hotel*. Specific incidents from O'Connor's experiences are woven into the play such as: his departure on idealistic grounds from the IRA (p.22), the stoning of Protestant socialist comrades from Belfast's Shankill Road by republicans at the annual commemoration of Wolfe Tone at Bodenstown cemetery, Co. Kildare (p.22) and his subsequent social isolation as a returned communist of the Connolly Brigade upon his return to Ireland after the Spanish Civil War which Shannon describes as 'here we were the Pariahs of our age, shunned, spat at, heckled and abused' (p.54). Victor Merriman explains the plight of such Irish idealists:

With such powerful cultural consequences in prospect, it was hardly a surprise that there was little use for idealism and little scope for utopianism in the Irish Free State (2011, p. 22).

*The Guernica Hotel* explores the difficulty of a fictionalised ageing idealist seeking to hold onto his beliefs in circumstances described by Merriman. Peter O'Connor like Francis Shannon also married a woman who owned and managed a small hotel in Waterford. Significant differences between O'Connor and the fictional Shannon exist. For example, unlike the fictional Shannon's unhappy marriage, the O'Connor marriage was a very happy one and O'Connor dedicated his memoir to his 'wife Biddy, with love and gratitude, for her unfailing support and love' (O'Connor, 1996, preface).

Nolan's plays now have a familiar two-act structure with a linear narrative that leads to a final resolution. The action takes place over a single stormy day in and about a run-down hotel on the edge of a cliff in the small tourist seaside town. As *The Guernica Hotel* presents powerful and critical political analysis of the Ireland of the 1990s, it is understandable that Nolan uses largely formal and frequently polemic language. Despite the overuse of lengthy monologues outlining ideological positions, however, conversations between characters, as in *Moonshine* and *Dear Kenny*, is structured mainly as duologues, mainly between educated people that are ideologically and philosophically aware of politics.

Interestingly, Nolan now introduces characters in a more subtle manner, using props, for example, to define them. Katherine is introduced carrying a laundry basket, thus establishing her as a caring, nurturing and conventional mother figure. Furthermore, her subsequent drying arrangement of ‘the linen on the rocks’ (p. 4 ) identifies her as a woman of traditional values who links past and present and a presence in Seafield against whom change can be measured. Nolan has now settled on a small seaside town, adjacent to Waterford, for the location of his work and continues to use location to express meaning.<sup>10</sup> Thus, inference may be drawn from Amelia’s comment: ‘there is little to report [...] and the morning papers didn’t come out from Waterford’ (p.19) that this is an isolated location where Shannon’s alternative republic might be imagined in a play that echoes Christopher Murray’s argument:

Irish drama is a long, energetic dispute with a changing audience over the same basic issues: where we come from, where we are now, and where we are headed. Alternatively these questions comprise history, identity, home or a sense of place, and visionary imagination or what Shaw called dreaming or myth-making. The questions renew themselves urgently yet creatively (1997, p.224).

The departure of ‘the last of the caravans’ as the ‘fairground is closed’ (p. 20) adds to the isolation, creating a grey world where familial and ideological conflict can remain in sharp focus as Nolan addresses what Murray describes above as the same basic questions of what we were, who we are and where we would like to be (Murray, 1997, p.244).

Nolan’s social and political criticism of the Irish body politic—the focus of much of the early work—now finds full expression in *The Guernica Hotel*. In the Waterford trilogy, for example, Billy Cass in *The Black Pool* was bitterly critical of the cronyism and clientalism on the Waterford docks that restricted employment to a select few. Similarly, Janey Mac was

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<sup>10</sup> Nolan’s use of Seafield as a location to express meaning connects with Brian Friel in his use of Ballybeg (small town) as a microcosm of Irish society in his plays.

equally caustic in criticising the controlling influence of the Catholic church over matters of state in *The Gods are Angry*, *Miss Kerr* while *The Boathouse* portrays politician Mr. Michael Ryan T.D. Minister for Sport and Youth Affairs as opportunistic, manipulative and self-serving. While political comment informs only part of the debate of the Waterford trilogy, *The Guernica Hotel* explores the role of politics as it impacts directly on the lives of a politician's family. Nolan's role as a political playwright is substantially different to other political playwrights such as Friel, Leonard or Barry because it addresses the political corruption of the day in a forthright manner and because the state is expressed in his writing as a social and economic entity rather than as a national or republican one. Nolan finds more in common with British political playwrights such as Caryl Churchill in *Owners* (1972) and *Serious Money* (1987) or Alan Bleasdale in *GBH* (1991) rather than with contemporary Irish dramatists. *The Guernica Hotel's* open criticism of the social, economic and political conditions of the Irish republic of the 1990s is far more explicit than other Irish playwrights critical of the Irish state such as Friel's *The Mundy Scheme* (1969), Leonard's *The Patrick Pearse Motel* (1971) and Barry's *Hinterland* (2002) where political criticism is largely cloaked in parody or metaphor.

Nolan's stinging evaluation of the Irish body politic adds to Victor Merriman's argument in describing such criticisms as significant moments of critical maturity for the Irish state (2001, p.21). Merriman, citing Ampka, explains the importance of such a critical view:

It marks the emergence of consciousness of, and desires for other options in articulating humanity, beyond limits set by elites in whose interests that state is organised (Merriman, 2001, p. 21).

*The Guernica Hotel* argues for a political system that 'must have a morality inherent in it' and highlights the contrast between idealists such as Shannon and local, opportunistic politicians who use politics for their own personal gain (White, 1994, p.10). Nolan establishes his developing position as a political playwright:

This play is the first one with which I've come out politically [...] I suppose if you write, as I do, about the lives of people who have been marginalised, you have to be political, but this one's Political. Political, not necessarily with a small 'p'. If one is fortunate enough to put pen to paper there's a responsibility there to give a voice to communities who don't have one (Cunningham, 1994, p.26).

*The Guernica Hotel* contrasts the public with the private, the national with the international, the past with the present and the ideal with the real as it attempts to imagine a different country. In an interview with Francine Cunningham entitled *Finding Inspiration in Forgotten Volunteers* in *The Sunday Business Post*, Nolan explains that the Irish International Brigadiers believed that 'the struggle of a particular form of social justice in Spain linked into the type of politics they were trying to create in this country' (1994). He argues that:

The men who fought in the International Brigade had a clearly thought-out vision of the sort of country Ireland might become, emerging from a nation that was narrow, very sectarian and divisive. So when I looked at the social culture that prevails in this country at the moment I wanted to make a connection between their hopes for Spain and Ireland and the climate in the country today (Cunningham, 1994, p.26).

In this way, Nolan makes connections between past and present, the real and the ideal, in the character of the uncompromising Francis Shannon.

Crucially, while Shannon is specific in his criticism of the contemporary state because of its sectarian and unequal nature, there is a distinct lack of clarity in the uncompromising Shannon's articulation of his wishes for the new republic. In other words, while the audience is constantly aware of what Francis Shannon, Communist and freedom-fighter opposes, he fails to present any alternative. While acknowledging an authorial view that the writer's intention is to expose the shortcomings of idealistic politicians, this thesis argues that the development of Shannon's character as a credible politician requires more

exploration and development. Vague phrases such as 'I still believed in miracles or at least in some inexorable capacity of humankind which would allow justice to prevail over evil' (p. 22) or 'the profound yet simple conviction that good would one-day triumph over evil, that justice would one-day prevail' (p.54) seem illusory and carry little weight against the pin-point accuracy of his opponents world view. His arch-opponent James Doyle T.D.'s criticism is a perfect example of the triumph of the specific over the abstract, of the concrete over the idealised, of substance over illusion:

What are you proud of Shannon? What republic did you construct? The Republic of empty rhetoric and the handy slogan. The Republic of catch-cry and do nothing.[...] All around this country, your so-called traitors of the Republic were building this country brick by brick while you and your comrades were propping up a failed revolution in Spain. In the fifties when you were cycling from one empty hall to the next, exhorting the workers of the world to unite, I opened my first factory in this town and created work. Just six jobs at first Shannon, but it was six more than all your oratory ever created. There are seventy-two people working there today—in all I employ one hundred and sixty people in four companies within sixty miles of where we now stand. That's the country I was building Shannon. Ask them does the system work. Ask them to choose between enterprise and initiative on one hand and your clapped out vision on the other? Ask your son to choose (p. 60).

Here Doyle's accusations of failure connect with Uncle Ben's similar charges in *Death of a Salesman* as he too demands of his brother: 'What are you building? Lay your hand on it. Where is it?' (Miller, 1949, p.67). Additionally, *The Guernica Hotel*, like Behan's *The Quare Fellow* (1954) interrogates and undermines the prevailing social and economic status quo which Pilkington identifies as a 'cosy middle-class consensus underlying the contemporary Irish state' (2001, p. 153).

Nolan's exploration of Shannon's ideological depiction as a Communist Republican, however, reveals a crucial lack of empathy and understanding necessary as a father. In the

Cunningham interview previously mentioned, the playwright explains that ‘anybody who is obsessive can cause a lot of pain within his own family’ (Cunningham, 1994, p.26). As a result, Nolan’s exploration of the nexus of strained familial relationships is arguably dramatically more powerful when burdened with the weight of political ideology, leading naturally to the breakdown in the father-son relationship that now becomes a significant theme in the work. Here Shannon finds common ground with Willie Loman, Arthur Miller’s flawed patriarch in *Death of a Salesman* (1949) who is a marriage of opposites: divisive and unifying, loving and spiteful, aloof and intimate and whose primal beliefs also alienate both his sons.

Shannon’s unyielding and obsessively principled stand makes life difficult for both himself and his immediate family, creating tensions that are rich in potential for dramatic conflict such as James’s revenge, Katherine’s secrets, Joseph’s absence and Shannon’s crisis of conscience. Ironically Shannon fails to pass on his principles and ideals to two of his immediate family—his wife and eldest child. He is more successful, however, with his extended hotel family of Amelia, Katherine and Grace, all of whom defend and honour his principles and shield him from both internal and external contempt. Nolan’s depiction of the idealistic but flawed Shannon makes him a compelling and dynamic character, as divisive as he is charismatic, as he succeeds in alienating those closest to him. Ironically both sons, polar opposites in principle and attitude, are willing critics of Shannon’s behaviour and present a rounded picture of the ideological patriarch. For example, James claims that he sentenced his wife and eldest son to ‘years of silence and contempt’ and that he waited in vain for ‘one small gesture that said I see you, I know you—I recognise your pain, too’ (p. 26) leading to understandable open conflict between the pair, now brought to a head by Shannon’s decision to dispose of James’s inheritance—without his knowledge. Interestingly, James’s crude and vulgar pattern of speech should arguably be seen as a deliberate, yet subtle, rejection of his father’s principles and scholarly demeanour and a linguistic indication of the breakdown in communication between father and son.

Shannon's principled ideology causes a crisis with his other son Joseph, when he fails to explain his gradual disillusionment. Jocelyn Clarke explains:

Haunted by the loss of his faith in the ideals and convictions which inspired both he and his fellow comrades to fight in the Spanish Civil War, and unable to reconcile the increasing divergent worlds of personal moral vision and public political and social landscape, Shannon's disillusionment has gradually isolated him over the years from both his sons and his community (Clarke, 13.02.1994).

Ironically Joseph rejects and abandons Shannon on principles that are equally old, aloof and inflexible. A largely cold and inalterable Joseph, who previously had absolute faith in his father's principles and beliefs, refuses to accept his father's cynicism and disillusionment brought about by 'one act of cruelty' (p. 31), perpetrated by his wife and son against Katherine. Similarly, he refuses to forgive his father's loss of faith and betrayal of the comrades, casting aside Shannon's explanation that if he could not succeed in convincing his wife and eldest son to wage war against prejudice, what hope had he of remaining true to the pledge he had made to his colleagues:

**Shannon:** How could I believe I was going to change the world when I couldn't impart the meaning of love to my own family? (p. 31).

The character of Shannon brings Nolan's writing to a new level in creating, for the first time, a central character that is significantly flawed and largely unsympathetic, prefiguring other such characters in his later work.

Interestingly, female characters are now more assertive and important as Nolan's writing develops. While Katherine McCall represents the traditional Irish mother, reluctant to express opinions, her young daughter Grace, however, is expressive of a modern

generation of feisty woman who express opinions in a determined fashion. She makes common ground with Frances in his battle with Doyle, for example, by declaring herself a comrade. An interesting feature of these feisty young women is some unappealing aspects of character. For example, Grace's comments regarding her school classmate Claire Smith who she calls 'Donkey Breath [...]and her feet smell [...]if I was a boy I wouldn't be seen dead with her' (p. 9) are arguably cruel while her comments to Doyle are confrontational (p.58). In this way, Nolan's writing now reflects modern trends in avoiding stereotype by presenting female characters that combine kindness with cruelty and beauty with an inner toughness.

It could be argued that the character of actress Amelia Caffrey—written specifically for the late Waterford actress Anna Manahan—is the most profound and impressive of Nolan's female characters thus far, prefiguring other such women in the work. Amelia significantly advances the role of Nolan's other aging thespian Bessie in *Dear Kenny* as the significant 'other' with comments that are far more profound—reaching beyond Bessie's familial wisdom into philosophical and ideological understanding. Amelia is expressive of the growing awareness in Nolan's work of the strength of women who frequently articulate the importance of maintaining faith in what often appears a lost cause. The theme of faith in the miraculous continues to grow as the dominant theme in the work and, significantly, finds clearer expression through Amelia in *The Guernica Hotel* than in previous dramas. More than any other character in Nolan's work to date, she directly asserts the importance of the struggle, the pursuit of the ideal, the importance of what frequently appears inconsequential—of dreaming the impossible dream. Here Amelia explains the need for faith:

**Amelia:** Not expect, Francis—hope. There's a difference, isn't there? I never expect anything anymore but it costs nothing to hope. If nothing else, it's a reason to get up in the morning.[...]

**Francis:** Do you still believe in miracles?

**Amelia:** I hope Francis. Isn't that a miracle in itself (p.21).

Thus, a female character expresses Nolan's core theme: the need for faith in the unexplained and the miraculous in order to achieve redemption.

The casting of Manahan is an interesting aspect of the metatheatricality that Nolan consciously introduces to the drama: an aging actress playing an aging actress. In doing so, Nolan introduces the possibility of redemption for Shannon through the performative act of singing in remembrance of the dead colleagues. As a result, Francis Shannon finds faith, healing and redemption through the transformative power of performance in the metatheatrical act of remembering the dead comrades through the singing of the *Internazionale* in the dining room of *The Guernica Hotel*. The internal politics of the struggle for control of a local brass band and the continuing role of music as a positive redemptive force is further explored in Nolan's next work where healing and comfort are found in a shop that salvages fractured relationships.

### *THE SALVAGE SHOP*

*The Salvage Shop*, with Niall Toibin as Sylvie Tansey, premiered with a professional production in Waterford in January 1998 before touring nationally. A production, with the same cast, was staged at the Gaiety Theatre in the Dublin Theatre Festival later that year. The play is set in the summer months of 1994 when seventy-two year old truculent Sylvie Tansey, owner of the Salvage Shop in the small seaside town of Garris and band master of the local Garris Brass Band, is dying of cancer. His only son Eddie has returned to care for Sylvie despite his father's persistent accusations of betrayal as a result of Eddie's failure to attend a band competition twelve years previously—on the day his wife deserted Eddie and their only daughter Katie, now a university student. Stephen Kearney, loyal friend and trusted band member, is the shop's only employee and seeks, in vain, to prevent Sylvie's removal as band leader from a group who have tired of his alcoholic and confrontational

behaviour. The decision to remove Sylvie as band captain is taken when they finish second in the annual Ballincollig Band Competition and a dying Sylvie is left with nothing to live for.

Inspired by his father's hosting of a John McCormack concert years previously, Eddie plans to host a Luciano Pavarotti concert in Garristown, engaging the help of his lover Rita and daughter Katie, in an attempt to salvage his relationship with Sylvie before he dies. When Josie Costello, the former lover of Eddie's estranged wife, offers sponsorship, tensions arise before a reluctant Eddie finally, agrees in a hopeless attempt to win Pavarotti's agreement. When the Pavarotti concert inevitably fails, the Garris Town Band host a concert in Sylvie's honour during which he discovers, in an epiphany moment, the value of human imperfection. Sylvie acknowledges his son's expression of love and their relationship is salvaged at the close of the play.

In 1998 *The Salvage Shop* was nominated for *The Irish Times/ ESB Best New Play Award* and was awarded the *Sunday Independent/ Ford Spirit of Life Award* by adjudicator Emer O'Kelly for 'Play of the Year' and has, like *Moonshine*, appeared in the national finals of the All-Ireland Drama Festival at Athlone in 2006 and in 2010. The popularity of the play is obvious from the number of its productions. The drama still remains popular on the amateur drama circuit and foreign productions which include Chicago (2002), Wales (2004), New York (2005) and Ottawa (2005) are evidence of Nolan's increasing reputation as a playwright.

*The Salvage Shop* was dedicated by Jim Nolan to his father, a member of the Waterford Barrack Street Brass Band, who had passed away some months earlier. Nolan explains the background to the drama in a piece written as part of the publicity for the Dublin Theatre Festival production.

