3 | Marie Jones and Charabanc: Popular Theatre in / for Northern Ireland

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Introduction

At the end of *Stones In His Pockets* one of the central characters, Jake, asks: 'Why couldn't it be done, don't we have the right to tell our own story, the way we want it?' (54). In the context of the play, the question marks a moment of meta-theatrical signification: indexing the possibility of a counter-story, an alternative view of things. But there's something more than this at work in the ripples that Jake's question provokes: that desire – 'to tell our own story, the way we want it' – is at the centre of Marie Jones's career as a playwright. Jones's life in the theatre (as a writer, actress, and director) has been dominated by the drive to tell stories from the ground up, drawing on materials (language, events) found in the communities that she knows so intimately. In that regard, her work is closely aligned with John McGrath's sense of a 'mode of theatre … which speaks the language of working-class entertainment and tries to develop that language to make critical, progressive theatre primarily for popular audiences' (100). McGrath's sense of a newly relevant theatre resonates strongly with Jones's engagement with the popular and with community-based theatre praxis. His sense too that 'the theatre is by its nature a political forum, or a politicizing medium, rather than a place to experience a rarefied artistic sensibility in an aesthetic void' (83), speaks quite directly to Jones's self-image as a writer:

> The people I write for are the people who are in my plays. They are really just ordinary people who really are powerless; who really don't have a voice. I've always felt that I have this huge

> responsibility, because the background I grew up in, nobody had any power, nobody had any voice. We were shafted, walked over everywhere. But now I have this arena, this power, this space to say: 'This is still me; this is the people I care about; these are the things that matter' (qtd. in Clancy).

Jones's nuanced understanding of the type of theatre she strives to create, and the kind of audiences she wishes to cultivate, is important when locating her work within a critical context. Theatre criticism is often predicated on firmly ingrained binaries of high versus low culture, and this is certainly evident in some of the critical attention that Jones's work has garnered: 'Jones writes the kinds of plays that make theatre critics sneer and ordinary audiences cheer' (*The Guardian*, 11 August 2004). Tellingly, she is only too aware of the ideological subtexts of such critical gradations:

> My plays get accused of being low art all the time … Even by the arts establishment in my own city. But what's wrong with being popular? I sometimes feel that people want to keep the theatre as some kind of special preserve for people like them, educated, cultured people; they don't like it when a play packs out the theatre with ordinary people having a good time (*The Guardian*, 11 August 2004).

John McGrath's equally unequivocal resistance to such critical boundaries is important as a further reminder to theatre practitioners and critics alike: 'there *are* indeed different kinds of audience, with different theatrical values and expectations, and … we have to be very careful before consigning one audience and its values to the critical dustbin' (3). Approaching this issue from a slightly different angle, Marie Jones has made the case that: 'It sometimes feels as though people think that if you're funny, you can't possibly be a serious playwright' (*The Guardian*, 11 August 2004). This essay explores Jones's particular brand of popular theatre, with its mix of the comic and the serious, as it was first developed in her work with Charabanc Theatre Company (McGrath's idea of popular theatre is also explored in Shonagh Hill's essay in this volume). It also seeks to establish the contextual terrain for the critical engagement to be found in this collection's subsequent essays. Its starting premise, in this regard, is that it is impossible to fully understand Jones's development as a playwright without first returning to the founding and subsequent success of Charabanc (1983 -1995).

The early 1980s were undoubtedly challenging times for theatre in Northern Ireland. But while the business of theatre may have been problematic, this is not to suggest an absence of the performative.

Indeed, the business of 'everyday life' during the Troubles was deeply imbued with elements of the performative. Negotiating communal, confessional, and political boundaries all necessitated nuanced role playing as everyone in a sense became a 'social actor', displaying certain aspects of identity while masking others. As John P. Harrington & Elizabeth J. Mitchell so succinctly parse it:

> Northern Ireland's charged atmosphere of sectarian division encourages a considerable amount of dramatic political performance within, and about, its borders. Social and dramatic actors, in and out of the theatre, give performances scripted to alter or confirm their particular definition of political reality (1).

In terms of Marie Jones's work, Harrington and Mitchell's sense of the North's complex matrix of identity-performance is aptly suggestive. It points us to the ways in which the North's intricate psycho-geography, social auto-surveillance, and politicized language code-play result in a lived reality wherein identity is not simply performative – it is also, at times, meta-performative. It is in the spaces between – between the real and the imagined, between the truth and the official story, between inner belief and outer mask, between quotidian experience and institutional political discourse – that Jones has usually found the space in which to explore lived reality and its possible alternatives.

The Charabanc project was a key component of Northern Ireland's theatre renaissance at the start of the 1980s. Claudia Harris describes this as 'a golden decade for Northern Irish drama', which had the effect of making 'the North, and Belfast in particular, a centre for dramatic arts similar to early twentieth-century Dublin' (Harris, Introduction *Four Plays* ix). The comparison is telling, suggesting a link between performative energy and moments of political uncertainty. Those connected with Charabanc, confronted by what was now an entrenched conflict, were not alone in their belief that the cultural realm had to respond more forcefully not just to the conditions in the North but to the underlying causes shaping those conditions. While the need was clear for a recalibration in the relationship between cultural production and social engagement, there was less consensus about just what shape such a rearticulation should take. What emerged during this period were two distinct models for a theatre practice that sought relevance and persuasive reach beyond the auditorium. Charabanc embodies one model, a model predicated upon grass-roots activism and communal narrative-making. A second model that emerged during this period was the Field Day Theatre Company, which was established in Derry in

1980 by Brian Friel and Stephen Rea and supported by a Board of Directors of cultural heavyweights such as Seamus Heaney, Tom Paulin and Seamus Deane (see Richtarik, *Lines* 20). These figures, along with the sense that Friel's future plays would get their first outing through the company, provided Field Day with the kind of prominence and momentum that is a rarity to say the least for new theatre companies. Charabanc couldn't have been more different – as Maria R. DiCenzo puts it: 'Charabanc could boast no notable members; instead, it was founded by a group of unknown, unemployed actresses with trade unionists for board members' (176).

It has become routine critical practice to set up Charabanc and Field Day as mutual foils in Northern Irish theatre history; and these were undoubtedly two very different companies – in outlook, resources, methodology and ambition. But alongside these differences there is value in noting just how fully the two shared a very particular moment in the North's cultural and political history. Helen Lojek unpacks these connections usefully:

> Both Field Day and Charabanc ... made clear assumptions about the power of drama and its connection with contemporary reality; both sought audiences beyond the urban middle class; and both offered food for thought to observers interested in the relationship between drama and culture in Ireland (Playing Politics 83-84).

