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A 'Text of Fear': Demarcating Violence in the Dramaturgy of Lisa McGee's *Girls and Dolls*

Lisa McGee's play *Girls and Dolls* was first performed by Tinderbox Theatre Company, Belfast, in 2006. At the centre of the narrative is a violent crime which closely resembles the murder of two-year-old James Bulger by two ten-year-olds, Robert Thompson and Jon Venables, in 1993 -- but for the fact that the two perpetrators, as well as the young child they kill, are female. McGee's play was by no means the only response to Thompson and Venables' crime which emerged from theatre in the United Kingdom. Rather, Mark Ravenhill has noted that the Bulger case provides the starting point for much notable British new theatre writing of the 1990s because of the particular 'dramatic landscape' it suggests: 'the shopping centre, the video camera, the child-killers'.¹ For Ravenhill, the level of creative and media interest in this crime -- committed by children, and in which the victim was an even younger child -- was a reflection of the fact that this case exposed the individualist and infantilised society associated with consumerism, 'an environment of the infant "me", where it is difficult to grow into the adult "us"'.² Thus the Bulger case prompted immediate creative responses to the questions of morality, the nature of the penal system, education and childhood which the case raised.³ Yet, if these concerns held particular resonance for British (or, perhaps, English) society at the turn of the twentieth century, it must also be recognized that the situation in Northern Ireland was rather different. In 1993, the year in which James Bulger was killed, John Major and Albert Reynolds signed the Downing Street Agreement signaling the fact that the British and Irish governments would begin working towards a peaceful future for Northern Ireland -- including negotiations towards a full paramilitary ceasefire. This agreement marked the first serious and sustained attempt to bring an end to over forty years of violent activity and the declaration which accompanied it vowed not only

to 'remove the causes of conflict', but also to 'overcome the legacy of history and to heal the divisions which have resulted'.⁴ If British playwrights observed a turn to violence in their society, Northern Irish playwrights became concerned with the processes surrounding the move to peace. Accordingly, British theatre's responses to the Bulger case were quick (Ravenhill's *Shopping and Fucking* first received a reading at the Finborough Theatre, London, in 1995) and they tended to focus on the act of violence. By contrast, McGee's play was written almost a decade after the event itself and it focuses exclusively upon the aftermath of the violence; the process of justice; and the fates of those who were directly involved. As such, the way that violence is represented in McGee's play reflects the realities of a post-conflict society: the wounded cultural and geographical landscape of Northern Ireland underpins its dramaturgy; and the process of remembering or revisiting the horrors of the past provides its dramatic structure.

McGee's response to the Bulger case is situated -- not in the shopping centre -- but in the landscape of 1980s Northern Ireland. This is not 'the world of the consumer', which Ravenhill describes.⁵ Rather it is a rundown, ramshackle place, which consists of city centre housing estates and corner shops, as well as the wooded piece of land on the outskirts of the city where the murder takes place. Indeed, while it is so clearly a response to the events of 1993, the dramatic landscape that *Girls and Dolls* presents is not unlike that of the Moors murders 'when Myra Hindley and Ian Brady took their victims on a journey from the depressing suburbs of 'sixties Manchester out into the natural world of the moors -- as if there were still something atavistic and dark in the natural world.'⁶ Consequently, the spatial organisation within McGee's play demonstrates that Northern Ireland, both as a landscape and as a constituency, is necessarily distinct from Britain; it also suggests that space is a key factor in understanding the way that violence operates within this context. In this way it is very much in step with recent scholarly engagement with Northern Ireland, which has

reflected the broader 'spatial turn' of the humanities and social sciences and resulted in studies which are increasingly sensitive to 'difference and specificity', and 'event and locale'.⁷ Examples of this include attempts to map acts of violent crime,⁸ and analyses of the ways in which individuals and communities negotiate spaces often segregated along sectarian, gender and ethnic lines.⁹ Certainly there are clearly marked 'territories' within the Northern Irish landscape, as defined by physical markers such as flags, painted curb stones, and political murals. Underpinning this, however, is an even more nuanced socio-cultural landscape which determines how individuals and communities interact spatially -- and it is the fear of violence which forms the basis of these spatial and behavioural practices. Thus Karen Lysaght and Anne Basten have argued that -- even in a post-ceasefire, post-Good Friday Agreement Northern Ireland -- 'sectarian violence' dictates the 'social and spatial parameters within which many people's everyday lives take place'.¹⁰ They claim that each individual living in this context develops their own understanding of what specific territories symbolise; what threat they may pose; and how best to behave within them. As a consequence, individuals develop a complicated body of knowledge relating to the landscape, which might be regarded as a 'text of fear'.¹¹ Yet, given that the concept of space is always and already central to the meaning-making process of theatre performance (because the theatre event necessarily takes place 'at a certain time, in a certain place' and in the presence of an audience),¹² it is perhaps surprising that there has been little analysis of the ways in which spatial organisation within the dramatic literature emerging from Northern Ireland reflects the mapping of violence which social scientists have observed in the 'everyday' lives of this community. After all, not only does the action of a play (usually) take place within a specific fictional location, but this location is also then represented on the physical space of the stage. Moreover, the 'audience--stage relationship', which is always determined by the organisation of the theatre space, can radically change this representational process.¹³ In this

chapter, therefore, I take as my starting point the idea that a ‘text of fear’, similar to that observed by Lysaght and Basten, can be read in the theatre work taking place within Northern Ireland, and I consider this with particular reference to Lisa McGee’s *Girls and Dolls*.