Every now and again, you have a lucky day. In the winter of 1994, I had an idea for a play but no setting. Then I walked into the Salvage Shop for the first time and found a home for the idea. Though it was my first visit, the name had long held an attraction, with its connotations of rebirth and transformation.

Magic happens there. Apparently mundane objects and materials are transformed and enabled to live again in new and literally wonderful ways. Raising for all of us, that possibility of reincarnation, renewal and redemption. This, I believe is the tremendous achievement of the Corcorans and their fellow craftsmen, their ability to alter our perception of the ordinary - their capacity to make the ordinary immortal (Nolan, 2014).

While theatre critics might debate the notion that *The Salvage Shop* is Nolan's best play, it is certainly his most popular. *The Irish Times* stated that 'its performance thoroughly deserved the instant and respectful standing ovation which it drew' (Nowlan, 1998), *The Examiner* wrote that 'The Salvage Shop confirms Jim Nolan as a master craftsman' (Hassett, 1998) while *The Sunday Times* declared 'The Salvage Shop is a powerful and original piece of theatre' (McCarthy and Ross, 1998). *The Sunday Tribune* referred to 'the extraordinary dramatic force' of the play (Clarke, 1998) while *The Munster Express* headlined its *Salvage Shop* review with 'Some of the finest emotional scenes ever seen on a Waterford Stage' (Murphy, 1998). *The Sunday Independent* wrote that Nolan 'has found both a passionate and compassionate objectivity, and a certain technical ease that had been missing' (O'Kelly, 1998). *Curtain Up*, the *Internet theatre magazine of reviews* commenting on the New York production, made the point that:

predictable though the outcome is, this is an epic, ever potent theme that combines the effect of changes that affect even a quiet little town with the redemptive power of mutual understanding and forgiveness (Sommer, 2005).

*The Salvage Shop* structure follows Nolan's largely naturalistic style of writing where an Aristotelian unity of time, space and action is evident. Located entirely in a salvage shop, the script is contemporaneous and set in two acts with most of the conversations taking the form of duologues. The over-written and lengthy speeches, heavily criticised by theatre critics in their reviews of *The Guernica Hotel*, the author's previous play, are not replicated here and the dialogue is largely economical and purposeful with lines that mix the lyrical, the poetic and the downright crude, enabling the drama to function at a personal and symbolic level. Male characters, in particular, are strong with understandably intense emotions expressed in simple, expressive and powerful language as in: 'Don't go on me, Sylvie! Don't go fucking dying on me! You can't go yet!' (p.84). The action in the first act takes place over the course of two days while the second occurs several weeks later, over a period of three weeks. Thus, the narrative is concentrated over a comparatively short time-span, as the surviving characters, driven by the force of Sylvie's impending death, learn to face the future strengthened by a new awareness and understanding.

Both female characters lack the development of Nolan's previous women however, and are largely passive, defined by their work with the emphasis on their stereotypical roles as secondary, supportive and largely secretarial. While Eddie dictates, his daughter Katie, for example, merely types and dispatches letters seeking sponsorship. Similarly, Eddie's landlady and sometime partner Rita is no more than a passive observer of the unfolding drama between Sylvie and Eddie with her role confined to that of carer and confessor. Moreover, the oppressive patriarchal nature of society is emphasised by the dying Sylvie's elicitation of a promise from Rita to continue in this traditional and subservient role after his death:

**Sylvie:** You'll look after them, won't you? When all this is over, I mean.

**Rita:** It's not over.

**Sylvie:** No. But I can see the finishing post.

**Rita:** I'll look after them (p. 58).

Ironically it is in their role as confidantes and advisors that the female characters become most assertive, sometimes stating unpalatable truths in a manner that connects Nolan's women with the female characters of Billy Roche. Christopher Murray explains:

It is interesting that Roche confers on the woman the voice of outspoken honesty which tears away the falsity of public posturing; in Irish drama, in Murphy's iconoclastic plays for example, this role is resoundingly male. To Roche the delusion of heroism is a male construct; its deconstruction is by women's common sense (Murray, 2009, p.215).

The deconstruction of male heroism, referred to by Murray above, is performed by Eddie's sometimes feisty university-attending daughter for example, assuming the role of the 'other' as she accuses her father of wallowing in his own self-pity:

**Katie:** [...] I think you like your chains. You've been wearing them so long, they'd only hurt now if you took them off. (p.74)

Katie's common-sense approach to life urges her father to put the past aside and to forget the issue of his wife's infidelity with Costello and her subsequent decision to abandon her husband and child. She urges him to accept her decision to take employment during her summer-vacation with Josie Costello because her friend Mags has told her that 'the crack is mighty' (p.22). Katie's request forms the least realistic element of the text and indicates a significant weakness in the script as her abrupt and largely unexplained decision to leave Costello's employment and return home suggests.

Although contemporary Irish drama is frequently located in spaces where characters work and also live, Nolan's location of the acting space in a salvage shop frees the dramatic text from these traditional boundary lines to enable the separation of private and public domains take place, moving what Anthony Roche describes as 'a fixed conventional setting into a fluid psychological space' (Roche, 1994, p.85). Thus, conversations concerning the interwoven damaged relationship of father and son occur between Eddie and Rita, for example, (p.78-9), while the band leader is in the upper unlit bedroom of the split-level composite set. Artistic conversations, regarding issues critical to the play's theme of salvation through artistic performance, are suitably enabled in the workshop of the salvage shop—a metaphoric fulcrum of artistic imagination that connects with a similar metaphor used by Seamus Heaney in his poem 'The Forge' (Heaney, 1969). The 'old axles and iron hoops' that litter Heaney's forge enable artistic conversation in the same way as the physical presence of 'the lovers' seat' (p.24) and the stained glass windows that are the centre-pieces of the salvage shop—each one with its deliberate flaw to remind observers that there is beauty in imperfection, widening the concept of the art of performance beyond theatrical representation into a physical and tactile art. Actor Niall Toibin who played the part of Sylvie in the original production, explained in an interview in *The Sunday Business Post*:

A lot of the scenes take place in a salvage shop, where both the father and the son work, and so the theme of the play is that nothing is beyond redemption. Things that are broken and useless are brought into the shop and they are repaired, like the relationship between father and son (Tóibín, 1998).

Thus, the choice of a salvage shop, as a space where family histories are explored and relationships are debated, should be seen then as a powerful enabler of conflict and resolution in this play.

The use of artistic performance has been critical in the creation of epiphanic moments of understanding in Nolan's previous dramas where performances of puppetry in *Dear Kenny* (1988), drama in *Moonshine* (1991) and, to a lesser extent, song in *The Guernica Hotel*, form a metatheatrical bridge to metaphysical understanding. Fintan O'Toole, commenting on Tom Murphy's work, describes a critical difference in understanding the role of epiphany which is particularly relevant to *The Salvage Shop*:

Whereas in the theatre of the epiphany, the climax is brought about by the relentless accumulation of detail and event, in Murphy's apocalyptic theatre the climax is brought about by the stripping away of unnecessary detail, the loss of illusion, and the climax itself is a leap into a different plane of action from where it has gone before (1994, p. 221).

*The Salvage Shop* concurs with O'Toole's definition of apocalyptic theatre in the stripping away of Sylvie's illusions regarding the search for musical perfection: 'of the sacred note that [...] enabled us to soar' (p.34). Finally, the band leader is transformed by the performative act as he conducts the band for the last time and is brought to a different plane of understanding, contradicting his life-long conviction that it was always 'about the music' (p. 42). As Sylvie explains:

**Sylvie:** [...] All I heard was the music. Those perfect notes all I ever cared about. I didn't give a damn why you'd gone missing. I'd forgotten, of course. The music would heal that. I'd heal it through the music. I'd forgotten, of course. There is pain which no music can describe; there are conditions for which no music exists. I know that now, Eddie. I'm the one who's sorry (p. 85).

As death approaches, Eddie's and Sylvie's relationship is restored not only by the loss of Eddie's illusion of the Pavarotti concert taking place but from Sylvie's

appreciation of life that comes from the recognition of the self's mortality and human limitations. The climax of reconciliation takes place after the unexpected acceptance by Sylvie, as a subjective individual making sense of an absurd world that is about to deny him 'all that life. [...] the colour of it. The energy of it. The fucking wonder of it' (p.78): that there is still beauty in imperfection and that salvation comes from self-forgiveness. Consequentially redemption in Nolan's work is moved onto a new level of understanding that finds its origin in Bessie's imperfect puppet show, or Pyramus and Thisby's bungled attempt at *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, or the raucous chorus of the *Internationale*: that redemption involves acceptance of man's limitations and comes from within as a result of engaging with the creative act of performance.

*The Salvage Shop* however, differs significantly from Nolan's previous dramas of redemption in that the epiphany is reported rather than recreated (as in *Dear Kenny*, *Moonshine* and *The Guernica Hotel*). Unlike these former works, the audience are not part of Sylvie's epiphany. As a result, the dramatic and emotional climax of the play is able to centre entirely on the salvation of the relationship of a dying father and his son rather than Sylvie's epiphanic moment of understanding of the importance of imperfection in artistic performance. *The Salvage Shop* is therefore a more muted, but no less valuable, drama of apocalypse than Tom Murphy's *The Gigli Concert* (1983) where the central character of JPW 'in a great apocalyptic gesture', while flinging himself into the abyss, achieves the perfection he desired by suddenly managing to sing like Gigli (O'Toole, 1994, p.213). In fact it is the loss of the illusion of perfection, sought by the dying Sylvie, that enables him to 'leap into a different plane' (O'Toole, 1994, p.211) of understanding, where the acceptance of 'the flawed note' (p. 86) in man enables him to connect with his fellow-man and his son as his epiphany of understanding.

While *The Guernica Hotel* (1994) was quite innovative in its use of songs (*Carrighdoun* and the *Internazionale*) to express meaning in a direct and blunt

manner, *The Salvage Shop* goes far beyond any previous texts in the integration of music into the plot, making it far more than simply a blunt device, or relief from the action, into a more subtle, layered and nuanced expression of meaning. The choice of music as an expression of emotion, meaning and communication is both subtextually and textually critically important in *The Salvage Shop* and, of course, essential to the narrative of a drama based around a brass band. Thus, the Tanseys express their love for each other through music. When words fail, and communication stutters, music subtly fills the communication gap and brings a much broader frame of reference. In the programme notes to the 1994 Red Kettle production of *The Salvage Shop*, playwright Thomas Kilroy comments that ‘music becomes part of the play’s body, an integral voice in the voices of the play’ (1994, p.3). The choice use of music as subtext emphasises the playwright’s confidence as a writer of drama in having the courage to select this medium as a metaphor for meaning. Eddie, for example, explains to Katie his father’s unusual expression of love for his mother as he recalls a regular occurrence in the salvage shop:

‘Una Furtiva Lagrima’—it’s his favourite aria. [...] In his cups sometimes, the long evenings by the fire, he’d play her that song. This is for you, he’d say, this is for you. And she’d know, Katie, she’d know the music was speaking for him. (Pause) I must try it myself sometime (p. 19).

Fintan O’Toole explains the context to this cultural phenomenon:

[...] In every town in Ireland in the forties and fifties, there were obsessional devotees of classical music, particularly of opera, for whom the drabness and confinement of life were negated by the colour and expressiveness of the expansive sound. (1994, p. 32)

Sylvie Tansey, for example, belongs to this cohort of classical music ‘devotees’ who found emotional liberation from their drab existence through music. Crucially he can only communicate his love for his wife through ‘the colour and expressiveness of the expansive sound’ of Donizetti’s *Una Furtiva Lagrima* from *L’elisir D’amore*, an aria from that opera that aptly expresses the love Nemorino, a simple rustic man (who, like Sylvie, cannot find the words) has for Adina through a love potion. Adina’s silent reaction of one simple tear (*una furtive lagrima*) confirms her love for Nemorino—just as Sylvie’s wife’s reaction to the aria confirms her love for her somewhat emotionally inarticulate husband.

Playwright Thomas Kilroy offers the following explanation of the function of music in the programme notes to *The Salvage Shop*:

One reason why music is so potent is that, more than any of the arts, it carries a promise, an illusionary promise but a promise nonetheless, that things can be made perfect in this world even for a few moments of harmonised sound (1998, p.5).

For a few brief moments, Donizetti’s aria carries the promise of love, referred to by Kilroy above, in a Tansey marriage where the expression of such feeling is seen as emotionally alien to its patriarch. Sylvie explains this Tansey male trait to his granddaughter in the following anecdote:

**Sylvie:** She [Kathleen Tansey] loved to dance, so she did, but we never went. Hard men never dance y’e see. Just the once she said. And so we did. And because I was drunk, we danced all night. And she looked so beautiful and she was happy. And I wanted to tell her something, Katie. But I didn’t. Nature of the beast, see. I didn’t tell her anything (p.50).

Similarly, an equally emotionally-mute Eddie Tansey, fearing the embarrassment that the music would disclose a son's unspoken love for a dying father, swiftly removes Bellini's *A Teo O Cara* from the stereo when Sylvie enters at the beginning of the play. The point is emphasised more directly in the following exchange:

**Eddie:** [...] I only play them [records] when he's out.

**Katie:** Dead right. Be awful if he thought you had something in common (p.28).

as Katie points to a core theme in the drama of the failure of communication between father and son, connecting with the same theme in Friel's *Philadelphia Here I Come* (1965) and other previous scripts such as *The Gods Are Angry*, *Miss Kerr*, *The Boathouse*, *Dear Kenny*, *Moonshine* and *The Guernica Hotel*. Sylvie explains this traditional emotional family silence to Rita:

**Sylvie:** You're a good woman, Rita. You mean more to him than he's able to show. You know that, don't you?

**Rita:** Yes, I do.

**Sylvie:** Only stunted, y'see. It's in the blood (p. 58).

Here Sylvie bluntly explains his son's stunted reticence in conveying emotion as a family trait. Eddie's refusal to accept his father's baton as leader of the Garris Town Band, and the sense of betrayal that accompanied it, lies at the heart of the drama and finds regular expression in the narrative as Sylvie repeats accusations of betrayal such as: 'a part of me died the night you walked' (p.33) and 'she betrayed you and you betrayed me'. (p.33) Thus, in frequently singing *The Minstrel Boy*, for example, the ballad of a son who carries his father's sword into battle, Eddie ironically and guiltily evokes the sense of betrayal and hurt in the Tansey father and son relationship.

Eddie and Rita's apparently casual singing of *The Holy Ground* (p.36) gives musical expression to, and identifies *The Salvage Shop* as, a quasi-religious site where salvation, healing and redemption can take place and connects with the frequent use of religious metaphor throughout, what this research would argue, is one of Nolan's most complex dramas. Sylvie defines his role as a band-leader in his community as a religious vocation explaining to Eddie that 'we had a sacred function in this place—Minister and Minstrel entwined' (p. 86). Other religious signifiers such as Stephen's work on the church stained glass windows, the origins of the name Stephen as the first martyr and his attendance at the nine first Fridays, the location and name of the workplace, the storing of Sylvie's drink in an unconsecrated tabernacle, enable diverse conversations around Christianity, salvation and redemption. Victor Merriman describes the dramatic value of diverse methods of understanding as follows:

Drama offers multiple layers of signification, literal, symbolic, and metaphorical. The richest dramatic experiences enable simultaneous access to all three, in complex, concentrated image-metaphors (2011, p. 18).

The literal, symbolic and metaphorical location of *The Salvage Shop* enables access to Nolan's core theme of healing and redemption in a post-Christian setting.

The use of the love seat in *The Salvage Shop* is a further visual example of Merriman's layers of signification: a symbol which is both literal and metaphorical. Crafted in the shape of an 'S', the lovers sit with their sides to each other, while facing the opposite way, in a physical example of a love that is unspoken, shielded, guarded and reluctant, a metaphor for the unexpressed love that at once separates and unites Eddie and Sylvie. The seat is also a metaphor for lovers, suggesting a

timeless and precious treasure that reaches beyond the boundaries of time and geographical location:

**Eddie:** It's called the lovers' seat. Six weeks ago the beam I cut it from, one-hundred-year-old pitch pine, was lying idle on a building site in Manchester (p. 24).

Sylvie's apparent dismissal of it in his comment 'T'will never take' (p. 24) offers signification far beyond literal meaning indicating an uneasy awareness of a natural reluctance in communicating emotion that is cultural and traditional. Sylvie dismisses the love seat because he is uncomfortable with the powerful metaphor as a symbolic expression of love. The placing of the love seat as an ever-present integral part of the set, for example, works at a symbolic level throughout the drama. Its geometric construction, with the couple both sitting astride while still physically separated from each other, symbolises simultaneously both separation and love. It also suggests the enduring presence of love and lovers and is an example of the 'complex, concentrated, image-metaphors' referred to by Victor Merriman above.

The absence of orthodox religion and any offer of Christian salvation indicate the growing view of the marginalised influence of clergy and faith in the emergent Ireland of the nineties as expressed previously in *Moonshine*. Christopher Murray explains this development as follows:

As a new ideology was forming in Ireland, the playwrights were registering the pain of living in a world suddenly, it seemed, bereft of divine protectionism. It was less a case of Paradise Lost than of Paradigm Lost (Murray, 1997, p. 179).