Each in their different way was interested in the spaces not usually sounded out by the theatre of the day, and, in turn, in occupying those spaces in a manner that revealed their multivalent potentials. While Field Day may have been concerned with a grand narrative of Ireland's 'fifth province', and Charabanc with methodologies attuned to discovering and telling the untold stories of Northern Ireland's everyday life, there is a sense in which these were different modes of engagement (using quite different methodological angles of attack) with a common problematic: empowering cultural representation in a place consumed by competing narratives resistant to the very idea of shared representational spaces.

The history of Charabanc, in this regard, begins with a sense of frustration, a response to the occlusion and lack of proper opportunity in Northern Ireland's conservative institutional theatre-world. Beyond the auditorium's walls, moreover, these were frustrations bound up with the problems of over-determined gender roles and restrictive class boundaries in a profoundly unequal society. As Marie Jones remembers:

> There were about five of us, who were all Belfast actresses, working in the theatre, not doing very challenging work, because there weren't many challenging roles for women … I mean even if there were only small parts in the Lyric or whatever, they'd bring over English actresses. And we'd start to think, in that colonial way you found here: 'We're not even good enough to go on the stage' (qtd. in Clancy).

The idea that the Lyric Theatre would pay for English actresses to travel 'across the water' to Belfast was particularly galling for those watching on from the occluded side-lines. While this was attributable at least in part to stringent policing of Equity's closed-shop approach to employment for actors, it was also regarded by many as an example of an inferiorist attitude to the local in deference to the 'metropolitan'. Brenda Winter's summation is clear and unambiguous: 'The employment prospects for actresses living and working in Belfast at this time were truly dire. It was indignation that galvanized the founders of Charabanc into doing something about their disempowered situation' (That's Not Theatre 20). But the issues at work here were about more than gender. There was also a gathering sense that the Belfast theatre-scene provided no real opportunity for Belfast's working-class communities to see themselves, their dilemmas, passions and possibilities, on stage. Such lives, and the social conditions that shaped them, were largely absent from Belfast's stages. Divided by much else, men and women on the Falls and Shankill roads largely shared the same opinion of the city's theatres – these were places with very little to do with them, staging versions of the world far removed from the lived reality of their daily existence.

It is all of this, and more, that informed the decision of five Belfast actresses to found a new company. The five women who came together to form Charabanc Theatre Company were Sarah (Marie) Jones[1], Eleanor Methven, Maureen McAuley, Carol Scanlan (subsequently Moore) and Brenda Winter. While Charabanc would rapidly learn to articulate a sophisticated rationale for its productions and the methodologies out of which they were born, the primary motivator in the company's early days was more directly related to the professional frustrations felt by this group of Belfast actresses. Quite simply, in the absence of quality female roles the actresses felt driven to create work for themselves. If that had been the limit of the company – staging other people's plays as a way of earning a living – it is unlikely that Charabanc would be a name remembered much beyond a small circle of Belfast theatre obsessives. In this regard, Claudia Harris's suggestion, that 'Charabanc's history is a triumphant story of women creating their

own work and in the process changing the shape of Irish drama' (Introduction *Four Plays* x), reveals just how much further the founders of Charabanc travelled in their quest to create work for themselves.

In addition to their frustrations over the lack, and quality, of the roles available to them, the five founders of Charabanc also shared a more thoroughgoing dissatisfaction with the nature *per se* of theatre in Belfast at that time. They soon realized that they needed not simply to create employment for themselves, but to create the kind of theatre that spoke to them and the place that was Northern Ireland in 1983. A key issue in this regard was gender inequality – the lack of opportunities for women in theatre was, as they knew only too well, a micro-level reflection of the macro social and political position of women in Ireland either side of the border at that time. Yet, while clearly committed to exploring the various power dynamics at play in this ideological matrix, the Charabanc founders were hesitant about overtly labelling their project in feminist terms. As Eleanor Methven recounts:

> When Charabanc started, it was from a very pragmatic economic base and was completely actor led … It was not a theoretical base. We really didn't come at it from an academic point of view… We didn't think if it in any feminist terms – it was an unconscious feminism, if you like (qtd. in Harris, Introduction *Four Plays* xxviii).

This hesitancy around terminology may seem slightly odd from a theatre group that would go on to be so clearly committed to tackling the politicality of everyday life. But, as explored more fully in Charlotte J. Headrick's essay in this volume, in place of the possible limitations imposed by debates concerning ideological positions and the specifics of gender politics, the founders of Charabanc were more concerned to inhabit an inclusive performative space. This was to be a space concerned more with the fundamentals of power distribution in Northern Ireland. As Marie Jones put in it 1987: 'We've been fighting for three and a half years to say we're a working-class theatre company. That's all we are. People will not accept that … We never really say we're a Belfast women's theatre company' (interview in Martin 97). The emphasis was very much on working outside entrenched positions of power and the absence of spaces of representation for working-class communities on both sides of the political divide.

The ideas that drove Charabanc had many lines of influence. The idea of a theatre that was community-based, socially-engaged and, at times, politically oppositional was one that by the early 1980s had had a

long history, particularly in Britain and the United States. In Britain a myriad of companies had already emerged, each of which, in their different ways, sought to challenge the political, class, and gender hegemonies of mainstream cultural production. Companies such as Red Ladder, Monstrous Regiment of Women, Joint Stock and, most famously, John McGrath's 7:84, were all established with the aim of rearticulating theatre as communally engaged and, where necessary, as a site of overt political resistance. In place of the traditional theatre hierarchy whereby a text with a single author is brought to life by a well-oiled mechanism of designated roles (producer, director, actors and so on), these companies drew on more collaborative and fluid modes of working. Interviews with real people, workshopping, improvisation, team writing – all of these techniques emerged as ways of reorienting traditional assumptions about the nature and function of theatre in society. As Carol Martin puts it, what we see at work here is a 'growing awareness … that art, especially performance, could be a forum for invoking powerful and creative forces of cultural, social, and spiritual worlds' (88). In terms of Northern Irish theatre, the founders of Charabanc were amongst the first to 'plant their work in the nexus of community life' (Martin 88).