Girls and Dolls: the Aftermath of Violence, Witnessing and Testimony

Girls and Dolls was written by Lisa McGee in 2004; commissioned by Tinderbox Theatre Company, Belfast, in 2005; and performed at various venues across Northern Ireland between 9 November and 9 December 2006. The action of the play begins twenty-six years after the violent crime has been committed, when the perpetrators, Clare and Emma, are reunited by an accident of fate -- or what Clare describes as ‘a blast from the past’.¹⁴ A reminder of the past, moreover, which is clearly unwelcome:

ADULT CLARE. ...I never understood that phrase. People use it with affection. Like when they remember an old song or see a film they’d forgotten about. People nearly always use it when something that’s been missing makes a welcome return. But a blast is an explosion, it’s abrupt, violent. It leaves scars and it burns. (*GD*, i, p. 5)

For Clare, this reminder of the past disrupts the relative peace and security of the present, in which memory can easily be subdued: ‘days have passed, sometimes months have passed, when I haven’t thought about it at all’ (*GD*, xxxv, p. 47). Yet memory and remembering are at the very heart of this play, which is, in many ways, an attempt to reconstruct (and, in so doing, to control) the events of the past. Moreover, although only two characters appear onstage during the course of the play, these characters are divided into their past and present selves (Clare and Adult Clare; Emma and Adult Emma) and so the piece requires four female actors for performance. Thus, the past is presented onstage in its own physical space and there appears to be a clearly demarcated temporal boundary between the violent actions of the past and the reconstructed present in which Emma, if not Clare, has managed to create ‘a new

life' (*GD*, ix, p. 18). In the present-day of the play, both characters have removed themselves from the familiar landscape of their shared past which consisted of 'that street' and 'that school' (*GD*, vii, p. 16). As the play progresses, however, the boundary between past and present becomes more fluid and -- accordingly -- their landscapes begin to merge. The tendency to demarcate the past in terms of space is a recognised response to a traumatic event in that

those who have suffered a traumatic episode remain attached to an internal landscape formed in the past, and the difficulties experienced in integrating it psychically involve the construction of a defensive border that divides one part of the psyche from another.¹⁵

Moreover, the fact that these temporal--spatial boundaries begin to break down in the play suggests the process of traumatic reenactment, in which the landscapes of the past and present are brought together by the telling of the survivor's narrative, and 'a reciprocal willingness on the part of others to listen, bear witness and ... to "share the burden of pain"'.¹⁶ Thematically, then, *Girls and Dolls* tackles issues of memory, witnessing and testimony, and the aftermath of violence, with the result that it is a play which has very particular resonances for a Northern Irish audience. Moreover, the fact that there are two protagonists -- both of whom are implicated in the violent act, and both of whom are involved in its reconstruction -- reflects the spatial demarcation of the Northern Irish landscape since, as Graham Dawson has argued, 'grief and mourning, as well as politics, have been split in two, polarized across the axis of violence'.¹⁷ By means of murals and other visual displays, the different sides of the Northern Irish community share in the act of commemoration while simultaneously using these acts as a means to mark their antagonism towards one another in presenting a 'highly selective narrative focused on what the *other* side have done to *us*, what

we have suffered and how *our* people have fought back'.¹⁸ Similarly, the characters of Clare and Emma are at once united and divided by the act of remembering past violence.

In analysing the way that violence is represented spatially within *Girls and Dolls*, Gay McAuley's taxonomy of space in performance provides a means by which to 'conceptualize, define and name the aspects of spatial function needed for meaningful discussion of theatrical semiosis'.¹⁹ While McAuley does not directly deal with the question of national or regional location and its impact upon the performance event, her taxonomy is broad and encompassing and it provides a useful framework for an analysis of this play within its Northern Irish context. My emphasis in this chapter is upon the textual and conceptual configurations of space within the piece, rather than the physical realities of the performance venue -- not least because the Tinderbox Theatre Company production was designed to tour and was presented in ten different performance spaces across Northern Ireland. Nevertheless, many of the physical realities of the performance event are still at work, including the relationship between the performers and the audience. I will therefore consider two aspects of McAuley's taxonomy in some detail. First, the 'fictional place' of the play, which relates to the various different locales embedded within the text and their relationship to the physical reality of the performance space (for example, whether these locales are represented onstage or offstage).²⁰ Second, the 'presentational space', which refers to the way that the fictional place is represented on the stage and the proxemics of performers in their occupation of this space.²¹ One of the most notable aspects of Tinderbox's theatre-making process, is the company's constant awareness that it is producing work for a specific audience: its mission statement asserts that its aim is to produce, 'dynamic new theatre plays that resonate strongly with audiences in Belfast, Northern Ireland and beyond'.²² Indeed, while Northern Ireland is currently the only constituent part of the United Kingdom not to have its own national theatre institution, the system of producing companies which exists within the region work together

to function, *de facto*, as a national theatre organisation. S. E. Wilmer has noted the central position the audience takes in the meaning-making process at work within the idea of a 'national theatre'; he has described this kind of institution as an arena which serves as 'a microcosm of the national community, passing judgements on images of itself'.²³ With this in mind, this chapter also considers the ways in which the theatre company negotiated in this case the positioning of the audience and performers in relation to the theatre event. While the audience were never required to move from their space within the theatre auditorium physically, they were required to engage with the onstage action ethically -- as such, the perceived boundary between 'audience space' and 'performance space' was destabilised.

Violence, Gender and the Organisation of 'Fictional Place'

Girls and Dolls was written for an all-female cast and this was one of the things about it which initially garnered critical attention because, as one reviewer contended, within the context of Northern Irish theatre 'there simply aren't enough plays for women.'²⁴ Similarly, the sociologist Linda Connolly has argued that, 'until recently women were simply left out of academic representations of the Troubles'.²⁵ If they have been similarly inconspicuous in dramatic literature from Northern Ireland, this is due in part to the fact that men have been more visible as active agents in the political conflict and, by contrast, 'women's political identities are viewed as passive and consensual'.²⁶ Thus, where women do appear onstage in plays for and about Northern Ireland, they are generally represented as 'peace makers rather than active political and transformative citizens in political analysis',²⁷ and are therefore quite often confined to the home or other domestic areas. According to Lorraine Dowler, the threat of violence in public spaces within Northern Ireland has resulted in an amplification of the traditional opposition between 'public/ masculine space' and 'private/ feminine space', and

that this in turn has led to the 'spatial construction of gender roles'.²⁸ In Northern Irish theatre, women are associated most often with the home: they are continually cast in the roles of wife, mother, daughter; and they are expected to protect their domestic space from outside threat. *Girls and Dolls* is unusual, then, not only because it requires an all-female cast, but also because it tells a story of violence enacted by female perpetrators upon a female victim. Clare and Emma, the only characters to appear onstage throughout the course of this play, are neither passive nor objective; rather they are the perpetrators of the violent act at the centre of the play. Furthermore, their position as subjects or agents of the action is made clear from their location within the landscape of the play since we rarely see these characters in their homes. In the 'present' of the play, Clare and Emma meet in the anonymous space of a hotel room; in the past they are more often to be found on the street, in the park, or at the treehouse.