Nevertheless the spiritual is never absent in Nolan's work. While God and the notion of eternal paradise are, however, noticeably absent, transcendence from ignorance to understanding, from old wounds to healing, from paternal hurt to forgiveness cannot be avoided and a paradigm of salvation does emerge in the text. By focussing on the last months of Sylvie's life, *The Salvage Shop* concentrates on the gap between a much desired traditional Christian salvation in an afterlife as expressed by Stephen and the belief in a nihilistic future that is the result of Sylvie's existential experience. Michael Dunbar's analysis proposes that:

Nolan has an underlying Christian philosophy throughout his work, allowing him to be considered as a religious playwright (Dunbar, p.iv, 2001).

However, while the spiritual is never far from Nolan's writing, this thesis suggests that Sylvie's redemption is existential, based on an acquired understanding of the essential flawed humanity in man from his own experience of life, and that Nolan acknowledges Christian salvation only as a form of mystical magic that conjures human consolation from the ritual of community. Old traditional certainties have lost authority while meaning comes from real, lived, subjective experience. Sylvie acknowledges the persuasive draw of a traditional faith that is deep-rooted in the following exchange with Stephen:

**Sylvie:** I used to go back from time to time, you know. To church, I mean. You'd be passing of an evening and the lights or the music or whatever would pull you in and when they'd raise their voices in supplication, I'd raise mine with them—imposter, though I was. The solace of community I suppose (p.56).

Significantly Sylvie, while rejecting its teachings, acknowledges the power of religion in providing comfort and consolation. Nevertheless his underlying philosophy is dark, nihilistic and certainly not one of Christian salvation. It is the philosophy of a modern man who finds himself alienated, adrift and searching for meaning in an absurd, chaotic world that is about to end as he endures the incurable. He elaborates in the continuing exchange with his loyal friend Stephen:

**Sylvie:** And lately, I've begun to imagine, Stephen, that the real tragedy was not so much that Big Daddy didn't exist but that he'd abandoned us as a bad joke—walked off the podium and abandoned us to our fate. What do you reckon? (p. 56)

Ironically *The Salvage Shop* does hold up the traditionally Christian virtues of compassion, sympathy, consolation and redemption but from a non-religious standpoint.

Stephen's ministering role gestures towards the Japanese philosophy of Wabi Sabi that acknowledges the importance of impermanence and imperfection in beauty and truth. Prof. Treviranus, acknowledging Powell, defines the philosophy of Wabi Sabi as follows:

Wabi-Sabi is a Japanese worldview and aesthetic that recognizes the beauty in the imperfect, impermanent and incomplete. '[Wabi-sabi] nurtures all that is authentic by acknowledging three simple realities: nothing lasts, nothing is finished, and nothing is perfect' (Powell, 2004). It also encompasses the beauty of things modest, humble and unconventional (Treviranus, 2010, p.2).

It is this philosophy rather than a Christian one that informs Sylvie's epiphany. Stephen uses the principles of Wabi Sabi, for example, to express his understanding

of redemption through the acceptance of human limitations. In conversation with Eddie, he uses the example of his grandfather's creation of the church's stained glass windows to explain this:

**Stephen:** Nothing is beyond redemption—you know that. The kink is everything, Eddie. When my grandfather made the original windows for the church below, they say he left a flaw in every panel the way people would remember they were the work of human hands. The mark of Cain he called it (p.26).

The flaw in the stained glass panel, for example, was an indication that man was human, capable of error and that this was a necessary part of his humanity. Evocation of the biblical story of Cain suggests that man's survival is conditional on his acceptance of his own imperfection. Stephen expresses what Sylvie will more fully explain, after his epiphany moment at his farewell concert: that acceptance of imperfection brings understanding, healing, redemption and self-forgiveness. Thus, imperfect performance has brought an epiphanic understanding that man, in order to gain self-knowledge, must celebrate life with all its imperfections. Sylvie's manic and obsessive pursuit of musical perfection has not brought enlightenment but the barren loneliness of the unattainable and the alienation of loved ones as he explains:

**Sylvie:** All I heard was the music. Those perfect notes all I ever cared about. I didn't give a damn why you had gone missing. The music would heal that. I'd heal it through the music. I'd forgotten, of course. There is pain which no music can describe; there are conditions for which no music exists. I know that now, Eddie. And I'm the one who's sorry (p.85).

This understanding connects Sylvie Tansey with Frances Shannon of *The Guernica Hotel* who alienated his family in the pursuit of the ideal. In accepting the 'noble

function [...] of the bum notes, the off-keys, the shady timings' (p. 86), Sylvie finds and shares with Eddie—the power to forgive himself. The sacred relationship of father and son—'Minister and Minstrel entwined' (p.86)—is re-established as is the vocation of the artist, as the quasi-priest of the community. Sylvie explains this priest-artist's vocation to Eddie:

**Sylvie:** [...] our little band had a purpose in this place. And we did too, Eddie [...] We were a conduit, a voice through which this town was enabled to sing and cry and celebrate and hope (p.34).

as Eddie receives the conductor's baton from his father in a grand theatrical gesture—replicating Sylvie's acceptance of the role from his own father a generation earlier. The play closes with the swelling sound of *Una Furtiva Lagrima* in the salvage shop where all things can be salvaged.

In the context of contemporary Irish theatre, Nolan has quite a unique position because of the directness of his vehement criticism of the body politic as he experienced it. This study sees this position as a natural development of his early work. The dramatic representation of political issues is worked out against a backdrop of familial conflict brought about by questions of ideology and inheritance of property, making the drama more compelling. Nolan's political writing is very much a 'work-in-progress'—as suggested by his return to the topic at the height of the Celtic Tiger—where issues such as polemics and ideology receive more balanced attention by the writer.

Nolan, especially through the use of music, introduces layers of meaning that moves the dramatic text beyond language into a deeper and more spiritual response. Thus, the spiritual informs the writing as evidenced, for example, by frequent use of biblical language and allusion. Forgiveness of self and others for imperfections is a

crucial development in Nolan's concept of healing and redemption, arguing that this results from an acceptance that there is beauty in the imperfect, impermanent and incomplete. It is a thought that will be tested in Nolan's next work.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### THE THEATRE IS OUR CHURCH: *Blackwater Angel* and *Sky Road*

In 2001 Jim Nolan's stature, as a contemporary Irish dramatist, was enhanced by his appointment as writer-in-residence at the Abbey Theatre. This chapter continues to explore Nolan's development as a playwright and considers his expansion of issues that have engaged him since 1979. *Blackwater Angel* is Nolan's most complete statement thus far on the connection between the creative act of theatre and the eliciting of healing and comfort in a Puritan setting hostile to the concept of non-religious redemption. This play connects the two main strands of his work (redemption and politics) by drawing the political issues of Restoration England into the narrative of a faith-healer in search of his own redemption. Similarly, *Sky Road* connects both themes by drawing the need to reform the Irish body politic into the narrative of a public official in search of healing and comfort through self-forgiveness. Interestingly, both plays explore the tension in the lived experience between the public and private personas of flawed individuals. In particular the chapter synthesises the works, examines production histories and critical reviews, and through critical analysis explores issues that are common to both. The chapter considers separately issues that are unique to both plays: the power of theatre to heal and the extensive role of metatheatre in *Blackwater Angel*, that goes far beyond its use in any of his previous work, and his searing critique of the body politic during Ireland's Celtic Tiger economy, in *Sky Road* which finds strong intertextual connections with Nolan's previous political play, *The Guernica Hotel*.

#### *Blackwater Angel*

*Blackwater Angel* was first staged in the Abbey Theatre in Dublin on May 8<sup>th</sup> 2001 while Jim Nolan was writer-in-residence there. The play begins on the banks of the Blackwater in

1666, where an exasperated Ruth Greatrakes and her servants, await the arrival of her husband Valentine from England—an ex-Cromwellian soldier and famous faith-healer/stroker, to attend to the endless crowds of invalids who wait at their castle gates.<sup>11</sup> When a weary Greatrakes returns, he refuses to attend to the waiting supplicants. Greatrakes explains that he was accused of being a charlatan and mountebank by ministers, churchman and pamphleteers while in London and was even summoned to account for his actions by King Charles II. As a result of these accusations, he has lost his faith and thus the power to heal.

As Greatrakes continues to ignore his ministering duty to the waiting crowds, a travelling troupe of players set up camp in the forest of Affane. Greatrakes attends a rehearsal of *The Broken Heart* and hears the voice of foundling Angel Landy who he now believes will restore his lost sense of innocence, source of his gift of faith-healing. Greatrakes' obsession with Angel grows, attending every performance while Ruth attends to the sick that are dying at his gates. However news of his failure to heal a blind man spreads rapidly, causing the waiting crowds to disperse. Ruth and the children leave for England and Greatrakes orders his servants to burn the outhouses in an attempt to obliterate all memory of the episode.

Matthew appeals to Greatrakes to heal Angel when she loses her voice. Now sexually attracted to Angel, Greatrakes takes her into his home, hopeful that she will restore his gift of healing or, at least, bring him peace of mind. His attempts to cure Angel, and his attempts to turn her into a lady, fail and ultimately lead to her suspected suicide by drowning. However, in attempting to heal Martin, a blind supplicant who he has previously failed to heal, Greatrakes' gift is mysteriously restored as Ruth and his children return. Resolved to carry out his duty, Greatrakes imagines Angel's voice as the curtain descends.

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<sup>11</sup> Greatrakes was called a 'stroker' because of his method of healing that involved stroking the affected area of the invalid (Fraher, 2001, p.5).

Abbey Theatre's Artistic Director Ben Barnes, writing in a diary of his tenure in the Abbey Theatre, which was published as *Plays and Controversies* explains the play's merits:

[...] the play is written with intellectual rigour, that its concerns are beyond the clash of useless swords in the political clamour of Cromwellian Ireland and that, in its probings, it reaches for a truth that is immemorial (2008, p.110).

Barnes finds the narrative of this 'remarkable new play' (p.74) fascinating and analyses the task facing the author at the writing stage:

I remind Jim of what he has to do: the story of a faith healer/stroker whose capacity to heal has deserted him and whose faith is shaken to its foundations. He journeys into the pit of despair and only when his wife and children have left him, and his friends and servants loyalty has been called into question, and only after he has resisted the temptation of Angel Landy with terrible consequences for him and for her, only when he has reached the nadir of self-loathing and despair, is his gift restored to him. But with it Paradise is not regained (Barnes, 2008, p.109).

The Abbey Theatre website states that the production was performed 36 times (Abbey Theatre, 2014). An amateur production of the work in Ottawa followed in 2003. The subsequent acquisition of the sole performing rights by American Mark Geisser, from 2003 to 2006 (resulting in an amateur London production in 2006), in part explains the small number of productions of *Blackwater Angel* during this crucial period, when the work was best known. The large cast and expensive wardrobe design may also be factors in making *Blackwater Angel* Nolan's least produced work. Ben Barnes had expressed confidence in Nolan's writing:

The signs for the show were so propitious and I believe that Nolan had written his best and most ambitious play to date. [...] Nolan

had, with great courage and application, immersed himself in the world of Cromwellian Ireland and surfaced with a fascinating story of a 'stroker', a miracle-worker, whose gift had deserted him and who had come under the spell of the siren-like foundling, Angel Landy, who tempts him in scenes reminiscent of the John Proctor/Abigail encounters in *The Crucible*. [...]As Jim explored that other-worldly gift and the demands it makes on a man who possesses it, he brings all the trademark compassion for the frailties of flawed humanity and its capacity for transcendence and redemption. That quality and the beauty of its writing is what, in my opinion, sets Jim's work apart (Barnes, 2008, p. 140).

The production was not a commercial success. Director Ben Barnes explains that the Abbey Theatre found itself, 'in spite of the fact that this project had been nurtured with care and worked on by a committed and talented creative team and cast, [...] staring [...] into an abyss of lukewarm notices and a struggling box-office' (2008, p.140). Patrick Lonergan in *Theatre and Globalisation* examines the lack of box-office interest for work such as Niall Williams's *The Murphy Initiative* (August 1991), Brian Friel's *Wonderful Tennessee* (June 1993), Jim Nolan's *Blackwater Angel* (May 2001) and Vincent Wood's *A Cry from Heaven* (June 2005) and offers a different explanation. He concludes that, while that classic Irish plays sold well during the tourist season, premiered work was largely commercially unsuccessful (Lonergan, 2010, p. 154-5).

Nolan's use of dialogue and location in *Blackwater Angel* differs significantly, however, from his previous work. For example, scenes are not dominated by duologues and instead conversation is dispersed over four or five characters although there is little attempt to recreate the language of the era. While a prologue is used for the first time since *The Boathouse* (1986), its purpose is more functional in providing back-story by dramatising Greatrakes' healing of Michael. After the specific regional location of the Waterford trilogy explored in Chapter 1, Nolan moves his work to small imagined coastal towns that blend fiction with reality in creating realistic locations such as Ballintra in *Moonshine*, Seafield in *The Guernica Hotel* or Garris in *The Salvage Shop*, locations that lie between rural and

urban settings that often, however, seem to have little connection with the outside world. However the inclusion of the world beyond the local in *Blackwater Angel* marks a significant difference in the writing. For example Greatrakes performs acts of healing in England that forces him to explain his actions before King Charles II at his London court. The Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral along with poet Andrew Marvell (p.30) writes testimonials on his behalf. Greatrakes attempts to heal Lady Conway in Warwickshire (p. 18), Ruth's father 'holds down a hundred acres in Cornwall' (p.48) and her brother is the 'Kings ambassador to the court of Madrid' (p.46). Crowds follow him around Lismore (p.77) while the travelling troupe of players 'sets sail for England at first light' (p.67) when their production of John Ford's *The Broken Heart* which is set in Sparta finishes in Affane. These references connect the faith healer's regional world with the greater world beyond, adding a new dimension to Nolan's work by giving it a broader and more universal context. Servant Michael Maher explains:

**Michael:** For it *is* a wonder, Lizzie. I did think that this parish was very small altogether but now I'm not so sure. For I'm inclined to think every man's story is a gallant one when it's told upon a stage (p.40).

Intriguingly Nolan for the first time moves his stage space beyond the immediate and the local to the greater world beyond, universalising the issues raised.

Generally theatre reviews were positive—with some strong reservations of the play's conclusion. While Sean Doran of *Books Ireland* states: 'this is a mature play, genuinely felt and cleverly crafted, one far above the general run of contemporary Irish drama' (01.11.2013). *The Sunday Independent* was critical of the play's conclusion in '*Faith's Nihilism*':

[...] in *Faith Healer* the audience is not asked to believe beyond intellectual doubt in the efficacy of faith; there is room for interpretation. Nolan, on the other hand, shows us the journey and the search coming full circle; and he suggests that if the

journey is taken with an open heart, redemption is inevitable. It is a gentle, warmhearted conclusion, even when born of desperation. But for many people it is not inevitable, and for them the conclusion is an intellectual cop-out that makes the journey hardly worth undertaking. [...]But the play's weakness lies in its denouement: Nolan portrays Greatrakes as finding and offering redemption through an acceptance of miraculous power. It's too tidy and rather simplistic (O'Kelly, 2001, reviews).

O'Kelly may have found the conclusion 'tidy and rather simplistic', but arguably such a conclusion is valid only if there is a refusal to accept the combination of mystery and faith, upon which Greatrakes' crisis is resolved. Nicholas Grene adds to this argument when acknowledging risks of sentimentality in the ritual of healing and regeneration which the ending offers in *Riders to the Sea* (Synge, 1904). In a comment, that connects with *Blackwater Angel*, he concludes:

But in performance, after the hard day's night of story-telling, all the comic-grotesque horrors of the past, the desperations of the present, which it had worked through, one can only feel that the conclusion, with whatever it offers of reconciliation and renewal, has been theatrically earned (Grene, 2,000, p.235).

*The Guardian* also took issue with a denouement that 'wrests some seriously unlikely redemption from the sacrifice' (2001). Both, however, commented on the epic scale of the work. O'Kelly referred to 'the scope and depth of the collage' (2001) while Moroney commented:

Yet the themes nag at you; the miracle-worker's inability to heal himself; the necessity for any moral man to reconcile himself to his fate; spirituality in the face of a heedless God; miracles and desperate hope. For all its sidestepping of historical polemicism, this is a deeply serious work of soul-raking, big-stage literature (2001).

The thesis acknowledges the legitimate concerns of O’Kelly and Moroney regarding a journey that seems to lead too easily towards redemption. However, it must also be acknowledged, that acceptance of faith-healing as a fact which both critics find challenging, is a necessary basis for engaging with the text and arises from acceptance of the tradition of faith healing in Irish society. Therefore any reluctance to accept the practice of faith-healing and the mystery that attends it, that forms the premise of the dramatic text of plays such as *Blackwater Angel*, would inevitably lead to such critical responses as outlined above. One can argue that the conclusion is far from being ‘too tidy and simplistic’ (O’Kelly, 2001, reviews) but is actually complex and thought-provoking. Patricia Lynch, in her article *New Uses of Traditional Healing in Contemporary Irish Literature*, supports this view when she connects Brian Friel’s *Faith Healer* and Nolan’s *Blackwater Angel*:

The depiction of healing in these texts is treated in a factual way, whether that be rooted in history, folklore, or founded on people’s lives. [...] only in the fiction and plays can the full dramatic potential of these life and death situations be explored (2012, p. 63).