In this they were aided by the guidance and knowledge of two figures with strong links to the British popular political theatre movements: Martin Lynch and Pam Brighton (each discussed more fully below). In these terms too, the short-lived Belfast community theatre company, Playzone (est. 1978), of which Marie Jones (along with other theatre notables such as Stephen Rea and Andy Hinds) was a member, deserves more recognition as a site of influence than it is usually accorded. Playzone's drive to produce theatre from the real-world experiences of the communities within which it worked provided a working model for the newly formed Charabanc. Martin Lynch's work likewise provided a model from which the Charabanc founders drew inspiration. Indeed Carol Moore describes Martin Lynch as acting as the group's 'mentor' in the early months of its existence (Impulse to Imagination 149). Lynch had started his public life as a political and community activist, but had soon recognized the power of theatre to engage with real-world issues with the kind of efficacy and subtlety largely absent from direct political mechanisms. While he worked initially with the 'Turf Lodge Fellowship Community Theatre' in the late 1970s, by 1981 his first play, *Dockers*, had premiered at the Lyric Theatre, demonstrating how community theatre could be translated into one of the city's main houses. Crucially, Lynch's play was borne out

of direct engagement with the city's dock-workers, many of whom he invited to the opening night at the Lyric Theatre. In Brenda Winter's words:

> The effect of this play on those of the Charabanc actresses present for the premiere was dramatic … If the dockers felt empowered by witnessing their lives enacted on stage, the local actors felt equally validated through hearing their own accent, idiom and cultural identity revitalized on the stage of the Lyric Theatre (That's Not Theatre 23).

Still perhaps a little unsure of their ground, the women initially approached Lynch to write some material for them. Lynch's response took them somewhat by surprise; he would later recall the moment as comic in its obviousness:

> At the first meeting with the actresses I listened as they told me how they wanted me to write a play about the experience of Belfast women! The absurdity of this struck me immediately and I asked them why *they* couldn't sit down and write about their experiences as Belfast women. This produced an instant silence, followed by laughter (Why This Play? 117).

It was a crucial moment in Charabanc's history. The suggestion 'led the company into ways of working that distinguished it from a mainstream of Irish theatre still concerned primarily with the production of dramatic literature by individual playwrights' (Maguire, *Making Theatre* 109). These ways of working, as Claudia Harris has noted, 'would seem foreign to those who privilege the creative model of a single playwright whose vision is then produced by a director and design team' (Introduction *Four Plays* xxvii). While encouraging the five Charabanc founders to engage with the creative process themselves, Lynch nevertheless ended up working closely on what would become the company's first production, *Lay Up Your Ends* (1983). Indeed in the whirlwind of creativity that marked the company's first months of existence it would seem that Lynch took the main writing role for this piece.[2] However it is also clear that Marie Jones was a major contributor to the writing process, and *Lay Up Your Ends* effectively marked her apprenticeship as a playwright. In the years ahead Jones would become the company's writer in residence and she would be 'credited with the scripts which grew from the group's largely self-discovered method of collaboration' (Harris, Introduction *Four Plays* xi).

Lay Up Your Ends

Lay Up Your Ends is important for Jones's development as a playwright not simply because of its subject matter or performance style, but because of the process through which it found its way from idea to stage. Charabanc's founders were convinced of the need to explore dimensions of Northern Irish history and life that had remained resolutely off-stage, and in hitting upon the Belfast mill strike of 1911 they struck very fruitful territory. The shift back in time may at first seem odd for a new theatre company seeking contemporary relevance, but Martin Lynch's memory of the process suggests a politically reflexive need to understand the present as the product of the past: 'we realized that the women of today couldn't be viewed in isolation from the history of our own mothers and grand-mothers. Their experience, in many senses made the Belfast women of today' (Why This Play? 118). The play's title indeed indexes the complexity and sophistication of Charabanc's intentions and ambitions. 'Lay up your ends' was the phrase shouted out in the mills when the linen strands broke on a machine – laying up the ends was the process whereby the strands were reconnected to allow the weaving to begin again. *Lay Up Your Ends* is, then, a play built on the symmetry of title and intent. It is not just the narrative strands of a 1911 event that are pieced together again on stage, but rather the social, cultural, and political connective tissues that link the 'then' of the play with the 'now' of the audience.

At the heart of the 1911 mill strike were issues that struck at the very core of what had brought the five founders of Charabanc together in the first place: the nature of work and its gendered divisions; class as a symptom of power dynamics; the question of representation and the unrepresented. In the play's opening scene we can see how these various texts and subtexts are firmly established, as the mill girls discuss the new working conditions that have been passed down by the owners:

> Lizzie: 'Any person found away from their usual place of work, except for necessary purposes, or talkin' with anyone out of their own alley will be fined 2d for each offence. No singin'. You're not even allowed to stop to fix your hair'.
> [...]
> Florrie: 'All persons in our employ shall serve four weeks' notice before leavin' their employ, but E Bingham and Company shall, and will, dismiss any person without notice being given'.
> Ethna: Does it say anythin' about breathin'? Are we still allowed to breathe? (48)

Thereafter the play charts the women's decision to strike, inspired in part by the rhetoric of union activists such as James Connolly and Jim Larkin, the resistance they met (from their husbands as well as the mill owners), and their eventual return to work, which, while not totally on their own terms, did lead to the establishment of a branch of the Irish Transport and General Workers especially for the Belfast mill women. There was a rather apt symmetry at play in the idea of the Charabanc women challenging their own working conditions by giving voice to a group of historical women who had so radically done the very same thing. *Lay Up Your Ends* was, in Claudia Harris's eloquent terms, a unique industrial protest' (Introduction *Four Plays* xiii).

The performance style of *Lay Up Your Ends* was heavily influenced by the introduction of Pam Brighton to the group. As noted above, it was Brighton, through her work with companies such as Monstrous Regiment, who provided the strongest link between Charabanc and the experimental theatre tradition that had developed in Britain over the previous decade. As a result, Charabanc's work was 'characterised by flexible performance modes, recognizable to anyone familiar with the 1970s British alternative touring theatre' (Maguire, *Making Theatre* 110). In performance this meant costume changes on stage in full view, beer boxes taking the place of industrial machinery, furniture, platforms for political speeches, and breaches in the fourth-wall as actors break character to engage directly with the audience. Thus *Lay Up Your Ends*, and much of Charabanc's work that followed it, was 'quite deliberately anti-illusionist' (Lojek, *Playing Politics* 91). This was 'not cottage drama in which an interior set is lovingly recreated and audiences are encouraged to enter into the fiction that actors have become the characters' (Lojek, 91). One result is that 'audiences are encouraged to remember that actors play roles' and that social constructions, such as over-determined gender and class roles, are likewise largely performative in nature (Lojek, 91). Such performative shifts were not restricted to women playing men; just as importantly the same actresses who played the parts of the mill girls also took on the roles of the mill owners' wives. We can get a sense of the resultant ironies in this exchange when two such wives break off from their rehearsal for a concert in aid of the workhouse – their husbands, as the stage directions sharply inform us, sit on its Board of Guardians – to discuss the striking women:

> **URSULA:** You house them, give them a living, try to get them out of their slum-ridden conditions by providing work for them. Those … those … bitches!