ADULT CLARE. I liked being outside, it was better outside.

ADULT EMMA. Why? ...

ADULT CLARE. I was happier -- I was happier in the street, in the park, in the tree house... (*GD*, xvii, p. 26)

With the exception of the hotel room, these are outside, unregulated spaces which do not offer the safety of the home -- yet, nor do they represent the level of domestic confinement which Lorraine Dowler has described in terms of a 'prison sentence'.²⁹

Domestic spaces within *Girls and Dolls* are largely represented as places to escape from, rather than seek refuge in. Far from being places of sanctuary, when we do catch glimpses of Clare and Emma's homes it is clear that they are not environments which provide safety and protection. As suggested by her personal appearance as 'a walking wrinkle' (*GD*, viii, p. 16), Emma's home is chaotic, disorganised and without a clear figure of authority;

details which later come to be used as evidence in her defence after the crime has been committed: 'Her mother's sick -- her father drinks ... She dresses in rags and she doesn't get fed, poor, poor little Emma' (*GD*, ix, p. 19). By contrast, Clare's outward appearance suggests an ordered, affluent home life; she is 'always so neat' (*GD*, viii, p. 17) and her parents give her so many gifts that her bedroom looks like a 'toyshop' (*GD*, xvi, p. 25). Yet these external markers conceal a more profound level of abuse and neglect. The disturbing sexual undercurrents of Clare's father's attentions -- implied at various points in the text -- are made evident in scene twenty-five of the play when he uses an apparent concern for the neatness of her appearance as an excuse for a sexual attack:

CLARE'S FATHER. Get in here. (*Pause.*) Out gallivanting all day again.

CLARE. Sorry, Daddy.

CLARE'S FATHER. Your dress is all dirty.

CLARE. I know.

CLARE'S FATHER. Take it off.

CLARE. I will. I'm going to. I'm going up to bed now.

CLARE'S FATHER. What? And drag muck upstairs too? Do you think that's a good idea? ... Take it off now.

CLARE. But Daddy—

CLARE'S FATHER. Don't make me get angry with you, Clare. Do as I say. (*GD*, xxv, pp. 32-3)

While this is certainly a space which is regulated by a figure of authority, it serves to invert Dowler's spatial dichotomy since it is hard to imagine how Clare could be more at risk in a public space than she is at home.

This scene is one of five which takes place inside Clare's house and each time the action of the play returns to this location, it moves progressively deeper into the interior of the building: it begins in the kitchen; moves into the living room; and ultimately ends with a number of scenes in Clare's bedroom. The first scene which occurs in the bedroom is scene forty-three, in which Clare's mother prepares for a week-long holiday: during which time Clare will be left alone with her father. Clare's mother's main concern is that Clare will continue to look neat during her absence and she has prepared a different outfit for each day of the week, 'I'm going to hang them up in order, so you just have to lift them out.' It would seem that the appearance of order and neatness is more important to her than Clare's physical or emotional wellbeing, 'don't be walking about like a tramp, Clare' (*GD*, xliii, p. 56). Similarly, several scenes later, Emma discovers Clare sitting on the floor of her room with a basin of water trying to scrub the room and its contents clean. Beside her, there is a 'collection of naked dolls' and she is repeating 'I need to clean up the mess... I need to tidy the whole room...' (*GD*, xlvi, p. 59). To Clare's mind, the room is 'filthy... dirty ... disgusting' and her main concern is to make the room acceptable for her mother, 'I need to tidy it all up cos when Mammy comes back... When Mammy comes back she'll kill me' (*GD*, xlvi, p. 59). There is nothing comforting or secure about this domestic space, rather Clare finds it difficult to separate her feelings about the room from the violence she has experienced within it: 'I hate this room... I hate this fucking room' (*GD*, xvi, p. 25). Furthermore, far from providing a sense of security, Clare's mother increases the feeling of threat within the room and it is her insistence upon maintaining the appearance of 'domestic order' which is shown to be so oppressive.³⁰

Dowler has argued that within certain elements of Northern Irish society -- in particular, catholic, republican communities such as that depicted in *Girls and Dolls* -- mothers are accorded respect because they are responsible for nurturing new generations of

political agents. Accordingly, 'motherhood' in Northern Ireland is intrinsically connected to the '(re)production of the body politic', in that 'it has become a Catholic Irish woman's nationalistic duty to produce and raise children for the generation of Irish votes.'³¹ Becoming a mother is not optional for women within this society. Nor is the position of 'mother' limited to women who already have children since all females have the 'potential' to become mothers and, as Rolston claims, 'the concern with protecting goes far beyond the bounds of family'.³² In *Girls and Dolls*, then, we are presented with a parade of ineffective and unwilling 'mother' figures since, according to this logic, women have little choice when it comes to taking on the role. Even Clare and Emma, who are ten years old in the time period of the play's flashbacks, are assumed to be capable of caring for the baby Shannon on the grounds that 'all wee girls love babies' (*GD*, xxxiv, p. 46). Legally, Clare and Emma are children; within the value system of the Northern Irish community which this play depicts, however, they are also potentially mothers. Yet if, as Rolston contends, the role of 'mother' is 'the only proper, acceptable, natural role for a woman' in Northern Irish literature,³³ in *Girls and Dolls* the role of mother is secondary to the appearance of motherliness. Thus, Clare's understanding of her relationship with her mother is encoded within her own attitude towards her dolls 'I want her washed, I want all of them clean...I never play with it. As long as it looks okay, it doesn't matter if it's broken, it just sits there, it just sits there and gets looked at' (*GD*, xlvi, p. 60). As a result, the representation of Northern Ireland's socio--cultural landscape at work within this play is at odds with that outlined by social scientists such as Dowler, Lysaght and Basten, *et al.* For example, Rolston asserts that the perceived security of domestic spaces in Northern Ireland is inextricably bound to the equivalence between the role of 'mother' and that of 'peace maker':