Lynch’s point supports the notion that the exploration of Greatrakes’ journey towards redemption will only be dramatically acceptable if the tension between the mystery of faith-healing and modern scientific understanding of medicine is resolved by acceptance of faith-healing as a factual occurrence. Without this acceptance, the play’s denouement remains challenging. Christopher Murray, in a review of *Blackwater Angel*, points to an obvious tension that must exist between a literal response and a visual/mystical response in ‘Triumph of the Literary Play’:

On stage there must always be this tension between the literary and the spectacular. [...] Jim Nolan is usually on the sides of the angels on this question. The kind of play he favours is full-length,

tragicomic, and self-consciously theatrical. To him theatre is not just metaphor; it is life directed (2002, p. 16).

In 'siding with the angels', Nolan then explores a world where 'belief in the gift of healing is inherent, with no sense of incongruity' (Lynch, 2012, p. 67). Michael Coady agrees with Murray:

If a theatre of the imagination represents the more mysterious heartland of the forest of enchantment then it is into that territory that Jim Nolan consistently journeys in search of insight, meaning and redemption. He is a dramatist who is conceptually drawn to bypass polemic in favour of the poetic (2001, p.5).

Here Coady points to a crucial element in Nolan's work as expressed in *Blackwater Angel*: the poetic sense of mystery that informs the stroker's redemption.

Nolan's journey in search of healing and redemption reaches its conclusion in a mystical epiphanic experience that disappoints those who seek logical explanations. Intriguingly *Blackwater Angel* searches for spiritual ways to perceive the world in mystical pathways that contrast with those offered by rational experience. Murray points out that the visual conclusion of the play is crucial in establishing such a pathway as Greatrakes' redemption is visually confirmed by the presence of the voice of Angel Landy inside his head and that:

The play is in that sense highly unusual. It flies in the face of contemporary fashion and it has the courage of its convictions (2002, p.16).

Murray, in praising Nolan for having the courage to place redemption as the central theme of his work, argues that *Blackwater Angel* was significantly different to Irish dramatic texts in 2001 and goes far beyond what Nolan attempted in his previous work.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Other Abbey productions in 2001 included *Eden* (O'Brien, Methuen, 2001), *Down the Line* and *The Hunt for Red Willie* (Mercier, Methuen, 2000), *Chair* (Operating Theatre Co., unpublished script, 2001) and *On Such as We* (Roche, Hern, 2001).

*Blackwater Angel* explores the emotional issues that threaten and disable Greatrakes in a complex weave of metatheatrical presentation that goes far beyond the use of metatheatrical presentation in any of his previous plays such as *Dear Kenny* (1988), *Moonshine* (1991), *The Guernica Hotel* (1994) and *The Salvage Shop* (1998). In fact the whole play strives to make a comment on how drama works and moves beyond any concept of Nolan's theatre as merely a realistic retelling of events. The lessons of the insert-play of *The Broken Heart* (1633) for example are used to guide all those in Greatrakes' home to resolve the emotional issues in their real lives. Similarly, role-playing is used to allow characters in the insert play of *The Broken Heart* to extend and interact with the characters of the framework play. Csilla Bertha, in her paper 'Theatre within the Theatre, Play within the Play—Self-Reflexivity in Jim Nolan's *Blackwater Angel*', explores his use of metatheatrical:

Jim Nolan's *Blackwater Angel* (2001), a rich, complex but barely-known play combines the two basic kinds of play-within-the-play and this metadramatic method multiplies the layers of self-reflexivity. The external play, dramatizing the seventeenth-century healer, Valentine's Greatrakes' fate, his predestined role, his and his family plight, invokes the *theatrum mundi*, the World Theatre whereas the insert play, the travelling theatre's performance of *The Broken Heart* influences the characters and the plot, and reverberates throughout the play. The two kinds of play-within-the-play, however, are not neatly separated but open up to into each other; boundaries break down, the characters of the different plays interact, the role-playing reduplicates itself inside and outside (2012, p. 93).

Boundaries between the real and the imagined world break down as characters use the lines and outcomes of the performed play as a model for resolving issues that are crucial to them in their own lives. Servant Michael Maher, for example, explains the difference the performed word has made to his life:

**Michael:** All my life I have wondered about the world beyond my master's fields and would I ever know its stories. I often did think to run away but, when the time came to go, I never did. So I waited. For something to happen. For something to make sense. (*Pause*) And then the playactors came. You and the playactors and the play. That was *my* miracle, Angel. You will have yours, too. But remember this: miracles is rooted in the clay, not the stars (p. 84).

Here Michael draws attention to what Hornby describes as a key element in the function of metadrama:

For a play to be fully metadramatic requires that the outer play have character and plot; that these must acknowledge the existence of the insert play; and that they acknowledge it as a performance. In other words there must be two distinguishable layers of performance (1986, p.35).

Michael's miracle draws attention then to one of Nolan's key themes: the power of theatre to represent and interpret a world in ways that made sense of his own lived experiences. Michael, in an apparently accidental quotation from the insert play, recites the metaphysical conceit from *The Broken Heart* (Ford, 1633) in commenting reflexively on the impossibility of any real love between Greatrakes and Angel Landy:

**Michael:** When Youth is ripe, and Age from time doth part,  
The lifeless Trunk shall wed the Broken Heart (p.71).

This conceit, then, frames and explains the servants' response to their master's unwise infatuation with the sixteen-year-old, subsequently described as 'not wholesome' (p.70) by Lizzie. Michael's previous playful repetition of Ithocles' cautionary advice from Ford's work that 'Morality applied to/timely practice, keeps the soul in tune' (p.39) reverberates

through the external dramatic text acting as a powerful warning to Greatrakes against improper behaviour. Ruth Greatrakes uses the example of the travelling players to reflect and reference her own experiences as the supplicant crowds besiege her gates. Ruth believes that she, and her household, are also involved in a drama and with all of the constituent dramatic ingredients of life and death. She calls attention to the theatricality of the lives they now lead as members of the *dramatis personae* of the theatre of life:

**Ruth:** Yes back to the drama! We have our own here too, you know. In the minor key I grant you but compelling nonetheless. Some days ago, a death, today an anonymous funeral and (To Greatrakes), just now, what with savage irony, my darling, a child born in a stable. Nothing to compare with the drama on your stage, Madame Everard, but, yes, compelling in its own sordid way (p.46).

Hornby expands on the metadramatic purpose of comments such as Ruth's:

The metadramatic experience for the audience is one of unease, a dislocation of perception [...] Seeing double is the true source of the significance of metadrama (1986, p.32).

Thus, Everard's theatre, which despite an initial acceptance that life and art are separate, reaches out through dramatic performance to make audience, Ruth and her household 'see double' and become aware of how close art and illusion are to reality. In this way the external drama of Greatrakes becomes intricately linked with the inner drama of *The Broken Heart* as he seeks to restore his broken heart through the voice of Angel Landy, one of the strolling players.

In the *theatrum mundi* of the main narrative, the notion that everyone must perform the role allotted to them by God is regularly articulated. Ruth tells Greatrakes 'you have no choice' (p.32) and again 'it was our destiny' (p.48). Moreover she believes that her husband's 'hands are touched by God' (p.24) and that must do 'as God ordains you do' (p. 24). Ruth believes that, once the gift has been bestowed, it cannot be revoked: 'you cannot go back, Valentine. You own it now and must pay the price' (p.32). While Greatrakes has faith, he has the gift of healing. Valentine explains the loss of the gift while in England and makes the central connection between faith, healing and innocence which is at the heart of the narrative:

**Greatrakes:** For if it were not the gutter pamphleteers, it were the physics and the philosophers; if it were not the Ministers of our Church, it were his Majesty's henchmen. And if were not all of those conjoined, it were—God forgive me—the poor afflicted themselves in their infinite relentless number. But between them all, they have stolen something without which I can never hope to heal.

**Ruth:** And what is that?

**Greatrakes:** My innocence, Ruth. Doing without knowing why. Doing without caring why. These hands are instruments only—mute servants to the miraculous (p.22).

These persistent attacks on Greatrakes cause him fear and doubt:

**Greatrakes:** Because I am frightened. These are dangerous times, Ruth. The world is rational and wonders have ceased. There is no trust in anything that cannot be by some law accounted for (p.22).

Loss of faith brought about the loss of the gift of healing and drives him to investigate the source of the power, believing that wonder can be investigated.

His interaction with the inner play of *The Broken Heart* brings him into contact with the mysterious Angel Landy whose voice, Greatrakes believes, replicates the state of innocence he has lost. He believes that Angel's voice will restore that lost state of innocence and thus restore the gift of healing. Thus, the movement of Angel Landy, Matthew and Eustacia Everard between the world of the healer, and the world of the theatre, facilitates the connection between the therapeutic power of the theatre and the healing power of Greatrakes. These significant agents, in the action of both the insert play and the framework play, dissolve the boundaries between the performed world and the lived world. Similarly, Everard's production of *The Broken Heart*, and Greatrakes real-life attempt to heal his own distress, combine as role-playing as dramatic purpose crosses over from the insert-play to the framework play in search of a cure for a broken heart.

Theatre and healing connect when Eustacia directly connects Greatrakes' work with cabaret theatre stating that 'your performances at Lincoln's Inn were the talk of the town' (p.35). On the other hand, her husband Matthew has an even more exalted sense of the purpose of theatre, claiming a sacred role in healing that connects with Greatrakes as a healer:

**Everard:** [...] But do you know Mr. Greatrakes, during all that time, I was consoled by unassailable truths: they banned us because they were afraid; they silenced us because we were a voice for those who had none; they broke our hearts because we *gave* heart to those whose hearts were broken; they crippled us because we could heal (p.35-6).

In this way, the sacred roles of theatre, faith and healing merge in *Blackwater Angel* and connect with a similar merging between music, faith and salvation in *The Salvage Shop*. Michael Coady argues that:

The mysterious nature of faith as an enabling gift, unbidable but powerful, underlies and informs *Blackwater Angel*. There is also

the connectedness of faith, imagination and innocence, and how all these may be the path to salvation if they can truly be found and sustained (2002, p.5).

In connecting faith, innocence and theatre, Angel Landy acts then as a metaphysical bridge to healing and understanding for Greatrakes who eventually realizes that the search for the source of the gift is pointless as it resides in the mystical. The dramatic text recognises these connections in Greatrakes' search for the source of his lost gift.

Once again the spiritual is never far from Nolan's text. Although he claims that he is 'no minister' (p.34), sacred trappings also apply to Valentine. His servants refer to him as 'the Master', he has a servant called 'Mary' who has 'swaddling' on her bed and supplicants crowd his 'barn' (p.39). Angel quotes Matthew, in evangelical tones appropriate to his name:

**Angel:** Master Everard says the Theatre is our Church. He says we honour God in our work and let the ministers honour Him in their chapel (p.50).

Angel's voice and song are 'gifts from God' (p.50-1). Everard's resolution to endure and have faith in his 'theatre of the church', recognising that the time of the theatres would come again, acts as a significant lesson to Greatrakes to persevere. The theatre manager's decision to include Angel's mystical, wordless song, in place of what he feels is the unsatisfactory conclusion to the epilogue of *The Broken Heart* because 'it implied a form of resolution on stage not normally found in life' (p. 36), opens up the resolution to Greatrakes' dilemma: he must reconnect with the state of innocence—and thus faith—by connecting with Angel's song. This directly contradicts—and justifies the replacement of the original final line of *The Broken Heart* that 'Art/can find no comfort for a broken heart' (Ford, 1633, p. 798, l. 92-3). Its replacement by Angel's song, which evokes innocence and faith, flatly contradicts Ford's original conclusion as healing can be found through dramatic

performance. Bertha asserts that ‘the parallel between actual healing and the healing power of art, more particularly theatre, is spelled out in the play in several ways’ (2012, p.97) and connects with the theme of healing and redemption through the performative act in Nolan’s previous work. Michael Coady adds to this argument in connecting *Moonshine* (1992), *The Salvage Shop* (1998) and *Blackwater Angel* (2002) thus:

It is both notable and revealing that drama itself, and theatrical performance, can literally become part of Nolan’s subject and narrative. Central to the plot of his play *Moonshine* is the attempt to stage *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* — in itself incorporating a play within the play, and an enchanted wood where transfiguration may occur. In *The Salvage Shop* there is also the attempt to contrive and insert as imaginative catalyst into the everyday a significant musical/theatrical performance. In that play the bric-a-brac clutter of the salvage shop could be seen as another kind of forest of the lost and found. Dramatic performance and travelling players, as well as wood and forest, are also central to *Blackwater Angel*, set in east Munster during the Restoration period, when the long Puritan ban on drama in England had lately been lifted (Coady, 2002, p.5).

Healing and salvation through theatrical performance then energise Nolan’s works. Coady suggests that ‘theatre itself, and possibly all art, is an attempted process of healing and redemption through transfiguration’ (Coady, 2002, p.5). The eponymous Angel, whose name is indicative of her purpose as proof of the healing and restorative power of theatre, is the principal agent that connects the inner script of *The Broken Heart* with the framework script of *Blackwater Angel*, just as the amateur troupe of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* connects their performed drama with the resolution of the real-life dramas of its players in the framework play of Nolan’s *Moonshine* (1991). Angel was found at the dark time when the theatres were closed and thus healing and curing through theatrical performance was denied to the community. Everard explains the therapeutic power of performance:

**Everard:** But do you know, Mr. Greatrakes, during all that time I was consoled by unassailable truths: they banned us because they were afraid; they silenced us because we were a voice for those who had none; they broke our hearts because we gave heart to those whose hearts were broken; they crippled us because we could heal (p.36).

Bertha suggests that the mysterious child whose innocent voice becomes associated with God's voice is a reward for the perseverance of the actors with their profession when performance was forbidden and the theatres were silent (Bertha, 2012, p. 98)—a theme that connects with Greatrakes' silence as a healer. The foundling's curative voice echoes outside the boundaries of Puritan law to bring comfort, healing and redemption just as Greatrakes did when, as a healer, he practised outside contemporary scientific laws of medicine. Christopher Murray explains:

Greatrakes falls for her. She is his anima and promise of deliverance from the despair into which he has fallen after his gift has deserted him. Her song is the pure distillation of innocence, associated with the river and forest area where the players first found her; she is a kind of *genius loci* or symbol of nature's harmony (2002, p.16).

Murray identifies Greatrakes' belief that Angel's pure and innocent voice is the voice of God speaking to him. He believes that he will reconnect with the state of innocence, which was the source of his gift if he hears her voice. Her voice is a sacred gift that she neither questions nor investigates. Angel's song of innocence and purity evokes the mystery of faith and points to the lesson that Greatrakes must learn: the impossibility of understanding the gift itself.

The loss of Angel's voice and her presence as a healer-who-has-come-to-be-healed in the home of another healer-in-need-of-healing ultimately provokes, through a metatheatrical

interlude, a crisis that forces Greatrakes to come to terms with 'the emotional issues that threaten and disable' (Murray, 2002 p.16). Denied the inspiration of Angel's voice, Valentine casts her in the role of a lady, dressed in bonnet, velvet cloak and buckled shoes. She becomes a Pygmalion character in a metadramatic staged dinner-party where unwilling servants are also cast in the role of upper-class guests. Their forced attendance indicates their awareness of the theatricality of the scene. The bizarre nature of the interlude is highlighted by Nolan's stage directions that compare Angel's appearance to 'a somewhat gaudy doll' (p.72). Ironically all the players in the dinner-scene reject the roles in which they have been cast, culminating in Angel's statement:

I do not want your fine clothes or buckled shoes. (*Rips buttons from dress and disrobes to petticoat*). I do not want your pretty ringlets or ribbons in my hair. (*These go also*). I do not want your name day, sir, for I have none! I only want to sing (p.76).

Angel 'only wants to sing' because her voice in performance is her identity. She is a force of nature: wild, untamed, natural and innocent. In seeking to bestow the trappings of family and finery on her, Valentine seeks ownership of the mysterious, wordless song that is her essence. In seeking to own the gift, he destroys it. The refusal of Greatrakes' household to perform the roles allotted to them by their master acknowledges Bertha's argument that they too are aware that he has sublimated sexual desire into religious devotion as self-serving justification (2012, p.99). Their blunt refusal to participate in the elaborate role-play of the dinner-scene is an ironic example of the power of metatheatre as a theatrical device: in refusing Greatrakes' attempt to force them to become the *dramatis personae* of this elaborate inner-drama, they succeed paradoxically in pointing out the absurdity of the role-play and, as a consequence, the deeply inappropriate nature of Greatrakes' position.

Murray suggests that 'the rest of the play is a metaphor of spiritual death and resurrection' (2002, p.16). Bertha, similarly, concludes that the work follows a pattern of Nature/Innocence, Experience/Fall and finally, Salvation. After much suffering culminating in Angel's death, Greatrakes, who has always remained a good man as everyone suggests, finally, overcomes weakness and is restored to his former state of grace and innocence as a healer. Greatrakes has learned the lessons of the insert play from the actors: that the miracle of healing is beyond rational understanding and that the performer should embrace the mystery of art instead of searching for its source and meaning. Everard instructs Greatrakes that 'the child is what she is, sir' (p.52) confirming that the real artist's gift is his/her identity, an inseparable part of the self. Angel is the most powerful agent in his acceptance of the impossibility of knowing or understanding the gift (Bertha, 2012, p.100).