> […]
> **LYDIA:** Well I've always thought that if they had some of the finer things in life – take their minds off striking… Some Gilbert and Sullivan, perhaps … some poetry … some of the lighter, more romantic poets. I feel … (95)

Lydia's rather clumsy notion of culture as an improving tool identifies another of the play's targets: the role of hegemonic culture in sustaining the political status quo. For example, when the members of Charabanc were researching the play they noticed that the women's strike had garnered very little attention in the newspapers. The striking women had largely been excluded from the mechanics of representation, a fact that played a major part in the strike's subsequent absence from much official historiography.[3] In a later scene, involving Ursula and her mill-owning husband (Eric Bingham), the play weaves this representational absence into its very fabric:

> **URSULA:** Oh absolutely. I think the unrest is as good as over. You're down to … what? … Three hundred die-hards, no strike money, no support in any art or part of the city – and the newspapers handled it really well, didn't they?
> **ERIC:** Hardly a mention. (106)

The moment is a metonym for the play as a whole: historical absence replayed in the context of contemporary presence. The temporal duality was reinforced further by the notes included in the Programme for its first performances. Ian Mc Elhinney, the company's Producer, informed those first audiences that Charabanc's main goal was to explore 'the diversity of our own history in this province'; while Martin Lynch explicitly unpacked the social and political connections between 1911 and 1983:

> Here was a story well worth telling, and bearing in mind the current attacks by the likes of Thatcher and Tebbit on the very principle of organised Trade Unionism, the story would serve as a timely reminder to female (and male) workers of today, just why Trade Unions are vital and how exactly our parents and grandparents suffered and struggled in their time to make life that much more bearable for the working-classes of today.

These programme notes would have done much to shape the play's reception at its opening night at the Belfast Civic Arts Theatre on 15 May 1983. Indeed even before a word was spoken from the stage this was by all accounts a remarkable night for a Belfast theatre in the early eighties. Everyone involved in Charabanc was keen to extend the project's sense of inclusivity to the opening night, and all those who had contributed to the play's genesis were invited to come along. As Claudia

Harris recalls (see also David Grant interview in this volume), the 'lobby was buzzing before the premiere performance of *Lay Up Your Ends*' but what was perhaps most notable was that the:

> theatregoers gathering there in friendly clusters that Sunday night were an unusual mix even for the Arts … Those who had told their stories of working in the linen mills, who had by their histories made this night possible, many who had never gone to a play at a downtown theatre before, were now rubbing shoulders with the theatre faithful (Harris, Introduction *Four Plays* xi).

As Carol Moore notes, these early performances were 'rough theatre but with dramatic sophistication', and they set the scene for Charabanc's growth and ambition (Impulse to Imagination 150).

Marie Jones, Charabanc's writer in residence:

The methodologies that had proved so successful in the case of *Lay Up Your Ends* set a template for Charabanc's next number of productions. The nature of Marie Jones's role in the company would, however, subtly shift over the course of the remaining decade. While Charabanc's second production, *Oul Delf and False Teeth* in 1984, was still very much the result of a collaborative writing process (the original script credits 'Marie Jones and the Charabanc Theatre Company'), by the time we reach the two plays produced in 1986 (*Gold on the Streets* and *The Girls in the Big Picture*) we are dealing with plays produced by Charabanc but which credit Jones as the major writer. These years effectively marked Jones's evolution from an actor who wrote to a writer who acted.

Work began on *Oul Delf and False Teeth* soon after the first run of *Lay Up Your Ends* came to a close, and it was first performed at Belfast's Civic Arts Theatre on 26 Feb 1984. Once again the group had hit upon a moment in the North's history, the 1949 elections, the ideological contours of which, as well as its subsequent neglect in the official record, fitted well with the company's self-image and objectives. *Oul Delf and False Teeth*, replicating the dynamics of the '49 elections, pits the attempts of those campaigning for the Labour Party, and for a vision of politics concerned with the inequalities of class and the uneven distribution of capital, against the entrenched positions of identity politics (Irish nationalist and Ulster Unionist alike) in the North. Those sitting in the audience were implicitly invited to re-examine this moment of political possibility in 1949 with the consequences of its failure, consequences that were all too obvious in 1984 Northern Ireland. *Oul Delf and False Teeth* picks up on many of the concerns that

Lay Up You Ends raised: both present identity politics as divisive and as built upon the over-writing of other potentially unifying discourses marked by analyses of class and power.

In her journal from this period director Pam Brighton gives a fascinating insight into the collaborative nature of the process out of which *Oul Delf and False Teeth* emerged:

> The discussions are positive with people contributing their particular skills – Brenda is tremendous at historical background; Martin at lining up the politics; Marie with her grasp of Belfast character and language. I try to focus it onto a dramatic structure (Six Characters 144).

This antithesis to the then dominant creative model – dependent on a single authorial voice honed in a process that is intimately private – goes to the heart of the early Charabanc project. Not that it was without its problems, as Brighton would have it: 'Sometimes the working process of Charabanc feels like someone newly delivered of quads – how to deal with it within the confines of normal space?' (Six Characters 146) Brighton's journal also articulates just how carefully Charabanc considered issues of performative style and its impact:

> Initially we'd been thinking of the campaign as a theatrical structure with two vaudeville characters weaving through keeping the audience informed. These were introduced partly through fear of the piece becoming dangerously naturalistic in style (Six Characters 145).

The hesitancy around naturalistic performance reveals a company intent on breaking the hegemony of realism in order to explore more interventionist cultural territory. The play would go on to end, for example, with a Brechtian transition to song as the entire cast took to the stage for a rendition of the politically charged 'Belfast the glory of Tories'.