As mothers, women care for children: they attempt to protect children from the ravages that life, especially life outside the domestic sphere, can bring. Violence, in

particular, threatens children and the stability of family life and as such is abhorrent to mothers.³⁴

In *Girls and Dolls*, however, all the victims of violence are children (Clare is the victim of her father's abuse; Shannon is the victim of the murder committed by Clare and Emma) and all violent acts are committed within a domestic setting. The role of mother still exists, but it does not function in the way that Rolston describes and it is for this reason that the 'text of fear' by which the characters live is overturned. Clare and Emma find it difficult to interpret what specific territories within the play symbolise and they therefore struggle to adapt their behaviour in order to ensure their own safety, let alone the safety of the toddler Shannon.

Clare and Emma's struggle to find a suitable place within their world is mapped out by the fictional places of the play. In all, eight scenes take place within the girl's homes, while nine occur on 'the street'. As the play progresses, however, Clare and Emma begin to appear more frequently in the hinterland location of 'Clare's front steps'. They are on the threshold -- quite literally; but also on a more symbolic level -- since they are situated somewhere between Dowler's dichotomy of masculine and feminine space. (They are also, of course, on the threshold between childhood and adolescence.) Above all, it is the tree house which is the space that most clearly represents their transitional position. Given the dichotomy between public/ masculine/ violent space and domestic/ feminine/ peaceful space which exists in models of Northern Irish society, the tree house (at least at first) represents an opportunity for Clare and Emma to create an entirely new kind of space within the world they inhabit. The tree house exists on the outskirts of the rigidly-mapped landscape of their community: 'you don't want your secret hideaway on your doorstep, do you?' (*GD*, xviii, p. 27). As such, it is a liminal space in the sense that it represents 'a storehouse of possibilities... a striving after new forms and structure'.³⁵ Consequently, Clare and Emma attempt to use the tree house to create a new space for themselves -- an alternative, perhaps,

to their existing domestic spaces since, in Clare's words, the tree house is 'safe' (*GD*, xix, p. 27). As they decorate and make their 'secret hideaway' comfortable, however, it becomes more difficult to maintain the boundaries between the tree house and the domestic spaces they are attempting to 'escape' from (*GD*, xix, p. 27). Indeed, the divisions between these different spaces prove to be more fluid than expected; as when Emma uses money given to Clare by her father to purchase a carpet for the tree house:

ADULT EMMA. Your father gave you that money and you sent me to the shop with it. You sent me there and you told me to buy the red rug...

ADULT CLARE. I gave you his money to get rid of it and what did you do? You carpeted my other world with it, with him. (*GD*, xxvi, p. 33)

The red rug, like a blood stain on the floor of the tree house, demonstrates that the boundaries between these 'worlds' have been ruptured and, for Clare, the space is 'ruined'. Again, the play delineates a spatial demarcation of 'safe' and 'threatening' space, and then immediately challenges this -- demonstrating that boundaries are rarely, if ever, fixed and unbreachable.

In raising questions about the perceived security of domestic spaces, this play also problematizes the essentialist gender binary that scholars like Rolsten have observed, in which 'men come to represent violence and women peace with all the force of a Greek myth'.³⁶ In many ways, *Girls and Dolls* can be seen as a coming of age narrative, in which Clare and Emma attempt to negotiate questions of gender and agency while growing up against the backdrop of the Troubles. While characters such as Aunt Rita, a devout Catholic who is described as a 'good woman' (*GD*, vii, p. 16), and ultra-feminine Laura who likes 'Barbie things, Barbie clothes, Barbie stationary [*sic*], Barbie cars, Barbie pets, everything' (*GD*, vi, p. 15), suggest different gender models, Clare and Emma struggle to conform to any of these. In both cases it is their propensity for violence which marks the girls' behaviour out as unfeminine, and therefore unacceptable. Emma's violence is physical, reflexive and hot

blooded 'If I'm caught fighting again, I'm dead. I'm deader than dead. She'll kill me' (*GD*, iv, p. 12). Because Emma's violence is visible, it is easier to control; the violent behaviour which Clare displays, however, is less predictable, and therefore much more troubling. Thus Clare is described in terms of a bomb, 'you blew up and there were pieces of you everywhere' (*GD*, xxxiii, p. 42), and it is she who is punished for the girls' joint crime. Emma, by contrast, '[is]n't punished at all' (*GD*, v, p. 13), instead her behaviour is controlled and she is carefully coached by those around her:

ADULT CLARE. ... Who told you that?

ADULT EMMA. I don't know. People. I can't remember.

ADULT CLARE. And you believed it. You didn't question it? (*GD*, iii, p. 8)

Clare has had little freedom of movement following the event because of her physical incarceration; in order to control her potential for violence, she is fixed in a single space. Yet Emma too has been restricted: she can no longer remain in the familiar landscape of the world she inhabited with Clare, and even her memories of this world are subtly manipulated by her family so that the 'text of fear' of her childhood is effectively dismantled.