The most obvious intertextual connections lie with *Faith Healer* (Friel, 1980). The list of comparisons is obvious: both plays feature central characters who are rural faith-healers who cannot control their gift and feel helpless in the face of what Eamonn Jordan refers to as 'the tension between determinism and freedom' (2009, p.xxiv). Despite their reliance on objective testimonies from others, which they use to justify their work to themselves and the outside world, both doubt their gift and regret that they were chosen as healers. However there are significant differences: Valentine Greatrakes is a real-life figure that is still remembered in the folk-history of Waterford, Friel's Frank Hardy is a fictional character.<sup>13</sup> While Frank worries 'am I a con man?' (Friel, 1980, p. 4), Greatrakes is certain that he is 'not some mountebank or conjurer—it is not a trick' (p.31). Significantly the conclusions are radically different. While Frank Hardy goes willingly to his death, overwhelmed by darkness in a 'quick black' (p. 58) having accepted the loss of the gift, Greatrakes accepts the burden of the gift in a cinematic moment with the voice of Angel 'within his head' (p. 94). It is an epiphany moment that recalls a similar incident in Thomas Murphy's *The Gigli Concert* ( Murphy, 1983, p.239) as JPW King, Dynamatologist, becomes

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<sup>13</sup> Peter Elmer's recent work on Valentine Greatrakes lists 225 historical references (including scientist Sir Robert Boyle and poet Andrew Marvell) of Greatrakes' healing (Elmer, 2013, pp. 185-209).

the voice of Benimillo Gigli singing 'Tu che a Dio spiegasti l'ali' as father and son unite to conduct *Una Furtiva Lagrima* at the close of Nolan's *The Salvage Shop* (1998).<sup>14</sup>

While Greatrakes sometimes complains of God's indifference to him, there is always acceptance of his need for Christianity. Angel teaches him to express love and tenderness while bringing him to accept selflessness, which lies at the core of Christian teaching. Bertha finds intertextual comparisons with characters in Tom Murphy's plays—arguing, fighting, blaspheming, cursing God and yet still depending on some measure of His consolation and guidance (2012, p.101). However it is a very modern and existential version of Christianity that the healer finds deep within his own self and one that accompanies the traditional nurturing values of faith. Michael Coady explains this process in *Blackwater Angel* as follows:

It is not through reason, but through faith in the imagination that redemption may happen. The play closes in the suggestive and transfiguring dark of the forest, where things may be lost but found again; where nothing is certain, but all things are possible (2002, p.5).

Christopher Murray agrees with Coady's argument that the play is unusual in expressing a message of hope and salvation in an age that is largely hostile to such concepts (Murray, 2002, p.16). This might go some way to addressing Nolan's purpose in choosing disease-infested Affane in 1666 as the location of his work. This research would argue that the writer seeks to create connections between those left in the wake of Celtic Tiger Ireland and the supplicants that come in need of healing, curing and redemption at the stroker's gates. Murray sums it up as follows:

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<sup>14</sup> For further development of the connection between Brian Friel's *Faith Healer* and Nolan's *Blackwater Angel*, see Lynch, P. A. (2012) 'New Uses of Traditional Healing in Contemporary Irish Literature', *Estudio Irlandeses* (Number 7, 2012 ), pp. 61-68.

As this is a limbo (of art) where the broken heart, as the players insist, may be healed, in a world of crumbling beliefs this may be no small consolation (2002, p.16).

*Blackwater Angel* represents Nolan's most complete statement thus far on the power of Art—and specifically theatre—to heal and console the broken heart. Through extensive use of metatheatre, theatrical characters such as Everard, Angel, Eustacia and, to an extent Greatrakes himself, comment reflexively on their positions as performers (actor/singer/faith-healer) and thus create connections between reality and art as performance forms a metaphysical bridge to understanding. Nolan is now energised by the tension between the real self and the projected self as self-consciously theatrical and flawed characters such as Greatrakes seek, sometimes in vain, to live up to the image others have created of them. It is a tension that re-appears in the flawed central political character of Nolan's next play *Sky Road*, where those who are left outside the Celtic Tiger economy could find a connection with Greatrakes' supplicants who must also wait outside his castle for healing and comfort.

### *Sky Road*

*Sky Road*, developed from a script entitled *The Last Resort*, was initially scheduled for production in the Abbey Theatre in 2005. In the play, newly-appointed minister for the Environment Frank Conroy returns to Seafield on a night in the early eighties for a celebration hosted by his wife Katherine and daughter Tess. Joe Harrington, a local journalist and Tess' fiancée, and Johnny Conroy, youngest son and heir to the Conroy political dynasty, precede Conroy's arrival. Eldest son Stephen maintains a bedside vigil for twenty-three-year-old Laura, Frank's secretary, critically injured in an early morning car crash in which Stephen admits abandoning the scene of the accident. Laura's death results in Stephen's conviction and imprisonment as he refuses his father's offer of help because

ministers cannot be seen to interfere with due legal process. Journalist Joe Harrington disputes this version of events and suggests that an over-the-limit Minister Conroy was the real driver who had abandoned the scene fearing damage to his political reputation. Alone with his son, the minister confirms the truth of Joe's allegations, adding that Stephen and Katherine concocted a version of events to exonerate Conroy on the basis that the greater good would be served by Frank's continuing presence in power. Despite his guilt-ridden father's wish to reveal the truth, Stephen is emphatic that Conroy's political crusade against the corruption of Taoiseach Emmet Grogan's administration is more important than his own personal freedom.

On a winter's night, four years later, the family gather to celebrate the fortieth anniversary of Conroy's entry into politics. Stephen has served his prison term, sold his pub and now lives at home while Tess has returned home for the celebrations. Conroy announces his intention to run for Taoiseach in his crusade to rid Irish politics of corruption. Joe Harrington, now a successful Dublin journalist, investigates an imminent council decision to rezone the Kilgallen estate, corruptly acquired by local developer Paddy Brennan, for housing. Joe alleges that recently-elected Johnny Conroy, who is Brennan's selling agent and has the casting vote, is seriously compromised and that details of these allegations were sent in a registered letter to Conroy, which Katherine has concealed. An emotional Conroy threatens to resign his seat if his son fails to abstain on the rezoning vote and the truth of Laura's accident finally, emerges. With his moral credibility restored, Stephen is hopeful that he can convince Johnny to abstain. Francis Conroy accepts his own flawed humanity and forgives himself as the curtain falls on Stephen searching the skies for the first signs of Halley's Comet.

In *Plays and Controversies* Ben Barnes recalls:

It was Jim's play about sacrifice for the greater good and a dark tale of private morality and public accountability (2008, p.433).

Despite Barnes' assurances on the commercial viability of the play, *The Last Resort* became a casualty of the new administration in the Abbey and was shelved. A reworked version of *The Last Resort*, with the new title of *Sky Road*, was premiered on Monday October 15<sup>th</sup> 2007 in the Theatre Royal, Waterford and was directed by Barnes—now artistic director of that theatre (2008, p.433). The absence of any significant body of theatrical reviews by the national media is due, in part, to the production of the play during the Dublin theatre festival. The limited number of national reviews undertaken was unkind. *The Irish Times*, argued that 'the ensemble cast struggled to provide depth of feeling to Nolan's hollow play' (Keating, 2007) while *Books Ireland* described the play as 'confused in its task' (Kelly, 2008, p.146)<sup>15</sup>.

In a comment applicable to *Sky Road*, Patrick Lonergan describes the Abbey style of writing as one that typically combines 'provocative political content, [...] naturalistic acting, the inclusion of characters drawn from the margins of society and the use of a single household to represent the Irish nation' (2010, p.61). Originally intended for staging in the Abbey, it is easy to recognise such characteristic aspects in the writing of Nolan's play. Unlike other Nolan texts however, *Sky Road* has only two scenes in Act One and one in Act Two, enabling the action to flow with less interruptions than in previous drama. This research argues that *Sky Road* recognizes the need to concentrate political issues over a shorter time-span, rather than the more epic narrative sweep of *The Guernica Hotel* that had resulted in loosely outlined plot lines begun some sixty years earlier. Cause-and-effect and the power of a lie drive the action forward. Now lines of conflict, that are emotionally and intellectually engaging, quickly appear in the drama to identify the various nexus points of struggle. Stephen's absence as a character, which is constantly referred to for example, creates immediate interest and expectation. The inciting action arrives in the first scene with Laura's death, initiating decisions by characters that will irrevocably shape their destinies, as the last opportunity for the protagonists to turn aside from their particular

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<sup>15</sup> Kelly was equally guilty of confusion in some elements of his analysis as he managed to confuse and synthesise not only the characters of Johnny and Stephen (who he incorrectly describes as 'a corrupt auctioneer') but also the characters of Taoiseach Emmet Grogan and local developer Paddy Brennan.

course of action is reached at a very early stage. Deciding to lie about the circumstances of Laura's death leads inevitably towards the resolution of this action as the Conroy family are forced to overcome the obstacles that the power of the lie presents. Joe Harrington, intruder journalist and plot precipitator, upsets the accepted explanation of events as a key energiser of the plot, creating a dissonance that demands to be resolved with questions that insist upon urgent address. Character traits are revealed in the manner in which they respond to the emerging crises to resolve these conflicts in a familial and political world, where drama lies in the complex search for different outcomes.

As in *Blackwater Angel*, Nolan has moved the dialogue away from duologues to more comprehensive conversations with multiple parts that occur naturally from situations in which the characters find themselves. The Conroy family are largely united by language, in both grammar and syntax. Powerful feelings are expressed in language that is educated, informed and intimate in a world that is keyed to suffering and questioning. For example, there is implicit understanding of Stephen's lyrical language, which sometimes retreats into an allegorical world of vague astrological references and metaphors, as a space for the projection of ideas. Lengthy political and ideological monologues, typical within *The Guernica Hotel*, are curtailed. Stephen's litany of lunar features takes on a religious form that comforts and heals in a musicality that connects with Billy Cass's dream of cranes in *The Black Pool* (1983), Albert the Liar O'Brien's legend of the sea-gods in *The Gods are Angry*, *Miss Kerr* (1985), Claire's imagined performance of *The Bohemian Girl* in *The Boathouse* (1986) and the players of Thisbe Productions in their performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in *Moonshine* (1991). Linguistically, the title *Sky Road* connects in a thematic and metaphoric way with other Nolan works such as *The Gods are Angry* (1985), *Moonshine* (1991), *The Salvage Shop* (1998) and *Blackwater Angel* (2001) to create an expectation of celestial healing and metaphoric meaning when spiritual paths are followed as suggested by the crucial placing of the onstage telescope. Intimate and familial language energises the tension between the emotional and personal issues that threaten to disable the Conroy family and on one occasion becomes crude in a scene in which Johnny, to his mother's horror, expresses his revulsion at his father's behaviour (p.75).

Nolan's choice of language here, however, indicates a significant gap in the shared language of feeling or intellect through which father and son can speak to each other, echoing similar confrontations between father and son in *The Guernica Hotel* (p.26). Political rhetoric, on the other hand, which is built around cliché and euphemism, mostly confined to ritual phrases and formulas of alpha-male aggression dominates the sub-plot of Conroy's challenge to Taoiseach Emmet Grogan. Unfortunately the rhetoric fails to translate into dramatic conflict and reveal little of the inner essence of the character.

The single set, with its location overlooking the sea on the veranda of the Conroy family home, facilitates the necessarily urgent pace of the drama as crucial decisions are reached in frequently charged and confrontational situations that precipitates urgent action and response. *The Irish Times* commented that 'the Conroy's backyard is transformed into a beach of sorts, whose shifting sands echo the instability of the family's fate' (Keating, 2013) in explaining the precariousness state of flux of the family's fortunes. As in *The Guernica Hotel*, the backdrop of the sea gives a sense of scale, of man (Frank Conroy) struggling against overwhelming odds in his bid to make a difference. Here Nolan's isolated setting of Seafield facilitates the examination of local issues associated with the Conroy family that typify the national experience, as suggested by references to Dublin politicians and the national media. Nevertheless, failure to exclude the outside world, in a manner that connects with *Blackwater Angel*, is a major driving force in the plot: party faithful invade Conroy's home and take part-ownership of him, Gardaí arrest Stephen, corrupt local developer Paddy Brennan involves Johnny Conroy in shading dealings, reporter Joe Harrington arrives to investigate alleged local corruption, a registered letter ultimately leads to crisis while Stephen awaits the momentous arrival of Halley's Comet. Despite the on-set location of the telescope that suggests the Conroy world is somehow removed from the real world and views it at a distance, the dramatic text of *Sky Road* emphasizes an authorial view that the outside world cannot be excluded.

Although the play is set in the early eighties, Nolan raises events and issues associated with the boom economy of 2000-2007. Stroke politics, rezoning issues, and inflationary

house prices, which were raised as incipient and local issues in *The Guernica Hotel*, are developed and firmly rooted in national as well as local politics in the narrative of *Sky Road*. These developments would, however, be anachronistic in the Ireland of the eighties, in which the play is set, and could thus create confusion in contextualising issues raised by the drama unless there is acceptance that these issues are intended to be contemporaneous. Eamonn Jordan, while dismissing the notion of addressing the problems of the present by writing about them in the past acknowledges the importance of imagining an alternative future (as Nolan does in *Sky Road*):

The past and the present cannot be recreational versions of one another. What we need now is an ability to imagine purposefully the future (Jordan, 2009, p.xlviii).

However, despite imagining the need for future political reform, it must be acknowledged that Nolan's relocation of political and social problems, contemporaneous with the Celtic Tiger to the 1980s is puzzling and confuses, rather than clarifies, the political issues raised and adds substance to Merriman's argument that 'Celtic Tiger Ireland was a strange place to make art' (2011, p.209).

Why then did Nolan place the events of the play in the 1980s? The apparent wealth of all the characters of *Sky Road*, for example, contrasts starkly with the perceived understanding of the economic life of the early eighties as represented by the world of Nolan's *Boathouse* (1986), and with the poorer economic circumstances of the Shannon hotel 'family' in *The Guernica Hotel* set in the more prosperous 1990s. One could argue that the issues raised in *Sky Road* (2007) were always intended to be issues contemporaneous with the economic and political abuses at the height of the Celtic Tiger, when the play was first drafted in 2005 as *The Last Resort*. Such an interpretation energises the text and establishes the importance of the drama as one of the few dramatic works written and produced in criticism of the perceived wisdom of that period and a

natural sequel to *The Guernica Hotel* (1993)<sup>16</sup>. Here Frances Conroy expresses a determination to tackle the economic circumstances that allowed individuals, with privileged access to money, to place their own interests ahead of the common good on the pretence of a 'trickle-down-effect' to the poorer elements of Irish society. The general election of 2007, the property debate and the questions raised by the subsequent cabinet appointments add substance to this author's argument that the issues of the play could be considered as a searing critique of the Celtic Tiger era. Why then does Nolan not locate the play in 2007? Victor Merriman may well provide the explanation when he draws attention to the reluctance of Irish playwrights to criticise the pervasive notion that equated the fortunes of the Irish people with the prosperity of a small class of international entrepreneurs who succeeded under the very favourable economic conditions that the Irish state had artificially created for them (2011, p.214). Therefore Nolan's exploration of the corruption of the body politic became more acceptable when placed at a distance from a culture that refused to acknowledge any criticism of contemporaneous economic policy. Strangely Merriman does not acknowledge Nolan's politico-cultural criticism of the Irish state, which has always been a significant theme in his work (*Waterford Trilogy* and *Guernica Hotel*), and is best expressed through his dramatic representation of life in Ireland when the political and the personal meet in the day-to-day lives of his characters.

This research argues that *Sky Road* can be seen as the natural sequel to *The Guernica Hotel*. Thematically the ill-considered obscurity of Francis Conroy's political philosophy in *Sky Road* connects with the same confusion around Francis Shannon's political idealism in *The Guernica Hotel*. However, in shifting from the more obvious conflicts between the individual and the demands of politics, to the conflict within the individual, Nolan connects with a similar theme in contemporary playwright Thomas Kilroy's work as identified by Anthony Roche (1994, p. 196).<sup>17</sup> Thus, obvious thematic connections with *The Guernica Hotel* emerge and strengthen the notion of *Sky Road* as a development of the previous

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<sup>16</sup> Of plays produced between 2002 and 2008, only Sebastian Barry's *Hinterland* and Marina Carr's *Ariel* are works that can be seen to explore a connection between political success and moral corruption.

<sup>17</sup> Nolan also directed two of Kilroy's plays: *Talbot's Box* (1976) for Red Kettle Theatre Co. in 1988 and *The Madame MacAdam Travelling Theatre* (1991) for Field Day Theatre Co. in 1991.

dramatic text. Both plays have family patriarchs who are idealistic, if largely ineffectual, politicians that attract and repel followers both within and outside the family. Inter-sibling rivalry, children who are driven away by the failure of the patriarch to live up to his political ideals, local stroke-politics, the struggle for a controlling vision of Irish life, anniversary celebrations, young girls who came to the family house from the orphanage and were damaged by the experience and, ultimately, a sacrificial son who rescues a father from himself are all issues that are central to both dramas. Similarly, while *Sky Road* benefited from the criticism of the lengthy polemical posturing of Francis Shannon in *The Guernica Hotel*, the fundamental problem of a central character lacking a clearly-defined political philosophy remains. At its simplest, while there is always awareness that Shannon and Conroy are against corruption, the issue of what exactly they stand for remains obscure. Eamonn Kelly explains:

The play becomes confused in its task of imagining what an honest Irish politician might look like. Frank Conroy, a moral crusader in the Dáil, comes across as a fairly hapless character, depicted in the play as a coward, a depressive, and the submissive half of his marriage (2008, p.146).