Oul Delf and False Teeth is set in the world of Belfast's post-war market traders and focuses largely on the women who made a living from trading on their stalls. The banter, humour, and conflicts, of the market stall-holders provide a context, and an interpretative space, for the political tensions that build up as the various parties canvass for votes. One of these women, the Catholic Anna McManus, has married Sam McManus, a Protestant who has returned from service in the war replete with socialist ideals. Sam's summation of the situation he has returned to in Belfast is politically powerful, but perhaps overly didactic in tone:

> I fought in a war for two years, wakin up every mornin thinkin it was goin to be my last, because we thought it was worth fightin something as wrong as Fascism. But, now [...I]t makes me realise that this country's run by another bunch of fascists (MS Act I Scene I).

While another character – Eileen, who has joined Sam canvassing for the Labour Party – delivers an analysis that unpacks many of the play's inner dynamics in a manner that is equally direct:

> Sam I know the Protestant workin people are not to blame. If their leaders – the people they look up to and respect are gettin up and sayin that Catholics are lazy and disloyal and can't be trusted, well they're goin to believe them, aren't they? Well that's why I think I'm with the Labour Party cos yous are against bigotry and those men that are tryin to divide us (MS Act I Scene III).

The success of the tactics, as parsed by Eileen, to divide the North by mapping political loyalty onto confessional identity is revealed by the progressive shift of Bertha away from her fellow stall-holders. The Protestant Bertha has been friends with her Catholic neighbours on the stalls for years but her position radically shifts in the course of the play, as she reacts to the perceived threat to her identity represented not just by the leftist discourse of the Labour Party but the move by southern Ireland to declare a republic. Bertha's reaction is inflected with the increasingly polarizing language of contemporary Unionist politics: 'The bleedin body of Ulster is in danger of bein served up on the altar of a Gaelic Republic. Sir Basil Brooke said that!' (MS Act II Scene V). In the following scene we meet Bertha selling Unionist rosettes on her stall: 'Don't let the Green Men get us. Get your rosettes here. Stop the Pope and his men comin over our mountains. Wear the badge and save Ulster from the evil of Holy Water!' (MS Act II Scene VI). The impact of Bertha's pronouncements on her Catholic friends, summed up by one of them (Bridie), haunts the action and points to the piece's central argument: 'These spirits of destruction and evil she's talkin about. She means us! The people she's known all her life. Her only friends' (MS Act II Scene V). In all of this the audience is left in no doubt, the play's future is the audience's present. There is real heart in *Oul Delf and False Teeth*, and a serious-minded endeavour to examine the roots of the modern troubles in the North. But the overt politics of the play's subject matter led the group into a space that lacked the nuance and positive energy of *Lay Up Your Ends*. As a result, when in the piece's final moments the results of the election in the ward are announced (the Ulster Party candidate easily beats the Labour candidate: 6337 to

3599) the lack of possible alterity (while historically accurate) feels somehow over-determined and imaginatively restrictive.

In these terms we can read Charabanc's next production, *Now You're Talkin'* (1986, written by Marie Jones and the Company) as a reaction to the limitations of historical logic that regulated much of the action in *Oul Delf and False Teeth*. For the first time the group set their work in the contemporary moment (mid-eighties) and explicitly explored the inter-communal tensions that so powerfully regulated daily life in much of Northern Ireland. If historical distance provided a kind of safety zone for cultural production, the shift to a direct contemporaneity entailed new risks and pressures for Jones and Charabanc. Something of this is certainly at work in the dilemma posed by finding an ending that allowed for the alterity missing from *Oul Delf and False Teeth*. As Jones would later recall:

> In our third play [*Now You're Talkin'*] we couldn't find an ending. It was about the present. We were frightened of leaving it at a moment where people could say, 'Ah, that's what Charabanc thinks, that's a statement.' We invited people we trusted to come and see it and asked them what they thought of the ending. People made different suggestions, and we tried them (Interview in Martin 91).

Such a process relies heavily on the flexibility allowed by the collaborative approach that had served Charabanc so well; but it was also a high-wire act at times, as Eleanor Methven describes:

> One time I arrived at the show at quarter past seven and everyone said, 'Hurry up, hurry up, you're ending the show tonight, we'll rehearse during the interval.' We'd keep an ending for a week or two and then we'd change it again. Because we're writing our own stuff, it's never finished. We're always striving to make it better – to perfect it. It's a good opportunity that actors don't normally get. You normally get a script, and everything is basically laid down for you. We have a lot more freedom (Interview in Martin 91).

Indeed, while the issue of *Now You're Talkin'*s ending was never fully settled (one of the risks perhaps of the process described by Methven), the two main iterations explored by the company (see below) reveal much about Charabanc's ambitious new territory.

Now You're Talkin' was first performed on 17 March 1985 at the Civic Arts Centre, Belfast. As noted in Wei H. Kao's essay in this volume, it marks an important moment in the evolution of Jones as a playwright, whose writing skills were coming evermore to the fore in the group's inner-workings. It is a play dominated by Jones's ear for rapid-fire dialogue, local idioms, and her sense of comic timing. It is set

in a residential centre for 'peace and reconciliation' where groups from different communities are invited to spend a few days living and talking together. As Kao points out in his piece, the play is a recognizable parody of the kind of peace and reconciliation residential centre made famous by the work of places such as the Corrymeela Community near Ballycastle (Co. Antrim). This is a setting that is ripe for dramatic conflict. The nature of the centre's work also means that the dialogue can openly bring the political subtexts of Charabanc's previous two plays to the surface: the women who are staying at the centre for the weekend have been invited there to discuss openly the 'Troubles' and its impact on their different communities. The group that are thrust together in *Now You're Talkin'* come from all parts of the Northern Irish political spectrum (nationalist / Republican; Unionist / Loyalist) and find themselves under the direction of a well-meaning but inept American facilitator named Carter. The fact that the latter shares his name with a recent American President only adds to the implicit critique of ill-informed external interventions into the complexity of Northern Irish affairs. Carter's techniques are often a highly comic mix of new-age mysticism and cod psychoanalysis, involving such disparate activities as Maypole dancing and Primal Scream Therapy. In a wonderfully comic example of theory removed from reality, for example, Carter establishes the goal of the Primal Scream session: 'I want you to relive and fully experience those unreal feelings of hate. Remember, the more pain you feel, the less you actually suffer' (20). Slightly earlier he had asked the women to look out the window on the majesty of the natural world, telling them they are 'All the same species … we eat the same food, we live in the same land and, united as we are now, we can feel as one the joy and fulfilment of the beauty of nature'. Sitting in a circle holding hands, 'Carter *is feeling every moment of it*' while the '*women are bemused*' (7).