In the present of the play, both Adult Clare and Adult Emma are depicted as 'outsiders' in their community; they have failed to negotiate the terrain of their childhood world and have therefore had to find a new place for themselves beyond its parameters. For Emma, in particular, this is difficult to accept:

ADULT EMMA. When it was over... I thought, I honestly thought I'd be playing in the street again that Monday. But people didn't want me, not in that street, not in that school. People wanted me to disappear, so I did... I went to a new school, a new street, in a new city. Rita took me away. (*GD*, vii, p. 16)

Although she is exiled from the community in which she was born, Emma manages to rebuild her life in a 'new city', which is apparently mapped along very similar lines to the one she and Clare inhabited as children. Clare, however, is left in a kind of limbo: we know very little about the space that she inhabits beyond the anonymous hotel room in which she and Emma meet. Indeed, it would seem that her isolation is part of her punishment; or, perhaps, her rehabilitation programme. Certainly, there is a clear sense that a distance must be maintained between these two women:

ADULT EMMA. You know they say that when certain individuals come together, it's explosive, like a chemical reaction, on their own nothing would happen -- it's the meeting that's dangerous...

ADULT CLARE. They pollute each other.

ADULT EMMA. I think so.

ADULT CLARE. You believe that.

ADULT EMMA. No. But people do.

ADULT CLARE. It's the meeting that's dangerous. Together they're braver, together they do things they couldn't have on their own. (*GD*, xii, p. 22)

If the need to clearly demarcate space is understood as a way of providing 'safe' places, the same, then, might be true for people. This play, therefore, addresses the approach to 'peace-keeping' which characterises the Northern Ireland conflict and questions the premise that, if strict boundaries are maintained, violence will not occur. Ultimately, the play rejects this partitionist idea since dramaturgically it shifts between different time frames, locations, and character representation with such frequency and fluidity that there is very little sense of any dedicated space. At times, the past and present collide. For example, in scene sixteen the young Clare and Emma break into a scene which is taking place, in the present, between Adult Clare and Adult Emma at a particularly dramatic moment:

ADULT CLARE. I never wanted it.

ADULT EMMA. You cut off all its hair.

ADULT CLARE. You were shouting...

EMMA. No! No give it to me! (*GD*, xvi, p. 25)

Clare and Emma's past and present selves can cut across a period of more than twenty years and break into different temporal 'spaces' (which are, of course, represented physically on stage) in order to communicate with one another. The notion of character is similarly unstable within the play since four actors depict, at various points in the play, thirteen different characters. The crossing of boundaries and the violation of discrete spaces is therefore a central idea within the play. Indeed, it is in the meeting between Adult Clare and Adult Emma, that this play deals with the issues surrounding the trauma; the result of violence which has occurred in the past and which continues to be played out in the memories of the perpetrators.

Witnessing Performance and the Organisation of the 'Presentational Space'

If McGee's playtext demarcates violence within the landscape of Northern Ireland, the map that it presents will inevitably be transformed as a result of the decisions made by actors, directors and designers during the process of production. While this is an incontrovertible fact of all theatre-making processes, it was, in a sense, heightened with regard to the Tinderbox production of *Girls and Dolls*; not least because the company commissioned and developed the play in collaboration with McGee. Taking as its mission the aim to develop new theatre writing in and for Northern Ireland, Tinderbox is concerned not only with the playwrights it

works with and the audiences it attracts but also with the ‘artistic environment in which its work takes place’.³⁷ Thus the company’s approach to making theatre is always notably self-conscious and this is reflected in its employment of a permanent and dedicated dramaturg. The role of dramaturg has only recently been introduced into the Anglophone theatre and there remains some confusion regarding the function of an individual working under this title. While there have been several competing attempts to define the term, a general consensus exists around the idea that this role is chameleon-like, in that it is ‘slippery, elastic and inclusive’,³⁸ and therefore that there can be ‘no specific definitions independent of specific contexts’.³⁹ In a sense, the dramaturg has a fundamentally reflexive role because he or she must adapt to the creative landscape which is already in place. By introducing a dramaturg into its theatre-making process, then, Tinderbox was effectively overturning conventional ‘creative territories’ within the rehearsal room, since the ill-defined nature of this role has the potential to challenge the perceived stability of accepted roles such as ‘actor’, ‘director’, ‘designer’ and even ‘audience’. Indeed, while the actors performing *Girls and Dolls* struggled to explain what the dramaturg’s role was in the rehearsal room, all felt that the process was more dynamic, challenging and fruitful because of her presence. One actor stated in interview, that the presence of the dramaturg ‘opened up’ the theatre-making process:

There’s been collaboration from day one, even in the workshops we’ve always worked together. There’s been no-one saying this is my job, or this is your job, we’ve worked as a group.⁴⁰

As a result, the text of *Girls and Dolls* was subjected to an unusually rigorous process of development and rehearsal in which the creative territories, as well as the physical and spatial relationships between participants, were carefully defined for the purposes of this specific production. Furthermore, Tinderbox was working with a Northern Irish audience in mind and the company aimed to ensure that the play would be as relevant as possible to a post-

ceasefire, peace-process community. Thus the representation of violence and its aftermath were central concerns in the theatre-making process.

In early drafts of the play, the action was written for two, rather than four, characters. (However, the two female actors taking on these roles were also to represent, by means of impersonation, all the many different characters who people the world of the play -- including Clare and Emma as both their child and adult selves.) These early versions follow a simple reverse chronology and Clare and Emma speak with a unified purpose:

EMMA. I can go back there in an instant.

CLARE. It was bright.

EMMA. In a second.

CLARE. And it buzzed.

EMMA. To start with ... in the beginning.

CLARE. To begin, introduce, initiate, activate.

EMMA. It's best, I suppose, to find a point.