Similar confusion around the hapless Francis Conroy—and arguably more ineffective Francis Shannon—connects both dramatic texts in creating enigmatic characters whose charismatic ability to attract ideological followers remains dramatically questionable and whose personalities suggest an authorial view that political integrity and weakness are synonymous and that idealists make poor politicians. Despite his macho-posturing, Francis Conroy has been outsmarted by his political nemesis Emmet Grogan on two of the main planks of his agreement with the new Taoiseach: establishment of an Anti-Corruption Commission in the Dáil and purchase by the Office of Public Works of the Kilgallen Estate. Four years later the estate is owned by a local developer and the Anti-Corruption Commission is staffed by weak and compromised politicians, chosen by Grogan, who are totally ineffective.

However there is a significant dramatic issue in accepting Conroy's position as a moral crusader who struggles against political corruption. The given circumstances of a minister who has been drinking and driving, who is involved in a car crash in which his young secretary subsequently dies, who panics and abandons the scene of the accident fearful for his political and moral reputation, and subsequently allows his eldest son to accept responsibility for the crash thereby incurring a significant prison sentence, contradicts the faith placed in him as a convincing moral hero. Johnny Conroy's accusations are inadequately addressed:

**Johnny:** [...]Tell me something, Minister? Tell me how you can stand in this yard and lecture me on declarations of fucking interest when you're the man that abandoned a dying girl and let your son do gaol for it? I want you to tell me how you can do that?  
**Conroy:** Practice, Johnny. Four years of practice. [...] You're never going to hate me as much as I hate myself. I left more than my Laura on the Sky Road that night. [...] My good name. My self-respect. They're rotting in the same clay that buried Laura. When I speak my voice mocks me [...] I claim a moral authority I no longer possess, I preach what I believe, but no longer practice. That's my atonement, Johnny (p. 75).

Arguably Conroy's self-loathing is inadequate as punishment for a young life lost and a son wronged, making it difficult to accept him as a dramatically sympathetic character. Moreover, pleas for sympathy are dramatically ineffective because his suffering is never witnessed, merely explained. However, this research argues that the tension between the private and public persona of the central character does energise the dramatic text, creating an interesting division between sympathy and scorn for the errant Minister.

*Sky Road* never fully offers an explanation for the trust placed in a compromised politician because the drama chooses exposition over privileged witness. In fact, Conroy's moral weakness remains the only character trait witnessed. His character, therefore, never

achieves the weight it needs because his moral and principled persona happens offstage, in obscure locations such as 'a small country hall at the foot of the mountains. [...] with twenty or thirty of the party faithful' (p.77). Stephen's explanation for his sacrifice 'because you're my father and I'm your son' (p.45) suggests an inverted version of a similar explanation of behaviour by Keller in Arthur Miller's drama *All My Sons* (1947) when he too explains:

**Keller:** There's nothing he could do that I wouldn't forgive. Because he's my son. Because I'm his father and he's my son. [...] Nothin's bigger than that. [...] I'm his father and he's my son and if there's something bigger than that I'll put a bullet in my head! (1958, p. 120).

In *Sky Road*, however, this argument fails precisely because it is the father who betrays his son and acceptance of the moral necessity of lying about a crime for the greater good does not sustain the argument of the drama. Compulsion to maintain a politician of integrity in high office never outweighs the greater concerns raised by his behaviour and suggests that all those associated with him are corrupted by the attempt. For example, Stephen and Katherine conspire to pervert the course of justice while high-minded Harrington conspires with Conroy to bury a serious crime, meeting integrity with integrity in order to further integrity in high office while engaging in a journalistic cover-up (Kelly, 2008, p.145). However, like Francis Shannon in *The Guernica Hotel*, while Conroy's immediate family are invited to view him as an atypical politician of integrity and probity, others see him as a typical politician tainted by the experience of power. *Sky Road* develops the authorial notion begun in *The Guernica Hotel* that honest people, who become involved with politics, are ultimately corrupted by it and that the road to high-office is tainted with sacrifices and buried secrets.

In choosing to conceal the real events of the night of the crash, Stephen is also tainted and corrupted through his contact with politics, albeit in a noble cause. Stephen, in his

fascination with astronomy, connects with many Nolan characters who withdraw from the world, through hobbies or fantasies, in order to find comfort and healing from a hostile world. Typically, these characters use an imagined world as metaphors or allegories to explain their view of life. Anthony Roche, commenting of similar characters in Thomas Kilroy's work, explains their function in his plays thus:

All engage with the notion of personal freedom, of resisting the pressures of social conformity and marking out a space of existential possibility. Kilroy has dramatised these issues through socially displaced figures as the homosexual, the writer and the Catholic mystic. Part of that endeavour has been the choosing of an objective other identity to mediate the struggle for self-realisation (1994, p. 206).

However, Nolan's outsider characters, while fulfilling a similar function, differ significantly to Kilroy's characters, figures of radical individuality set against the surrounding society because they are mainly creative and artistic, expressing their opposition to, and understanding of, that society in mainly theatrical terms. Nolan's outsider characters are different as they frequently communicate their imagined possibility of transformation through creative acts of performance or find refuge in them as a comforting fiction. Thus, Arthur Simpson in *The Flowers of May* (1979), Claire in *The Boathouse* (1986), Sylvie and Eddie Tansey in *The Salvage Shop* (1998) all use their obsession with music to define and explain their purpose in life and to also shield themselves from it. Similarly, Billy Cass in *The Black Pool* (1983), Albert the Liar O'Brien in *The Gods are Angry, Miss Kerr* (1985), Michael in *Moonshine* (1991) all invent fantasy supernatural worlds of cranes and sea-gods both as explanations for, and as protection against, the harsher reality of an unkind universe. Equally, and more prominently, other Nolan characters turn to the world of the imagination as expressed in theatrical or cinematic performance to find some understanding of a frequently hostile world such as Bessie in *Dear Kenny* (1988), Janey

Mac in *The Gods are Angry, Miss Kerr* (1985), McKeever in *Moonshine* (1991) and Michael in *Blackwater Angel* (2001).

Nolan's dreamers are all significantly other to members of their immediate community, outsider characters that are part of a group they become progressively isolated from, and viewed as eccentric by, those around them. They seek out a space of existential possibility while engaged with the pursuit of personal freedom and resistance to the pressures of social conformity. For example Stephen Conroy in *Sky Road* (2007), in attempting to cope with the tragic death of a daughter he felt powerless to save, connects with other Nolan characters who also seek out an imaginative space of escape in search of comfort and healing. Thus, Stephen, seeking to make sense of this space through his passion with astronomy, draws on a wide range of astronomical references to communicate his understanding. For example, he uses the analogy of astronaut Mike Collins, who was beyond contact for more than one third of his moon-orbit and 'beyond pity or hope, beyond blame or blessing [...] down to the only questions that really matter, between you and you' (p. 31), as a powerful metaphor to explain his own sacrifice in going to prison to safeguard his father's position, describing it, as in Collins' case, as 'duty [...] in the greater good' (p.31).<sup>18</sup> Stephen's comforting litany of lunar seas—his 'Litania Lunaris' of 'Mare Cognitum, Mare Vaporum, Mare Serenitatis, Mare Nectaris, Mare Tranquilatis' (p. 30) all offer spiritual comfort in the same way as Michael's litany of train stations in *Moonshine* (1991): 'Ardglass, Kilmore, Farrenstown, Ardbeg. All change. Newport, Killowen, Raheen and Lismore' (Nolan, 1991, p. 22). Both texts connect with Brian Friel's *Faith Healer* (1980) as Frank also finds comfort in a recited litany of places: 'Kinlochverbie, Inverbervie, Inverdrue, Invergordon, Badachroo, Kinlochewe' [...] (2001, p.2).

Stephen's implied comparison of Conroy to Galileo as a good man forced to lie, and who discovers blemishes on the supposed perfect face of the moon, works well in offering

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<sup>18</sup> Michael Collins was the third member of the first moon landing by Apollo 11. While Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin landed on the moon, Michael Collins piloted the command spacecraft alone in lunar orbit until Armstrong and Aldrin returned to it just under a day later for the trip back to Earth.

multiple layers of signification in the drama. Similarly, the arrival of Halley's Comet, as a signifier of significant change, underlines Conroy's importance as a leader of reform in Irish politics. On the other hand, *The Irish Times* argues that the astral references become more oblique as the writing struggles to cope with the earth-bound concerns of the Conroy family (Keating, 2001). Keating's concerns add to the argument that Stephen's astronomical references to the Pleiades, Perseus, Auriga, Cassiopeia and Orion, struggle to connect with Conroy's wife and children and confuse, rather than clarify, the issues. Thus, while Stephen's listing of the lunar seas discovered by Galileo (Mare Crisium, Sinus Iridum, Lacus Mortis, Mare Fecundatis etc.) creates comfort in their iteration through the creative act of naming, their metaphoric resonance struggles to achieve signification because of their obscurity.

However Nolan's choice of obvious and accessible Christian names as metaphoric signifiers is far more successful in creating multiple levels of understanding of his characters. The name of Francis connects Nolan's two most powerful reforming political characters—the naïve and politically disconnected Francis Shannon of *The Guernica Hotel* with the more developed and politically connected Francis Conroy of *Sky Road*. Both dramatic texts support the notion that idealistic people are marginalised, promise much but achieve little and are compromised by politics—despite their integrity. In its connection with St. Francis of Assisi, the name invites interpretation of both characters as anti-establishment figures prepared to suffer for their principles, charismatic preachers of the truth and courageous, if marginalised, champions of the poor, with total disdain for monetary gain and personal success. The dramatic text connects Stephen Conroy with St. Stephen—the first Christian martyr, who was stoned to death for his teachings—as the sacrificial martyr-figure who spends several years in prison for, what he believes to be, the common good.

Despite the absence of any mention of God, religious references appear and principal character names are given saintly associations. For example, subtle religious undertones hint towards Conroy's apparent messianic role. His son suffers and sacrifices his freedom

for him while Katherine names his constituents ‘petitioners’ (p.60) who attend ‘clinics’ (p.60) where he is their ‘healer’ (p.60). In continuing religious references, Katherine describes Conroy’s challenge to Taoiseach Emmet Grogan as a ‘Holy War’ (p.61)—which Nolan emphasises through capitalisation. Conroy’s 40-year crusade in pursuit of political justice, which the house-party of Act 2 celebrates, has profound biblical resonance in connecting with the 40 days and nights of penance spent by Jesus in the Judean Desert refusing all of the Devil’s temptations (Luke, 4:27). The term bestows purpose on Conroy’s 40-year political apprenticeship, in attending half-empty parish halls, in connecting with the 40 years of wandering by the Jews in the desert. Known as the ‘*Wilderness Years*’ in the *Book of Numbers*, the fourth book of the Jewish sacred book of the Torah, exile was both harsh and necessary for the Jewish people to become who they would be. The lessons that were absorbed and translated into Jewish individual and public life, that would prove to be of lasting value parallel Conroy’s own years in the political wilderness. Drawing on further biblical references, Katherine declares that ‘the truth was his weapon and his armour’ (p.61), Conroy declares that ‘the truth will heal us’ (p.73) and that ‘I’ve already sacrificed one son’ (p.77). Stephen never expected ‘a St. Christopher medal’ (p.42) for his alleged behaviour on the night of the accident, Tess and Joe discuss the ‘conscience’ (p.55) of the party while Katherine speaks to Stephen of Johnny’s ‘lost [...] innocence’ (p.60).

Despite the absence of direct religious experience, *Sky Road* connects with other Nolan dramas in refusing to give up on the spiritual adding substance to Christopher Murray’s contention that ‘Jim Nolan is usually on the side of the angels in this question’ (Murray, 2002, p.16). Stephen’s star-gazing becomes a substitute for conventional spiritual experience and is representative of a modern-day search for a metaphysical meaning to life. His outer space becomes a space of intervention in the here and now (Merriman, 2011, p.220) and the poetic and lyrical recitation of the list of Lunar seas offers prayer-like comfort and healing in litanies, traditionally associated with a series of short petitions or exhortations, that invite repetition and agreement. Stephen’s astronomical search yields an epiphanic conclusion that connects with *The Guernica Hotel*: the acceptance of flawed

humanity in the self as a bridge to healing and redemption. Stephen communicates this understanding in an analogous comparison to Galileo as Conroy begins to exit:

**Stephen:** Galileo. That fearless truth-searcher, observing the moon for the first time through the recently invented telescope, was pleased to note its surface pock-marked and flawed and not, as was widely held, perfectly smooth. (Pause). What an extraordinarily liberating, discovery that must have been, Da. With what joyous abandon did the great astronomer bestride the cobbled streets of Naples, armed with the knowledge of such magnificent imperfection? (p.78).

Biblical language and terminology such as 'truth, joyous, and bestride' adds substance to his role as psychic mediator of spiritual truth and a human conduit for the possibility for healing and redemption. Stephen's journey expresses Nolan's refusal to give up on the spiritual with some sense of divine order always present. Holding Laura's dying hand at the 'crossing gates' (p.24), Stephen asserts a spiritual belief that she has gone to starlight 'where the good souls go' (p.24). Earlier use of biblical language as in 'my cup runneth over' (p.49) emphasises Nolan's sense of 'sacred function' [...] as 'minister and minstrel entwined' (Nolan, 1998, p.86), adding weight to Stephen's mystic utterance in bringing healing and comfort to the Conroy family. Stephen emphasises the importance of faith in the imagination in a world of crumbling beliefs:

**Stephen:** I miss her [Cassie]. I miss her real bad sometimes. But I know where she is. Just like I know where Laura is. (Pause) I couldn't see the sky when I was inside. [...] I didn't matter. Same as old Halley up there, just because you can't see it doesn't mean it's not there. And when I got out, Cassie was waiting. Just where I thought I'd find her. [...] Albireo. The double star. Big star, bright orange in the northern sky. Baby star, baby blue, nestling in Momma's warm glow (p.79-80).

McKeever's imaginative search in the mysterious forests of enchantment of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in *Moonshine* (1991) is part of Nolan's consistent thematic journey (Coady, 2001, p.4) for insight, meaning and redemption. Stephen Conroy's astrological expedition to the stars in his galactic quest for personal salvation replicates a similar pilgrimage as both wounded artists attempt to heal themselves.

*Sky Road* is the strongest expression yet of Nolan's critique of the Irish body politic and develops naturally from issues raised in *The Guernica Hotel* and the Waterford trilogy. First-hand experience of local corruption and cronyism in his formative years led to a deep desire to reform the body politic and to replace self-serving politicians with idealistically-driven selfless leaders whose ambition was to further the interests of ordinary Irish workers. *The Guernica Hotel* and now *Sky Road* elevate these local issues to national concerns. Thus, short-termism in economic policy and political practises of a self-serving mini-ruling elite are explored by the playwright in a forthright, if somewhat polemic, manner that this thesis argues is quite unique in contemporary Irish drama where national and republican issues usually dominates. Nolan's work continues to add to the understanding of Irish society in exploring the manner in which political governance affects the lives of Irish people during the Celtic Tiger years.

Nevertheless, while political issues dominate *Sky Road*, the strength of the drama lies in the exploration of family relationships and the manner in which they are resolved. In doing so, Nolan reveals himself as a dramatist who is prepared to risk—and sometimes struggle—in presenting central characters such as Frances Shannon (*The Guernica Hotel*), Sylvie Tansey (*The Salvage Shop*), Valentine Greatrakes (*Blackwater Angel*) and Frances Conroy that are flawed, difficult, contradictory and not always likeable and that challenge traditional character types and audience expectations. The struggle of such flawed characters to live up to the image their followers have created for them makes their journey compelling. *Blackwater Angel* marks Nolan's most complete use of metatheatre, begun in *Dear Kenny*, as the play becomes essentially a drama about drama; specifically the power of drama to instruct, heal and comfort. Here Nolan makes his most explicit

statement yet about the connection between theatre and the transformative power of performance in bringing healing and redemption. The journey towards redemption of yet another flawed character in extremis forms the narrative of Nolan's next work: *Brighton*.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### THE ORDINARY EXTRAORDINARY: *Brighton*

This chapter critically analyses *Brighton* and proposes it as Nolan's most complete statement thus far on healing and redemption. The chapter documents the background and production history of the play and presents critical reviews of its performance. The chapter proposes that in his exploration of injured people in crisis, Nolan finds a spiritual pathway towards personal redemption that combines faith with tradition and is based on personal experience. The chapter explores the decline of religious influence in Irish society and its replacement by a humanist philosophy that ironically places spirituality at its core. The study examines various means, such as the referencing of religion, the significance of location, names and aspects of metatheatre in the search for healing for those who live and work in the Sisters of Calvary Nursing Home in Brighton.