Unsurprisingly, tensions soon begin to emerge in the group; tensions that are only exasperated by Carter's well-meaning foolishness. Having asked what the word 'freedom' meant to the women, Carter feels on safe ground as they play along with the expected answers (concerning domestic duties, marriage commitments, gender roles etc.); but he clearly doesn't know how to handle Veronica, the hardline Republican in the group, when she declares 'Freedom for Ireland!' (6) The declaration breaks the veneer of polite falseness that the group had maintained up to this point and the full depths of what divides them quickly comes to the surface. The rupture proves to be fruitful in its way and the group unite to run Carter out of the room:

> Yes! Yes! We do hate each other! We bloody well hate each other! That's what all this trouble is about. What the hell do you know about it? You don't know anything about it! Why don't you just fuck off? (Carter *runs off stage*) (23).

Thereafter the women choose to talk on their terms, terms that rely on blunt speaking in place of Carter's psycho-babble. Importantly the play offers no pat solutions or trite clichés. Open talk proves to be useful but resolution remains beyond the women's (and the play's) grasp. In a comic denouement the women's insistence on staying together to talk further on these newly honest and open terms is interpreted as a sit-in protest. There is much comedic potential in this set up and Jones and Charabanc are adept at exploiting it; but the play inexorably moves towards its more sombre conclusion. Just what this conclusion should, or could, be was, as we've seen, something that much occupied the group. In the play's first iteration, the lights go down on a scene where Veronica (the hardline Republican) and Jackie (who has been described as a moderate Protestant) stand looking out the window as other members of the group conduct a press conference outside. Neither is convinced that much has been achieved in the discussions and the attention their 'sit-in' has garnered:

> **JACKIE:** It is too late now … (*Grabs* Veronica's *hand and leads her to the window*.) Look out there … tell me what you see? … Thelma, the true-blue Brit … and there are thousands like her who are not going to give an inch … how are you going to make people like that come with you into a new Ireland?
> **VERONICA** (*quietly*)**:** What other choice do you have … Fight to defend Ulster until every drop of Protestant blood has been spilt? (52-53)

That final stage image of the two women remaining to hold hands clearly left the group a little unsettled. The image, they knew, could be read as suggesting that Veronica could have persuaded Jackie to move from her Unionist position and thus be read as ideologically loaded in favour of a Republican agenda. In response, Charabanc tried out an alternative ending in which instead of holding hands the two women 'look at each other with nothing left to say' before leaving the stage separately. A more melancholic ending, undoubtedly, but also one that was more representative of Northern Ireland's political realities in 1985.

These years represent the zenith of Charabanc's creative energies and productivity. The following year would see the production of two new works: *Gold in the Streets* and *The Girls in the Big Picture*. Moreover, in terms of Jones the playwright, 1986 would be a

particularly important year, as each of these plays would be credited more explicitly to her as writer: 'written by Marie Jones, devised by the Company'. *Gold in the Streets* was premiered in January 1986 at the Belfast Civic Arts Theatre and represents a summation of the group's interests and research up to that point. Rather than settling on one particular historical moment, *Gold in the Streets* moves through time to explore the thematic threads that link Belfast in 1912, 1950 and 1985.[4] Its three one-act pieces are self-contained but thematically connected through their examination of sectarianism and emigration. The first act, set in 1912 and returning us to territory very familiar from *Lay Up Your Ends*, tells the story of Agnes and John Joe, two Catholics who move to Belfast from the country to get work. John Joe is an expert hand-weaver but his skills are no longer needed in an increasingly mechanized industry. They arrive in the city to stay with Agnes's sister, Molly, who has married George, a Protestant from the Shankill Road. Unfortunately, their arrival is an unwanted surprise to George who is worried about the ramifications in the build-up to Ulster Day:

> **GEORGE:** He's not gonna get a job as a weaver up here. That's a skilled job. He's a Catholic.
> **MOLLY:** Could you not speak for him? You know Ernie Simpson, he's the foreman in the factory. He's in your lodge. Could you not vouch for him even though he's a Catholic?
> **GEORGE:** And get branded as a Fenian lover? I'd a hard enough time when I married you, love, but thank God you've done me proud. I'm not getting' myself into trouble. Ulster Day is coming up soon and I want to be able to hold my head up in these streets. (61)

To make ends meet, Agnes takes a job as house cleaner in one of the city's big houses: she has had to pretend to be Protestant to secure the position and she is finally 'caught out' in her pretence and is fired. In the end Agnes and John Joe are forced out of Belfast. They decide to go to England to escape from prejudice, but in the act's final moments the stage's soundscape is filled with English voices telling racist Irish jokes.

The second act, set in 1950, tells the story of Mary Connor (a Catholic) who has returned to Belfast from England with her daughter, Joan. Joan's father, an Englishman, was killed during the Second World War. A nervous Mary arrives home; she is clearly aware that some difficulties lie ahead but is unprepared for just how excluded she will be made feel. Mary and Joan's status as outcasts is brilliantly captured through Jones's skilful blending of the comic with pathos:

> BERNIE: My mummy says yous don't believe in God and are goin' to burn in the fires of hell like the black babies in Africa.

> **JOAN:** No. My daddy is in heaven. The man in church said.
> **ELISH:** He couldn't be; he's a Prod.
> **BERNIE:** Even worse than that, he's English. He's bound to be in hell.
> **JOAN:** But we believe in God as well.
> **ELISH:** Well, God doesn't believe in you, so there! (84)

Rejected by her community, in an inversion of the sectarianism that marked the opening act, Mary is finally forced to leave Belfast once again to return to England.

The final act moves the action to 1985 and tells the story of Sharon McAllister. Sharon's husband Davy has been out of work for four years, since the collapse of the DeLorean car factory[5], and is clearly beginning to suffer from depression as a result. Desperate to change his situation, Davy joins the police (RUC). While Sharon sits at home night after night consumed with worry, Davy becomes ever more consumed with the camaraderie and 'friendship under fire' bonding of his new life. Totally oblivious to Sharon's worries, Davy returns home to regale her with stories of near-misses and the adrenalin rush of danger:

> **DAVY:** [...] God, we'd a laugh the day. Big Ginger Donaldson – member I told you about him 'the Michelin Man', gets his uniforms made by Alec Simmons, me and him and Georgie McBride were all in the Landrover goin' up by Divis Flats when there was the sound of gunfire. So we stopped, all jumped out and took cover. Suddenly there was another burst of machine gun fire, silence, and then a psshh sound. As quick as a flask George pipes up 'Hey, Ginger, was that you or the back wheel?' We near pissed ourselves laughing (100).