CLARE. Establish, launch, instigate, originate.⁴¹

There is no sense that Clare and Emma are talking to one another here, rather their sometimes shared and sometimes competing narrative is delivered as direct address to the audience: they are engaged in an act of storytelling. With the play's expansion to include four characters in later drafts, however, this dynamic was altered since a larger cast allowed the company to disrupt the chronology of the narrative and experiment with the spatial demarcation of the past and the present onstage. The company settled on a stage design which depicted the 'fixed' space of the hotel room in which Adult Clare and Adult Emma meet; surrounded by a 'flexible' space in which Clare and Emma could perform the events of the past. The room

was a small raised platform (approximately two metres squared), which restricted the movements of Adult Clare and Adult Emma considerably. The actors playing young Clare and young Emma had only a little more space in many of the venues at which the play was performed,⁴² but they used the space more fluidly in that they were able to conjure a series of locations, layering one over the other ('Clare's kitchen' became 'Emma's kitchen' for the following scene; 'the Shop' was overwritten by 'Emma's living room'). Thus, while the various places and space of the past collided, the fact that Adult Clare and Adult Emma were confined in a separated space, overlooking this action, emphasised the fact that they were both performers in and observers of their own narrative. Indeed, the company's decision to represent past and present in contiguous space onstage, meant that Adult Clare and Adult Emma effectively adopted the role of audience of their own narrative for large chunks of the action. Even in early drafts of the script the play relied upon storytelling techniques and much of the action took the form of monologues delivered by the adult versions of the characters. The symbiotic relationship between speaker and listener, implied in storytelling, is therefore central to the narrative of the play. The first twenty-five scenes show Clare and Emma negotiating ownership of the narrative; each asserting their own account of events and contesting all others. But at the end of scene twenty-six the reason that Adult Clare requested a meeting with Adult Emma is revealed:

ADULT CLARE. How can I forget before I've even remembered?

ADULT EMMA. What's that supposed to mean?

ADULT CLARE. I didn't bring you here to tell you anything.

ADULT EMMA. Then why am I here?

ADULT CLARE. (*quietly*) I've lost it.

ADULT EMMA. I'm sorry?

ADULT CLARE. (*quietly*) Somehow... it's gone.

ADULT EMMA. I can't make out what you're saying.

ADULT CLARE. I don't remember what happened. (*Beat.*) I brought you here because there are things you can tell me. (*GD*, xxvi, p. 35)

Clare needs to understand what happened in order to be able to move on with her life, and she can only do so by listening to Emma tell the story. The relationship between storyteller and listener is therefore established as being central, not only to the form of the play, but also to its content.

In his book *Making Theatre in Northern Ireland Through and Beyond the Troubles*, Tom Maguire has noted that the use of monologue and other storytelling techniques is common in Northern Irish theatre -- particularly theatre created by women. He claims that this form of performance represents:

a shift in the concern of dramatists from a representation of how the social world might be registered objectively to a depiction of the subjective experience of individuals... Thus, [the use of these techniques] celebrate[s] the subjectivity of the women, validating their experiences and their authority.⁴³

In *Girls and Dolls*, however, the use of storytelling is not celebratory; rather it is a means of reconstructing the 'broken narratives and disrupted lives' of a traumatic past.⁴⁴ Returning to the 'story' of the past is also, for Clare and Emma, an opportunity to revisit the site of violence. In this way, the act of remembering in the play is suggestive more of a traumatic reenactment than of a celebration of subjectivity. Moreover, While Maguire claims that storytelling has the power to 'validate' the experience of the teller, in *Girls and Dolls* Emma and Clare struggle to find a way of telling their story (or stories) from their own perspective. Emma, for example, recalls that she understood Clare's behaviour to be 'inappropriate', and

Clare responds ‘those are somebody else’s words, Emma!’ (*GD*, xxxv, p. 48). As reinforced by the casting of the play, Adult Clare and Adult Emma are unable to recognise themselves in the Clare and Emma from the past: they are, quite literally, different people. There is a ‘history that literally *has no place*, neither in the past, in which it was not fully experienced, nor in the present, in which its precise images and enactments are not fully understood’⁴⁵ and it is for this reason that they are unable to escape it; they are continually ‘moving away but getting closer’ to the moment in which the event occurred (*GD*, xlix, p. 72).

Cathy Caruth has argued that, for victims of trauma, ‘reenactments of the past do not simply serve as testimony to an event, but may also, paradoxically enough, bear witness to a past that was never fully experienced as it occurred.’⁴⁶ Certainly, the idea that the moment of the killing at the centre of *Girls and Dolls* was ‘never fully experienced’ is contained within Clare’s claim that she doesn’t ‘remember what happened’. Similarly, Emma’s reluctance to admit her role in what took place is also suggestive of the effects of trauma in that she has allowed ‘the event to bypass consciousness [and] become emotionally constricted’.⁴⁷ Indeed, just as Bessel A. van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart argue that extreme instances of trauma can manifest in multiple personality disorder in that ‘fixed ideas develop into entirely separate identities’,⁴⁸ it is possible to read the characters Clare and Emma as being representative of two aspects of a single personality. They are jointly responsible for what happened, and they cannot reach the end of the story unless they are once again united. Thus, Adult Emma asks Adult Clare, ‘You just want to know what happened... And once you do, that’s the end of it? I mean, as far as I’m concerned. Once you know, you’re finished with me?’ (*GD*, xxvi, p. 36). There may even be an implicit suggestion here (in the question: ‘once you know, you’re finished with me?’) that Emma will cease to exist once Clare has accepted this character as part of her own personality. Regardless of whether they are a single entity with multiple personalities or two separate individuals, however, it is the idea of ‘bearing

witness' to the traumatic memory which is central to their exchange. Indeed, while traumatic reenactment is generally 'a solitary activity',⁴⁹ in this play Clare and Emma work together to reconstruct the past. They do not, however, always take an equal part in the telling, since occasionally one or other assumes the role of audience: to employ a phrase, which is used in both trauma theory and performance theory they act as 'witness' to one another's story.