*Brighton*, directed by Ben Barnes (who directed Nolan's last four plays), was commissioned by, and produced at, Garter Lane Arts Centre, Waterford on Sat. May 1<sup>st</sup> 2010 while Nolan was Theatre Artist-in-Residence there, marking the author's twenty-fifth anniversary as a playwright. One year later Garter Lane secured Arts Council funding for a ten-venue national tour.<sup>19</sup> Set in present day London, sixty-year-old celebrated actor Jack Dunhill, paralysed from the waist down and confined to a wheelchair as a result of a recent fall from an escalator at Hammersmith Tube Station, arrives at the Sisters of Cavalry Nursing home for rehabilitation, following a spell in Stoke Mandeville Hospital. Care Assistant David Grant, enthusiastic Arsenal supporter and openly gay lover of his less-than-faithful partner Enzo, conducts a tour of the nursing home where he introduces Jack

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<sup>19</sup> The tour began in Waterford on Mon. Sept 12 and continued to locations that included Limerick, Blanchardstown, Navan, Kilkenny, Tralee, Sligo, Castlebar, Thurles, Carlow and Newbridge.

to Fulham supporter Lily, another resident. Fr. Bernard, the actor's chaplain and friend to both Lily and Jack, has asked her to watch over the intensely private actor's wellbeing. Jack's desire for seclusion is subverted by Lily's determination to rehabilitate him with the outside world and to re-establish his relationship with his much-younger partner Alison. Jack confides to the apparently jolly Lily that he has decided on an assisted suicide, with Alison's help, in Switzerland in seven months' time to end his useless existence. His passion for racing, however, forces him to seek the assistance of Lily to place his bets at the local bookies, and draws him into the world of a woman who advises acceptance of the hand fate has dealt. All three form a loving and inspiring friendship.

Circumstances, however, conspire against Jack's withdrawal from the world. Lily's collapse on Brighton Pier leads to Dave's dramatic revelation that Lily has terminal brain cancer. Jack is forced to leave the nursing home to place his bets at the bookies and by his determination to visit Lily in hospital. He now takes on Lily's role as saviour, promoting her Calvary Nursing Home Christmas Choir, despite Fr. Mackey's objections, and encouraging the deteriorating Lily to complete her memoirs. Lily promises to attend rehearsal for the Christmas Choir, in exchange for Jack's agreement to end his intention for an assisted suicide. All three face their limited futures with confidence: Dave will marry Enzo, Jack will perform in *The Cherry Orchard* and Lily will complete her memoirs before she dies. The curtain falls as regrets are cast aside and Jack and Lily, accompanied by Dave, leave for the Christmas Choir rehearsals.

*Brighton* is based on the real-life experience of Waterford born-actor John Rogan who had forged a successful acting career in London. Sadly, Rogan was severely injured in a fall from an escalator in Hammersmith Tube Station in 2005 and spent considerable time in Stoke Mandeville Hospital before transferring to a nursing home to assist in his recovery. Nolan uses these unfortunate circumstances as a starting point for the central character of Jack Dunhill, as he had done previously in other works with characters such as Billy Cass in *The Black Pool* (1993), Frances Shannon in *The Guernica Hotel* (1991) and Valentine

Greatrakes in *Blackwater Angel* (2001), to explore the journey of a tortured soul towards some form of redemption. Merriman proposes that characters are not simply fictions:

People and places in acts of performance are not fictions, pure and simple. They are fictionalized accounts of real people and real places: sites for the poetic articulation and contestation of ideas, conflicts and events from, or with resonance for, the real world settled for by their audiences (2012, p.101).

Similarly, Nolan's characters are not entirely fictitious entities but incorporate aspect of reality. *Brighton* takes us into that gap between reality and fiction that becomes an energised and contested space of conflict where personal futures are debated and where comfort, healing and purpose is explored in the playwright's version of reality. *Brighton's* dramatic text, therefore, arises from fictionalised accounts of issues that are real and crucial to the lives of three members of a nursing home that becomes a site for the exploration of ways in which all three will respond to dramatic changes in their lives.

Critical reviews were largely positive emphasising Garter Lane Chairperson's description of the work in the programme notes as 'this poignant, richly comic and resoundingly affirmative hymn to the human spirit' (Harpur, 2011, p.3). *Irish Theatre Magazine*, described the production as a celebration of 'friendship, hope and the resilience of the human spirit' (Kealy, 2010) while the *Waterford News and Star*, spoke of the work as a celebration of 'the essential goodness in man [and his] shared vision of humanity' (McEvoy, 2011, p. 26). *The Sunday Independent* described the work as 'a charming and uplifting piece delivered with sentiment rather than sentimentality' (O'Kelly, 2010, Theatre). *The Irish Times* was less enthusiastic, however, complaining that the play was 'an unapologetic paean to inspiration and survival' and that 'Brighton urges us to park our cynicism at the door.' Arguing that *Brighton's* characters fail the psychological plausibility test, Crawley summarises the work as 'undemanding stuff' where the audience is 'spoonfed every significance' (Crawley, 2010). *The Munster Express* had no such qualms,

however, declaring that 'it was also a triumph for the transformative power of theatre, the extraordinary process of making the ordinary memorable and possible' (Murphy, 2010).

Structurally, the dramatisation of the characters' inner lives can be regarded as the main feature of *Brighton*. Each scene advances the remarkably simple and linear plot line with climax resulting in epiphanic moments that alter the perspective of the three characters, leading to significant difference in the way they decide to order what remains of their lives and circumstances. By placing significantly crucial actions off-stage, such as Jack's accident in Holborn Tube Station, Lily's collapse on Brighton Pier during the nursing home's annual outing to Brighton or Dave's break-up with his lover, *Brighton* becomes arguably Nolan's most concentrated narrative. These events become mere incidents in the narrative and should not be confused with plot. *Brighton's* drama resides in the reaction of, and manner in which, the protagonists deal with these incidents.

Another interesting aspect of the structure of the play is one which allows concentration of subject-matter to be strengthened by description, and reference only, to a host of other characters whom we never meet but whose purpose is crucial to the action: the domineering Fr. Mackey, Dave's gay lover Enzo, the 'brandy-fuelled' (p.6) actor's chaplain Fr. Bernard, Jack's beautiful partner Alison, the flirtatious octogenarian Mr. Robinson, the incurably romantic Freddie who becomes Lily's friend at Ladbroke's High Street bookmakers and Dave's loving father who struggles to come to terms with his son's homosexuality. In conferring such characters with a strong sense of the eccentric, the absurd or the downright comic, *Brighton's* off-stage characters become significant and create a sense of context with the world outside the nursing home. Yet again, the deliberate placing of such events and characters off-stage enables the drama to focus on the hard issue of healing and survival in a nursing-home space that is a retreat from a hostile world, enabling Lily as storyteller to provide the only access to, and understanding of, life as now experienced by both herself and Jack Dunhill.

Thus, significant life-changing events are frequently located off-stage in Nolan's work so that the focus is centred, not on the central characters' experiences of life, but on the manner in which they respond to the challenges they bring. The real drama in *Brighton* lies in the process of transformation that allows Jack cope with the physical and psychological damage of his traumatic accident, in the discovery of courage that allows a dying woman face up to her inevitable and immediate end and in the empowerment of a young man in confronting an uncertain future. However major plot-propelling incidents—such as Jack's accident or Lily's tumour—always seem to be somewhere else. In *Brighton*, therefore, life-changing events occur in another space that are almost incidental to the energies of the main characters, which are given over to apparently trivial physical and spiritual issues such as organising the Cavalry House Christmas Choir, placing bets in William Hills or attending to one's toilet needs. Nolan chooses to dramatise seemingly inconsequential events onstage in order to focus on the exploration of human relationships, in crucial epiphanic moments of self-knowledge, in a post-dramatic setting. Characters, therefore, are given space to explore their own stories thus focussing on crucial psychological conditions as they face up to respective futures of sexual isolation, physical handicap and—in Lily's case—death. Lily's rhetorical question to Jack that 'the journey is everything, isn't it?' (p.23), affirms the decision to leave the comfort of stasis, from refuge in a sentimentalised past, for a journey of transformation that will empower all three to face up to their uncertain futures. *Brighton's* concern, therefore, is the process of that transformation.

Location in *Brighton* is crucial to the unfolding of events. Anthony Roche explains one aspect of the use of location in modern Irish drama:

Contemporary Irish drama does not so much rely on a plot as a central location, whose implications are explored and unfolded in a process which is likelier to be circular and repetitious than straight-forward (1994, p.6).

Thus conversation and debate around Jack's redemption, Lily's salvation and Dave's relationship issues occur in a Catholic nursing home that offers healing, consolation and reflection as a mission statement and a place of refuge and retreat that becomes a testing-ground for character and resolve for three marginalised people—the physically disabled, the aged and, to a lesser extent, Dave as a homosexual. A drama of emotional and psychological change rather than actions, *Brighton* presents us with an issue that is common to contemporary Irish drama: three people on the edge, exploring the lack of wholeness in their own lives—and in each other's—suffering the dismantling of all the certainties of their existences. Their self-analysis leads to a significant re-shaping of their lives. Nolan uses the tension between humorous celebration of the chaos of life and the dreadful solemnity of death, injury or rejection, to explore the human spirit as it faces up to its uncertain place in a changing world. Locating the drama in a Hammersmith nursing home and Brighton General Hospital replaces certainty with uncertainty, decision with indecision, answers with questions and provides an intermediate space to debate and act out the fundamental issue of the purpose of life in the medial space between life and death. Neither Jack nor Lily knows quite what to do in locations that offer temporary shelter from long-term problems that can only be addressed by change—but change to what? Jack continuously emphasises the uncertainty of his life: 'my options are limited' (p. 12)...'this is just temporary'...I can live with it for now'...these days I believe in nothing except the last race and even that only to pass the time' (p.34-35), 'if there's a light shining somewhere, I haven't seen it yet' and 'I don't know how to live like this' (p.40). Denied the comfort of stasis and a return to the past, debate centres on the imperative of change:

**Lily:** ...So what are you going to do? Wait for a remake of *Ironside*?  
Or the musical version of *Dr. Stangelove*? (p.60).

In referencing two wheelchair-bound acting roles that will never return, Lily posits the central theme of the play: Jack's need to embrace change in order to survive in a hostile world. Thus, *Brighton* differs significantly from Christopher Roche's argument that 'the best contemporary Irish playwrights are engaged in a search for dramatic means to re-

interpret by re-imagining the past' (1994, p.22). *Brighton's* characters search for dramatic means to re-interpret by re-imagining their futures—and not their pasts—as they search for alternative narratives whose purpose, in this instance, is personal liberation from the past (Roche, 1994, p.12).

Significantly Nolan locates his work, for the first time, outside the regional and the national. Nolan locates his early work in his home city of Waterford before moving to a remote coastal space that is almost a world within a world, midway between rural and urban, old-fashioned and modern, isolated and connected with only passing references to a greater world beyond the one described. While the Sisters of Calvary nursing home, in its disconnectedness with its immediate surrounding world connects with Nolan's other dramatic spaces, *Brighton*, nevertheless, marks a new departure in Nolan's writing. The first act of the drama is located in London with frequent references to greater London and beyond such as Islington (p. 13), the West End and Stoke (p. 15), Craven Cottage and Highbury (p.16), Battersea (p. 20), Clapham (p.20), Chelsea, Westminster and the Fulham Road (p. 30), Holburn Station (p.35) amongst others while the second act is located in Brighton General Hospital. The cumulative dramatic effect of the references to these locations outside the main settings of the nursing home and the hospital is to create an awareness of the impossibility of answering Jack's wish to shut out the outside world, thus freeing the dramatic text from issues that could be considered as primarily local into exploration of issues that are common to all such as imminent death, fear of change and the relevance of faith in a world hostile to man.

As in previous work by Nolan, *The Black Pool* (1983), *The Boathouse* (1986), *The Guernica Hotel* (1993), *The Salvage Shop* (1998), *Blackwater Angel* (2001), *Sky Road* (2007), the names of locations in the dramas are important signifiers. For example, the title *Brighton* evokes an end-of-pier world where manufactured and short-term joy faces the reality of a road that can no longer be travelled. The timing of the play, which begins 'in late autumn' (p.11) and concludes 'in mid-winter' (p.62), care assistant Dave connects *Brighton* thematically with Stephen Conroy's quasi-religious litany of comfort, offered in Nolan's

previous political work *Sky Road* (2007), in describing the garden of the nursing home as ‘a sea of tranquillity in an ocean of storms’ (p.11) while conducting an introductory tour of the nursing home. Similarly, the garden’s dedication to Mother St. Benedict (foundress of the Sisters of Calvary order) can be seen as a major signifier in the work by evoking the rule of St. Benedict, generally regarded as the patriarch of Western monasticism, which extols the value of the shared asceticism of common life in the salvation of those who practise the code. Benedict’s rule sees the Divine Presence everywhere and in everything. Concerns are centered on the needs of others and much attention is paid to interpersonal relations in a shared experience of life in order to transform those in search of salvation—all issues that are central to Jack and Lily’s journey of transformation in their search for healing and redemption in *Brighton*. In this way, Lily subtly extols the value of the unspoken Benedictine rule to Jack by seeking to integrate him into the shared life of the nursing home: bingo in the common room (p.5), communal lunch (p.31), participation in the Calvary House Christmas choir (p.33) and the annual nursing home excursion to Brighton which Lily describes as her ‘journey of reclamation’ (p.41). Lily’s determination to reintegrate Jack into society arises from her spiritual philosophy of helping others and from her role as a human—if not quite religious—conduit for the possibility of transformation. Her invitation to Jack to a London Festival Hall concert is couched in religious terminology: the orchestra will play Dvorak’s ‘Requiem’, it is a ‘need’ that brings ‘consolation’ and the journey is like my ‘pilgrimage’ (p.31). Dave identifies Lily’s role immediately through her moniker: ‘Lily the Pink’ (p.12), the eponymous heroine of the famous Scaffold pop song of the same name who is described in the song’s third line as ‘the saviour of the human race’.<sup>20</sup>

While the line remains unspoken throughout the drama, Brighton clearly identifies Lily in religious terms. Thus, Lily’s use of religious expressions suggests traditional Catholicism,

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<sup>20</sup> We’ll drink a drink a drink/ To Lily the Pink the Pink the Pink/ The saviour of the human race. ‘Lily the Pink’ is a modernisation of an older folk song titled “The Ballad of Lydia Pinkham”. The lyrics celebrate the “medicinal compound” invented by Lily the Pink, and, in each verse, chronicle some extraordinary cure which it has affected.

referring to 'novenas for desperate cases' (p.12), 'First Mass at Holy Cross' (p.13), organiser of the 'Cavalry House Christmas Choir' (p.33) and speaking with deference of Fr. Mackey, Fr. Bernard and Fr. Ferando. Similarly, religious connections with horses' names such as 'the Bishop's Baby' (p.29) and 'Pilgrim's Progress' (p.48) prompt her choice of racing wagers. Lily's use of language is markedly religious and quite philosophical; bestowing a missionary role on the dying woman who advises Jack that he still has 'more than enough time for an epiphany' (p.40). She has been 'nourished by music' that bestows 'consolations'(p.31). Her trips to the shopping mall is a 'daily pilgrimage' that brings 'affirmation' (p.31) while she frequently visits the 'healing garden' (p.34) and enjoys Faure's 'Agnus Dei' (p.37). Lily's writing is an 'exorcism' (p.37), the annual Calvary Nursing home outing to Brighton is 'our journey of reclamation' (p.41) and the transformation in Jack and herself is her 'Miracle of Brighton' (p.61) while her impending death is the catalyst for Jack Dunhill's redemption.

*Brighton* expresses Nolan's most profound, complete and complex expression of spiritual transformation and redemption thus far. The random nature of Jack Dunhill's injuries creates a sense that life is illogical and arbitrary and that man has been abandoned to his own devices. His apparent determination for an assisted suicide in Switzerland in seven months' time adds a sense of dramatic urgency and tension to the search for healing. Significantly Mother St. Benedict's 'thirty years in a mud hut on the banks of the Yangtze River' (p.11) is referenced by Dave when explaining her closet Zen Buddhism—a philosophy that advocates inner search for enlightenment that finds dramatic expression in *Brighton*. These practices of communal living, interpersonal relations and inner reflection leading to personal enlightenment through a Zen discipline which, when practised properly, results in total spontaneity and ultimate freedom also expresses Lily's thinking. Perry Schmidt-Leukel, referencing Wilfrid Cantwell Smith, identifies the two crucial elements of religion as (i) the cumulative tradition of that belief and (ii) the personal faith of those who live within that particular tradition. He argues that faith is what life means in the light of a given religious tradition that is constantly evolving and

that through personal, existential faith, people relate to what they perceive as reality and to what they then accept as ultimate, transcendent reality (2006, p. ix).