It is clear to the audience, but not to Davy, that such stories are simply pushing Sharon further to the edge of a nervous breakdown. The ending is inevitable and echoes those of the preceding two acts: Sharon leaves with the children to live with her sister in London. While structurally different to the group's early work, there's a clear sense in which the piece rehearses Charabanc's central concerns: the relationship between the North's past and its present, and the presentation of those stories usually occluded from cultural production.

Both of these concerns are once again central to *The Girls in the Big Picture* (premiered at the Ardhowen Theatre, Enniskillen, September 1986). In other ways, though, the play marks an interesting change of tack for Charabanc. In place of the usual focus on the urban dynamics of Belfast, *The Girls in the Big Picture* has a rural setting and explores the politics of marriage and land in the early 1960s. The play tells the story of a group of women who are all, in their different ways, struggling

to find a place for themselves in a social landscape heavily regulated by religious authority (in all its denominations), sexual repression, and the power entailed in holding property. *The Girls in the Big Picture* captures a fascinating moment in the development of modern Ireland (north and south). The rural world of the play, a world that in many ways has remained unchanged for decades, is being transformed by electrification and the creeping infiltration of a globalized cultural modernity (rock n roll music and dance-halls). It is a moment when one mode of social being is passing away while another is not fully formed and the play's younger characters are caught in an inter-generational waiting game: waiting to inherit the farm, to take over the local café, to inherit the village's clothes shop.

The imbrication of gender, property, and power is brilliantly exposed in one of the play's dramatic centre-pieces: the 'Basket Tea'. Mary-Jo, one of the three main female protagonists, explains the rural tradition to Pat (a visiting city-slicker who is more interested in rock n roll and the occasional fling):

> We have them every three months. You see, the women all make up big baskets of food, right? And Jamesie Bickerstaff, he's the auctioneer, he auctions them, and the men all bid for them. Whosever basket you buy you stay with that person all night and you dance (136).

It is within these contours of social power that the women of the play live out their lives. Their visits to the local cinema thus become a way of escaping the constrictions of their day-to-day existence. These cinema scenes are accompanied by film soundtracks and the heightened melodramatic romantic intrigue of the movies cleverly counterpoints the more prosaic narratives of marriage and routine life discussed by the women. Just as importantly these on-stage cinema visits (the actresses face the audience as if watching the screen) open up a crucial meta-performative space: the women's engagement with culture as a mode of resistance amplifies Charabanc's theatrical project. The political dimensions of fantasy and reality, moreover, will be picked up again by Jones in future works such as *Somewhere Over the Balcony* and *Stones in His Pockets*. In the end, though, a complete escape remains unattainable, for now, and the women in *The Girls in the Big Picture* are left to deal with the realities of their claustrophobic existence. Unlike *Oul Delf and False Teeth*, however, the vitality of the language and vision in *The Girls in the Big Picture* opens up a space of possibility and perhaps even the promise of future alterity.

It is thus apt that the group's next piece *Somewhere Over the Balcony* should focus so fully on the relationship between language and the imagination, and on the possibility of 'otherness' offered by the fantastical. *Somewhere Over the Balcony* premiered at the Drill Hall Arts Centre (London) in September 1987 and marks the creative highpoint of the group's most fruitful period. *Somewhere Over the Balcony* tells the story of life in a Belfast tower block – although not specified, it becomes clear that the setting is the nationalist Divis flats in West Belfast – as it is observed by three women: Kate Tidy (devout Catholic in her thirties); Ceely Cash (irreverent widow in her thirties); Rose Marie Noble (mother of twins in her thirties). The play's setting thus creates a performative lens different to that deployed in the group's early work. While Charabanc had 'strained to remain detached from an exclusive association with any one community or political perspective, *Somewhere Over the Balcony* is written entirely from the perspective of the female nationalist population of Divis' (Maguire, *Making Theatre* 111). That Charabanc would bring the play with equal success to audiences from nationalist and unionist backgrounds is a testament to the integrity and honesty of its engagement with Belfast's communities. It is also a testament to the strength and incisiveness of Jones's writing by this stage of her career.

The formal style of the play was another key to its positive reception. The women occupy their viewpoint on the balconies and the events of the play are relayed to the audience through their interpretative narration. Through them the audience hears of the rushed wedding involving guests in disguise (because they're 'on the run'), a catering van getting blown up (while carrying the forty-five turkey dinners and trifles for the wedding reception) and the siege at the church as the army and police attempt to capture those guests of interest to them. As Claudia Harris puts it, *Somewhere over the Balcony* 'is an irrepressible pastiche of Belfast living. Highly entertaining, the play abounds in black comedy and ludicrous situations and wonderful music' (Review *Somewhere* 47). That said, while highly comedic, the play also adeptly sustains a tension, as Maria R. DiCenzo has it, 'between hilarity and horror; the comedy seduces the audience into the world of the play, but viewers are never allowed to lose sight of the violence (psychological and physical) done to the lives of women daily' (181-182). The play's reliance on fantasy is thus a safety-valve but not an abdication; as Eleanor Methven said of Belfast at that time, 'the parameters of normality have been stretched so much, that no matter what you put in, you will find a parallel for it in everyday normal life' (qtd. in DiCenzo

181). For Charabanc and Jones the conventions of realist theatre were simply not adequate to the task of representing a place where the borders of the 'real' and the 'unreal' had proven to be so permeable. *Somewhere Over the Balcony* represents the high-point of the group's engagement with performative techniques – anti-illusionist use of songs, direct audience address etc. – that had so informed their idea of community-based theatre practice from the outset.