The concept of audience as a witness, is a critical concern arising from performance theory of the late twentieth century. Tim Etchells, of performance group Forced Entertainment, has argued that this concept has shifted the position and function of audiences of contemporary theatre in that 'to witness an event is to be present at it in some fundamentally ethical way, to feel the weight of things and one's own place in them, even if that place is simply, for the moment, as an onlooker'.⁵⁰ Anne Whitehead describes a similar process of providing 'testimony' of the traumatic event, which relies upon a 'contract' between listener and teller. The listener necessarily has an 'emotional investment in the testimony'.⁵¹ Consequently, by listening to one another's story in this way, Clare and Emma are implicitly recognising their position *within* the narrative; and therefore their complicity in what occurred. And, in doing so, they are also helping to direct the audience towards an appropriate model of response: if Clare and Emma are 'witnessing' one another's stories then the audience is, in turn, bearing witness to their combined traumatic narrative. Thus the perceived distinctions between audience space and performance space are destabilised; the audience are 'drawn in' to the dramatic (and, indeed, moral) space which is occupied by the performers. It is, perhaps, in this aspect that the play moves furthest away from Maguire's model of storytelling in Northern Irish drama. He argues that, in storytelling, the audience exists 'only as a voiceless addressee, [and is therefore] entirely reliant on the performer to organise their perspective on the scenes enacted; to direct it to where it should attend'.⁵² Yet in *Girls and Dolls*, storytelling is used as a means by which the audience is implicated

ethically in the violent events of the play. Indeed, by acting as ‘witness’ to the story that Clare and Emma gradually piece together, the audience symbolically colludes in the act itself. Ravenhill has suggested that the Bulger case acted as a symbol for broader experiences of trauma and grief: ‘somehow we all saw ourselves in that video image. Saw ourselves as we are in our dreams, as all the figures: both as Thompson and Venables, the killers, and as Bulger, the victim...’.⁵³ And perhaps this is also an appropriate way of conceptualizing the relationship between performers and audience in *Girls and Dolls*; particularly given the post-conflict context and the wider societal move to engage with traumatic narratives emerging from the Troubles.

While I have argued that Tinderbox developed this production with a specific audience in mind, one reviewer suggested that it failed to ‘really connect with audiences in Northern Ireland’ because it ends at the moment when the violent act is committed:

The whole reconciliation motif is underdeveloped here, since the play charts the events leading up to the murder but, unlike precursors such as Tom Murphy’s *Bailegangaire*, it gives us no sense of the consequences of the telling of the story. We don’t know if the two achieve the closure that they clearly long for. The play stops just when things start to get interesting in terms of its relevance to post-conflict reconciliation initiatives in Northern Ireland.⁵⁴

Yet such a reading of the play is rather functional in that it assumes that theatre is merely a mechanism of ‘post-conflict reconciliation initiatives’. Indeed, I would argue that it is the process of reenactment, as opposed to the ‘closure’ of reconciliation, which is at issue here. It is the telling of the story, rather than the outcome of this, which really matters. For this reviewer, however, the fact that the play ends with the moment of violence means that the narrative is unresolved -- and therefore it lacks a ‘tidy ending’.⁵⁵ Certainly a sense of closure is common to plays that employ an Aristotelian model of dramaturgy in which there must be a clear beginning, middle and end to the action which occurs. By contrast, *Girls and Dolls*

begins in the middle of Clare and Emma's story and winds its way back to the beginning. Yet John Countryman and Charlotte Headrick have argued that life in Northern Ireland is characterised by 'uncertainty and open endings' due to the constant possibility that violence will erupt.⁵⁶ They argue, therefore, that a sense of closure would inevitably serve to reinforce 'the status quo',⁵⁷ and that a clear resolution would 'merely confirm our assumptions and affirm an existing state of affairs'.⁵⁸ *Girls and Dolls*' unusual construction is arguably, then, a reflection of McGee's attempt to 'find new ways to deal dramaturgically with the violence'.⁵⁹ At the start of the play, Clare and Emma possess only a traumatic memory of the event, which Whitehead has described as 'a confrontation with a shocking and unexpected event, which [can] not be fitted into prior frameworks of understanding'.⁶⁰ By the end of the play, this has been converted into a narrative memory which 'recognises the past as past'.⁶¹ Thus, it is the process of narrativizing the traumatic event by means of testimony and witnessing, which provides these characters -- and, by implication, their audience -- with the possibility to fully address past violence.

It is the geo--political context of *Girls and Dolls* which underpins the distinction between McGee's representation of violence from the English responses to the Bulger case Ravenhill has pointed to. While an apparently senseless act of violence, perpetrated by and enacted upon juveniles, seemed a shocking reflection of the barbarity of consumer society in England, the reality of casual violence was already deeply inscribed in the landscape of Northern Ireland by 1993. Indeed this 2006 production of the play demonstrates how eloquently the concept of space can be used to represent violence and its aftermath in Northern Irish theatre. Not only can the demarcation of space within the fictional place of the play challenge the ways in which violence is gendered within this context, but the careful positioning of the audience in relation to the presentational space of the performance can also draw attention to important concerns surrounding witnessing and testimony in the aftermath

of violence. Even the negotiation of creative territories in the rehearsal and production process can influence the way in which the question of violence is approached. Perhaps most notable, however, in this production was the way in which spatial demarcations were used to represent temporal realities and the fact that the past and the present appeared onstage alongside one another. Indeed, in a post-ceasefire, post-conflict context, space -- and the demarcation of 'territory' -- remains the primary means of representing violence and its aftermath in the dramatic landscape of Northern Ireland.

¹ Mark Ravenhill, 'A Tear in the Fabric: the James Bulger Murder and New Theatre Writing in the Nineties', *NTQ* 20:4 (2004), pp. 305-314, p. 308.

² *Ibid.*, p. 312.