Lily's expression of her own religious and spiritual philosophy, through her own personal existential experience, is both complex and practical and is subtly understated, although in keeping with Schmidt-Leukel's explanation of a continuously evolving faith. Therefore her religious philosophy is a very modern expression of the impact of tradition and changing circumstances on her faith. While practicing Catholicism, her existential experiences and her constant inner-reflections have brought her to an essentially humanist stance that identifies good in all human beings. Interestingly, she does not attribute her successful thirty-six year marriage to Albert to church teaching but simply to 'muddling through' (p.20)—a philosophy that acknowledges Schmidt-Leukel's position that changing circumstances alters religious belief. She expresses her purpose in life in humanist, and not Catholic, terms: to maintain a signal that she 'hasn't quite gone away' (p.17). Her confidence in the future is based on her faith in humanity's ability to adapt to any situation and survive. She advocates acceptance of current circumstances as necessary before change can be affected in order to embrace a different and uncertain future. Acceptance of death does not come from religious belief but from the satisfaction of a life well-lived. Lily is arguably Nolan's best-written female character in that she is intellectually and emotionally complex in her behaviour, motivations and conversations in ways that are significantly different to Ruth in *Blackwater Angel* or Katie and Rita in *The Salvage Shop* for example.

Despite Lily's apparent pose as a traditional Catholic, Nolan recognises that significant differences between traditional Catholicism and individual spiritualism emerge in a manner that connects with other practitioners. Merriman, for example, identifies 'both a struggle between ways of seeing, and a struggle for the right to perceive the world in ways other than those offered by alliance of the priest and the mass of the people' (2012, p.95) in relation to Synge. However, this comment is equally attributable to the presentation of religion in *Brighton*. Despite Lily's daily attendance at mass, her wedding has taken place

at 'Battersea Registry Office [on] April Fool's Day, 1962' (p.20) and she failed to return home for her mother's funeral in 1954 leading to a Catholic's guilt of 'a lifetime of regret' (p.37). She welcomes death but not in Christian terms and never refers to supernatural life. Traditional deference to clerics is noticeably absent from her life. Lily describes the nursing home church as 'Fr. Mackey's chapel' (p.59) and is 'delighted to report that Fr. Mackey's sinuses show no improvement whatsoever' (p.27). She laughingly admits to 'entertaining impure thoughts between the First and Second Readings at the impossibly handsome Brazilian boy—Fr. Fernando' (p.18) and places greater value on the flawed humanity of the brandy-fuelled actor's chaplain Fr. Bernard whose attendance at first mass on Sunday was problematic (p. 15). While personal clerical failings never seem to trouble her own personal faith, her Catholic references are largely figures of speech. She is ambiguous on belief in biblical miracles such as the wedding feast at Cana which she describes enigmatically as acts of faith to be accepted: 'believe it, or believe it not [...] but of the smaller kind' (p.60).

The marginal impact of clerical representatives on the lives of the characters of *Brighton* indicates a significant shift from the priest-dominated theocratic society as represented by Nolan's Waterford trilogy of the early eighties to a twenty-first century country. Clerics are now seen to be marginal to the lives of a modern, largely secular world that simply treats them with indifference. *Brighton* is significant because of the picture and interpretation it presents of religion in Irish society—as represented by Irish people in Britain—at a particularly interesting stage in its development. Nolan's writing is different to other playwrights because the span of his work covers that critical period in Irish social evolution when religion wanes and moral secularism comes to the fore. Throughout the dramatic text, for example, there is a tacit acceptance of the growing marginalisation of religion in people's lives, where Catholicism no longer seems as relevant. Simply put, priests have little relevance to the lives of the characters of *Brighton*, and offer little more than mild amusement to audiences through their idiosyncrasies. A Fr. Mackey 'special' is a noticeably boring mass, for example, while he is dismissed by Jack as 'an insufferable idiot' (p.56). Similarly, alcoholic Fr. Bernard can no longer be trusted with a parish and has been

sidelined to the role of actor's chaplain, where he will achieve little while Fr. Fernando's appeal lies in his sexual attraction. Significantly second generation Irish Catholic Care assistant Dave expresses no religious belief, whatsoever.

*Brighton* expresses the strongest statement of Nolan's therapeutic role of artistic performance, either as performer or audience, in achieving healing and redemption. Lily's attendance at the London Philharmonic's performance at the Royal Festival Hall, for example, brings spiritual nourishment and consolation (p.31). Significantly, both Jack and Lily recognise the importance of the communal performance of singing (and not praying) in the Christmas choir in bringing healing and comfort to the residents of the nursing home, an act that connects with Nolan's philosophy of redemption through artistic performance in his other works. Conversely, Fr. Mackey's failure to recognise this indicates the failure of organised religion to make a meaningful contribution to the lives of the nursing home's 'bunch of old fossils for whom this choir might just be enough reason to get up in the morning' (p.58). Fr. Mackey offers neither consolation nor reason, but draws on liturgical inflexibility to enforce a religion devoid of spirituality that drives its followers in search of spiritual comfort elsewhere. Thus, the performance sports of football and racing bring purpose and meaning to Dave and Jack respectively, turning to them—and not religion—in times of crisis when as Dave explains 'it's the taking part that counts' (p. 62). The communal performance of singing in the church choir offers spiritual comfort while Lily's act of writing is a form of 'exorcism' (p. 37), where the creative act initiates a healing process, expressed in lyrical and poetic terms, that is based on Lily's existential experience of life:

**Lily:** Do I believe in miracles? Why yes, of course, and have done all my life. The great ones you can take on trust or don't. The water into wine, the loaves and the fishes, the blind being made to see. Did they really happen? Well that's an act of faith, isn't it—believe it, or believe it not.'

But of the smaller kind—the ordinary extraordinary—I have the evidence of my eyes. And the day that Jack Dunhill wheeled his chair into the streets of London and finally, came to see me I

choose to remember as the Miracle of Brighton. And that miracle resides not just in Jack's journey but in mine. For by the time he had left that evening I had remembered what it is to love and be loved and realised that if accident or fate had brought me to Brighton to save Jack, Jack had also come here to try and save me (p. 61).

Nolan's concept of redemption through art, therefore, finds more subtle expression in *Brighton* than in previous works. While Jack's acceptance of the part of Firs in *The Cherry Orchard* (Chekhov, 1904) indicates his redemption through his acceptance of change, there is no dramatic representation of the event. Here real and fictional worlds merge as both dramatic texts emphasise the need for change in order to survive. Ironically, Nolan again uses an element of metatheatricality by choosing the figure of the artist of a play-within-a-play to emphasise this dramatic point: Jack, in accepting the part of Firs (a character who refuses to change and clings to the past), actually embraces a significant change in his own life that leads inevitably on to a form of redemption based on the creative act. Jack will find a better future 'in a cherry orchard [that] is also used by Chekhov as a poetic symbol of a better life ahead' (Pitcher, 1973, p.162). Fr. Mackey's refusal to embrace change, and Jack's initial stasis, are seen as denials of redemption whereas Jack's later decision to conquer fear and embrace change through theatrical performance is seen as life-affirming and healing. Lily's song of *Que Sera Sera*, embracing 'whatever will be will be' does not affirm stasis but a willingness to change and accept 'a future that's not ours to see' (Evans and Livingstone, 1956), adapt to it, and survive.<sup>21</sup> In the final moment of the play, the clear apprehension that what is now before all three characters is a finite range of future possibilities, suggesting that Lily's explanation of subjectivity as 'muddling through' (p.20) is a more enabling analytical tool in the struggle for healing and redemption than traditional religious guidance.

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<sup>21</sup> Sung by Doris Day and written by Ray Evans and Jay Livingston for Alfred Hitchcock's 1956 film *The Man Who Knew Too Much*. This song won the 1956 Oscar for Best Song.

*Brighton's* simple story about a handful of people is universal because the emotions portrayed can be widely recognized and appreciated. The drama's network of emotion involves Jack, Lily and Dave in their search for meaning and healing. Lily evolves her philosophy of life, best described as a coming to terms emotionally with the events of her life, as a result of the situations in which she finds herself. Jack comes to a similar philosophy, due to her determined mentoring. Dave expresses a determination to forge a meaningful future based on their advice. Brighton's characters express what they feel about life when they philosophise, comparing notes together to find a common path towards some form of redemption. Philosophising involves the characters looking beyond individual circumstances and speculating on the significance of their lives within the scheme of human life as a whole. These philosophies do not stand outside the emotional network of the play but form a shared emotional response, creating an unusual degree of harmony. The undramatic nature of the final scene with its anti-climactic ending suggests that life goes on and has only been interrupted by the brief life of the play. Jack and Lily's departure not only compliment the play's opening, but conveys an overall shape and symmetry and a pattern to the story that has just been created. In the opening scene, care-assistant Dave leads a broken, despairing Jack into the Sisters of Calvary Nursing Home in search of sanctuary and seclusion from a hostile world and the play concludes with a determined and renewed Jack Dunhill leading Lily out to sing in the Calvary Nursing Home Christmas Choir, having found redemption in the ordinary extraordinary.

This chapter has explored Nolan's most recent work *Brighton* and found it to be his most complete statement thus far on healing and redemption. It finds that, while the spiritual is never far from his writing, Nolan's faith is one that is largely humanist and based on the self's personal experiences and reflects a significant social change in Irish society. *Brighton* dismisses the role of organised religion as irrelevant and chooses instead a humanist creed that is a mixture of faith and tradition, and informed by personal experience. These experiences are heightened when in crisis and the combination of a dying woman and a traumatised and paralysed actor addressing a purposeless future (if any), makes the journey towards redemption all the more urgent. The study has found that Nolan's

referencing of names, locations, religious terminology and metatheatre are all useful tools in his search for a way forward for *Brighton's* wounded.

## CONCLUSION

This thesis has examined the contribution that Jim Nolan has made to contemporary Irish drama by providing a critical analysis of both his published and unpublished work—and has explored his development as a playwright from 1979 to the present day. The objectives of the study were to establish themes that were common within the dramatic texts, explore their connectivity and, provide an in-depth and comprehensive analysis of Nolan's work to date. The dissertation has considered how social and economic conditions are expressed and explored in his plays and argues that they provide a unique perspective on the development of Irish life and culture during this period. In particular the work considered Nolan as a political writer and his exploration of the theme of redemption through a creative act.

The different concerns in the early plays include the exploration of poverty, unemployment and lack of opportunity, concerns to which Nolan returns in the political arguments of the later plays. These early plays address matters particularly relevant to marginalised and disempowered working-class characters who struggle to find fulfilment in an anti-meritocratic world that is portrayed as rooted in nepotism and self-interest. Here Nolan connects with other twentieth-century Irish playwrights in seeking to give a voice to the voiceless in lies that would otherwise remain unrecorded (Greene, 2000, p. 219). *The Guernica Hotel* and *Sky Road* develop these arguments and identify the social damage caused by elected representatives, in pursuit of personal gain. Such political plays are quite unique in Irish theatre in portraying corruption, greed and cronyism as routinely at the heart of the body politic during the Celtic Tiger era. Furthermore these plays suggest that characters that have varying degrees of political integrity achieve little, that idealists make ineffectual politicians and that honest people, who become involved with politics, are ultimately corrupted by it. The dissertation, in critiquing Nolan's political dramas, analyses both how the plays present and critique the ways in which local political order can be manipulated for personal gain and the resulting corruption of the national body

politic. Nolan renders these issues as complex and intricate, however, by interweaving fraught and fragile family relationships with the greater political conflict, adding a powerful, personal and compelling dimension to the dramas.

Nolan offers a unique presentation of family life in Ireland in the post 1937 Irish Constitution setting. He attempts to show how marriages function in all their complexity with varying degrees of success and ambiguity. Marriages are frequently portrayed as silent or loveless relationships, where intimacy is dulled by the familiarity of an ageing marriage, as depicted in *Moonshine* or *The Salvage Shop*. Quite often he reflects on the breakdown in communication between father and child or husband and wife—even when love is present. The mother-child relationship, however, rarely features in the work. Unlike Friel, however, who deals with the process of non-communication, Nolan deals with the outcomes of such relationships where silence frequently leads to division and mistrust, suggesting that the accepted traditional family unit is no longer the only social paradigm for society. In its place, hotel or hospital or workplace ‘families’, where members are not biologically related, emerge as alternative social units.

The underlying philosophy of the texts is one of secular humanism which questions the values and beliefs of Christianity while paradoxically acknowledging the role that the spiritual plays in the life of his characters. Nolan’s characters express a post-Christian view of the world where redemption lies in accepting despair as a necessary part of the human condition. Nevertheless, a certain kind of spirituality remains influential on characters, however, as emphasised by the choice of biblical language used by those dreamer-characters that connect with a higher truth. These characters are deeply critical of representatives of the Catholic clergy, describing them as controlling, authoritative and inflexible. Though there are many references to priests and nuns in Nolan’s plays, they remain off-stage. The exception to this is the Church of Ireland rector Reverend Langton in *Moonshine* who has actually begun to doubt his own faith. However, the portrait of an autocratic church gradually fades, over the course of Nolan’s writing to date, to reveal one

that is largely irrelevant to the lives of his characters. While his characters remain convinced of the need for a spiritual experience, they seek it elsewhere.

The themes of healing and redemption are manifest from the outset in Nolan's drama as characters search for purpose or fulfilment in a hostile world, frequently mediated by persons that could be described as 'other' or 'different' from their peers. These priest-like characters offer spiritual connections to a higher truth that enable them to interpret the chaos and absurdity of their own lives and the lives of those surrounding them. Art and theatre in particular, facilitates these characters in their search for healing and comfort. The experience of art either through music, puppetry, cinema or writing throughout the plays is positively transformative, an aspect of Nolan's work that makes him unique amongst his peers. Interestingly, while characters argue the need for redemption in the early work, no specific access to healing is posited. As the writing develops, however, characters find the ability to access healing and redemption through some form of artistic performance. Redemption, however, does not depend on the artistic merit of the resulting artwork but through participation in the creative act which is frequently associated with theatre and live performance. In doing so, Nolan is seen as a playwright that is prepared to make an explicit comment on the important role that theatre plays in both the development of the individual and society. Thus, the early plays (1979-86) feature characters that are aware of redemption but have no direct means of achieving it. The plays ranging between 1988 and 1993 provide this means through participation in artistic performance while the later work, dating between 1998 and 2014, suggest that an acceptance of the imperfect self is a necessary condition for healing and self-forgiveness.

While the theme of redemption connects Murphy and Nolan's work the poetic lyricism and metaphorical language that accompanies these moments of redemption confer upon Nolan's drama a uniqueness of voice and sensibility. But language, though it becomes lyrical is ultimately insufficient in providing a route into revelation. Creative acts such as music, puppetry, writing or theatre facilitate epiphanic moments where language is seen to be inadequate in mystical moments of understanding. The dramas reveal, through

metatheatrical devices, the process that leads to the dramatisation of and active participation by, the characters in the epiphanic act. At such times the narrative moves towards a daring moment in which the impossible becomes possible, not as an idea, but as an action on stage. The plays demonstrate that it is possible to recall or recreate this moment of epiphany onstage and the narratives reveal what leads to, and happens during, this journey. Such journeys lead Nolan's characters to understanding and redemption in quasi-religious experiences that are located in spaces other than a church. The process, through metatheatrical devices, that leads to engagement with the epiphanic act is what separates Nolan from other contemporary Irish dramatists. His plays frequently close in a mood of optimism with a picture of a community that has transcended suffering and become aware that redemption is possible. As previously referenced within this thesis critics Rushe, O'Kelly and Crawley argue that Nolan's characters find redemption too easily and the dramas are weakened because of this. However, this point is valid if logic is determined only by cause and effect, and the theatrical logic of such epiphanic moments that are shared by both audience and actor is discounted. Arguably, the intellectual journey that leads to transformation within these characters comes only after a difficult and painful journey that involves much suffering and loss. Nicholas Grene acknowledges similar 'risks of sentimentality in the ritual of healing and regeneration which the ending offers' in *Riders To the Sea*. (Synge, 1904). Nevertheless, Grene concludes that 'in performance one can only feel that the conclusion, with whatever it offers of reconciliation and renewal, has been theatrically earned' (2000, p.235).

While Nolan works within a broadly conventional plot structure, written in a realistic style with story-telling as central to the work, the inclusion of such metatheatrical devices and epiphanic moments challenges any description of Nolan's theatre as mere traditional storytelling where narrative is seen as the sole means of accessing understanding. His work, over such a crucial period of social change in recent Irish history, offers interesting observations about the origins and nature of change in areas such as family life, religion and politics. The dramas explore changes such as the emergence of secular humanism as a philosophy to challenge traditional Catholicism, and argue that the corruption of local

politics leads to similar corruption in the national body politic. His early plays give a voice to those who had none: casual dockers such as Billy Cass in *The Black Pool*, low-paid workers such as Janey Mac in *The Gods are Angry*, *Miss Kerr* or repressed homosexuals such as Griffin in *Moonshine*. Nolan's characters are sometimes presented in extremis such as the dying Sylvie Tansey in *The Salvage Shop* and Lily Thompson or the catastrophically injured Jack Dunhill in *Brighton*. However, the telling of their stories, and the public confessions of private sins, brings healing and comfort and a path to redemption is found when each, in turn, engages with some act of performance. Jim Nolan's work explores the role of the artist and connects it with personal spirituality, healing and social activism. Sylvie Tansey explains his role as an artist as one that combines the roles of minister and minstrel. Through the minstrel's songs of his characters that speak the narrative of those whose experience of the world has been one of pain and suffering, epiphanic moments in these plays minister healing and redemption to those who seek access to it through artistic performance. In doing so, mundane lives are transformed and the ordinary becomes extraordinary.

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