This theatrical maturity is combined to great effect with the brilliance of Jones's comic dialogue, and the nuanced sense of its power to create meta-performative conceits, which is at work throughout *Somewhere Over the Balcony*. One of the women, Ceely, for example, has set up an illegal radio station in her flat and transmits to the local area with information, gossip, and a regular game of radio bingo. It is a clever device, revealing the power of communication (she mainly transmits to other women in the area) but also the sense of lives disconnected and trapped by the violence that surrounds them. In the face of real physical violence, it is the women of the play that truly understand the power of language to transform. We can see the pure joy of this language-play at work here, for instance, when Ceely broadcasts a request to find beds for visitors who have arrived to take part in the Internment commemorations:

> There are sixteen visitors sittin' over in that chapel, two arms the one length, and they still haven't been claimed yet. Now, I want them out and lodged before Charlene and Danny get married, right? Two 'Troops Out' from Manchester, men, middle aged. Two Basque Separatists; they want to stay together. Six of the Communist Party of Great Britain; they don't mind what way they're split up. Two Nicaraguan freedom strugglers and two 'Rock Against Racism' for anybody that likes a wee bit of a dance. And guess who? Valadimir the wee 'Solidarity' Polish fella. That cratur has been coming here on internment anniversary for three years, and he hasn't got a bed yet (191).

Thereafter the play culminates in a scene of high-farce (as reported to the audience via the three women on stage): the wedding church ends up under siege, with soldiers and police surrounding it demanding the surrender of the 'on the runs', turkey dinners are used as bargaining chips, a rival game of bingo breaks out amongst those trapped in the church (much to Ceely's annoyance), a baby threatens to be born before its parents can say their vows, and, finally, a stolen army helicopter is used to break out those of particular interest to the waiting police. The effect of all this is to seduce the audience into a space where the utterly bizarre takes on all the hallmarks of the everyday; as one of the women,

Kate, so eloquently sums it up at the end: 'That's what I love about this place. On a day like today you could be anywhere' (204).

Over the next number of years Charabanc would continue with Marie Jones working as its writer-in-residence, with scripts credited to her as the major author. The result would be four plays: *Terrible Twins Crazy Christmas* (1988); *Weddins, Weeins and Wakes* (1989); *Blind Fiddler of Glenaduach* (1990); and *The Hamster Wheel* (1990). The first of these, *Terrible Twins Crazy Christmas*, first performed in December 1988 at the Riverside Theatre (Coleraine), marked an interesting departure for Charabanc as it is a piece aimed specifically at younger audiences. A comic romp involving a fairy, a confused leprechaun (he's six foot), a giant, a witch, the Children of Lir, and a talking pigeon, *Terrible Twins Crazy Christmas* tells the story of the fight to save Christmas from the evil plots of Baron Begrudger. While a departure for Charabanc, the play did not come completely out of the blue in terms of Jones's interests. One-time Charabanc member, Brenda Winter, had in this same year founded Replay Theatre Company and from the outset Jones had connected with Replay's ambitions to bring quality drama to younger audiences, and would go on to work with Replay on many occasions in the years ahead (see interview with Winter in this volume).

Charabanc's next production, however, saw the group return to more familiar territory. *Weddins, Weeins and Wakes*, which was commissioned by the BBC and first performed at the Shankill Festival in 1989, went through two distinct iterations, starting out as a recognizably Charabanc-style play before being re-written as a musical. While perhaps not fully successful in either version, the piece was undoubtedly another example of Jones's ability to capture the everyday comic genius of a working-class Belfast community (in this case that of the Shankill Road). Equally, *Blind Fiddler of Glenaduach* is an interesting, but only partially successful, piece. As Wei H. Kao explores in his essay, it is a piece concerned with the debilitating effects of sectarianism on cultural production and the transmission of communal memory.

The most interesting of these final Jones / Charabanc plays is *The Hamster Wheel*. It is of particular note because it marks such a radical departure from the concerns that had so dominated Charabanc up to this point. While set in contemporary Northern Ireland, *The Hamster Wheel* has little to say about that place's ongoing political troubles. First produced at The Arts Theatre (Belfast) in February 1990, it focuses on a woman who finds herself as her husband's full-time-carer in the wake

of his stroke. It is notable for just how successfully it captures the claustrophobic pressures that such a situation can so often bring to a home; it also reveals much about just how easily such households get forgotten about. While different in theme and tone to Charabanc's earlier plays, *The Hamster Wheel* still involved Jones and the group in the sort of preparatory work that had become their hallmark. As Maria R. DiCenzo notes: the 'production grew out of extensive research with voluntary and professional organizations and individuals in the Belfast community' (182). This commitment to social engagement was reflected in the play's part sponsorship by Belfast City Council. In place of the grand-narrative politics of the 'Northern situation', the play deals with the politics of the domestic, of the family, 'a set of troubles', as David Grant notes, 'as real and as serious as Northern Ireland's political ones, but which get nowhere near the same kind of attention' (Introduction *The Crack* xi). In terms of Jones's development as a writer, *The Hamster Wheel* is important exactly because it 'represents a significant move away from some by now slightly over-familiar tendencies in Northern Irish theatre' (Grant, Introduction *The Crack* viii). It is important in another way too, as it marked the last time Jones would work with Charabanc. While Charabanc would continue until 1995, Jones left the company in 1990 to pursue other creative projects. As the essays that follow demonstrate, Jones's subsequent career would be an extraordinary one; each in their own way also reveals just how important the early days of Charabanc were to the emergence of this remarkable voice in contemporary popular theatre.

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[1] Marie Jones performed under the name Sarah Jones as there was already a Marie Jones registered as a member of Equity.

[2] The collaborative nature of the *Lay Up Your Ends* project in the end led to some ambiguity over just who should get the main writing credit. However, when the play was finally published in 2008, to mark its 25th anniversary, it was credited to 'Martin Lynch and the Charabanc Theatre Company', a move that seems to accurately reflect the collaborative nature of the play's evolution as well as the key role played by Lynch in its writing and structuring.

[3] The play's insight in this regard would establish one of the recurring concerns of Jones's work, namely not just the way people live but the way in which they are represented by and to others. These are certainly concerns that we read as informing later works such as *A Night in November*, *Stones in His Pockets*, and *Women on the Verge of HRT* (all explored more fully in the chapters that follow).

[4] In this regard we may read the play as performing a template for what would become a pattern in Northern Irish theatre from the 1990s of

multi-strand work, linked by a common set of concerns. See for example, multi-authored pieces like Tinderbox's *Convictions* in Crumlin Road Courthouse, or Big Telly's touring production of *Bog People*.

[5] The DeLorean motor company was founded by John Delorean in the late 1970s and established a manufacturing plant in Belfast in the early 1980s. The controversial company produced cars in Belfast from 1981-82 but financial troubles led to the closure of the plant. The car is best remembered today as the vehicle converted to a time machine in the *Back to the Future* films.