³ The plays that Ravenhill refers to are his own *Shopping and Fucking* (1996), *Handbag* (1998), and *Some Explicit Polaroids* (1999), as well as the work of writers including Sarah Kane, Joe Penhall, Patrick Marber and Martin McDonagh. The Bulger case excited so much media attention that it brought other, similar instances into focus -- in particular, the case of Mary Bell (who murdered two young boys while still a juvenile herself), which received renewed press attention in 2003 and which is the subject of Jack Thorne's *Fanny and Faggot* (2007) and Simon Stephens's *Morning* (2012). Again, these plays focus primarily upon the motivation for, and the details of, the murder, rather than its aftermath.

⁴ Downing Street Declaration in Cox, Michael, Adrian Guelke and Fiona Stephen, eds, *A Farewell to Arms? From 'Long War' to Long Peace in Northern Ireland* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 200), p. 327.

⁵ Ravenhill, p. 308.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Denis Cosgrove, 'Landscape and Landschaft', *GHI Bulletin*, 35 (Fall 2004), pp. 57-71, p. 57. Available from

http://www.ghi-dc.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=182&Itemid=100

[Accessed 5 February 2012].

⁸ Victor Mesev, Peter Shirlow and Joni Downs, 'The Geography of Conflict and Death in Belfast, Northern Ireland', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 99, 5 (2009), pp. 893-903.

⁹ See, for example, Karen Lysaght and Anne Basten, 'Violence, Fear and the 'Everyday': Negotiating Spatial Practice in the City of Belfast' in Elizabeth A. Stanko, ed., *The Meanings of Violence* (London; New York: Routledge, 2003), pp.224-242; and Lorraine Dowler, "'And They Think I'm Just a Nice Old Lady" Women and War in Belfast, Northern Ireland', *Gender, Place and Culture* 5, 2 (1998), pp. 159-76.

¹⁰ Lysaght and Basten, p. 224.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Willmar Sauter, 'Introduction' in Willmar Sauter, ed., *Theatrical Events: Borders, Dynamics, Frames* (2004) pp. 3-14, p. 11.

¹³ Susan Bennett, *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 103.

¹⁴ Lisa McGee, *Girls and Dolls* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2006), i, p. 5. All subsequent scene/ page references from this edition are given in parentheses, abbreviated as *GD*, after quotations in the text.

¹⁵ Graham Dawson, *Making Peace With the Past?: Memory, Trauma and the Irish Troubles* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), p. 66.

¹⁶ Kim Lacy Rogers, Selma Leydesdorff and Graham Dawson, eds, *Trauma and Life Stories: International Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 6. (quoting from Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*)

¹⁷ Dawson, *Making Peace with the Past?: Memory, Trauma and the Irish Troubles* (Manchester: MUP, 2007), p. 3.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Gay McAuley, *Space in Performance: Making Meaning in the Theatre* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), p. 24.

²⁰ Ibid, p. 30.

²¹ Ibid, pp. 28-9.

²² 'New Writing at Tinderbox', in McGee, *Girls and Dolls*, p. xiii.

²³ S. E. Wilmer, *Theatre, Society and the Nation: Staging American Identities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 2.

²⁴ Carole-Anne Upton, 'Review of *Girls and Dolls* by Lisa McGee', *Irish Theatre Magazine* (Winter 2006), pp. 69-71, p. 69.

²⁵ Linda Connolly, 'Feminist Politics and the Peace Process', *Capital and Class* 69 (1999), pp. 145-59, p. 150.

²⁶ Ibid, p. 152.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Dowler, p. 160.

²⁹ Ibid, p. 165.

³⁰ Maguire, p. 104.

³¹ Dowler, p. 164.

³² Bill Rolston, 'Mothers, Whores and Villains: Images of Women in Novels of the Northern Ireland Conflict', *Race and Class* 31, 1 (1996??), pp. 41-57, p. 44.

³³ Ibid, p. 45.

³⁴ Ibid, p. 44.

³⁵ Victor Turner, 'Are There Universals of Performance in Myth, Ritual and Drama?', Richard Schechner, ed., *By Means of Performance: Intercultural Studies of Theatre and Ritual* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 12.

³⁶ Ibid, p. 45.

³⁷ Tinderbox Theatre Company, 'About Us', Available at: <http://www.tinderbox.org.uk/about-us/> [Accessed 9 August 2012.]

³⁸ Cathy Turner and Synne K. Behrnt, *Dramaturgy and Performance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 14.

³⁹ Mary Luckhurst, *Dramaturgy: A Revolution in Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. ??

⁴⁰ Bernadette Brown, interview with the author, 17 November 2006.

⁴¹ McGee, *Girls and Dolls*, draft one (unpublished document, Tinderbox Theatre Company Archive), p. 2.

⁴² The play toured to a range of different venues across Northern Ireland, including community halls and arts centres. As a result, the stage size and shape varied throughout the run; however all of the venues might be considered 'intimate' in that they accommodated audiences of less than 300.

⁴³ Maguire, p. 115.

⁴⁴ Anne Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), p. 5.

⁴⁵ Cathy Caruth, ed., *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore; London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), p. 153.

⁴⁶ Caruth, p. 151.

⁴⁷ Bessel A. van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart, 'The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma', in Caruth, ed., *Trauma*, p. 164.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Caruth, p. 153.

⁵⁰ Tim Etchells, *Certain Fragments: Contemporary Performance and Forced Entertainment* (London; New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 17.

⁵¹ Whitehead, p. 34.

⁵² Maguire, p. 144.

⁵³ Ravenhill, p. 309.

⁵⁴ Upton, p. 71.

⁵⁵ John Countryman and Charlotte Headrick, 'The "End" of Violence in Northern Ireland: Gender, Dramaturgy, and the Limits of Aristotelian Form' in John W. Frick, ed., *Theatre and Violence* (Tuscaloosa: Southeastern Theatre Conference and the University of Alabama Press, 1999), pp. 64-76, p. 69.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid, p. 68.

⁵⁸ Ibid, p. 69.

⁵⁹ Ibid, p. 70.

⁶⁰ Whitehead, p. 140.

⁶¹ Ibid.