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► To cite this version:

Virginie Privas-Bréauté. A Quiet ‘Rehearsal for the Revolution’: ”Quietly” (2012) by Owen McCafferty. 2014. halshs-01342488

HAL Id: halshs-01342488

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-01342488>

Preprint submitted on 16 Oct 2017

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A Quiet ‘Rehearsal for the Revolution’: *Quietly* (2012) by Owen

McCafferty

Virginie Privas Bréauté

Quietly marked Owen McCafferty’s debut at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin. Performed in November 2012, it was the first play the Northern Irish playwright premiered in the Republic. His major plays – *The Waiting List* (1994), *Mojo Mickybo* (1998), *Scenes from the Big Picture* (2003) – were written for the London National Theatre or Northern Irish stages. Like most of his work, *Quietly* articulates the tension between past violence during the Troubles in Northern Ireland and the present as perceived by working-class characters who struggle to come to terms with their past. *Quietly* expresses the difficulties of redemption by staging two enemies of a troubled past and a third character who functions not only as a representative of another community but also as a witness. It examines the triangular relationship of a Polish barman (Robert) who fled his home country because of poverty, Jimmy, a Catholic whose entire life was marked by the murder of his father in 1974 and Ian, a Protestant, who regrets being involved in bombing attacks on Catholics when he was a teenager. He now wants to make amends and has looked for the families of the people he killed. Jimmy has agreed to meet him in Belfast in the pub owned by Robert where his father was murdered, in 2009. The marginal role of Robert, as both an actor and a spectator, recalls the concept of ‘spect-actor’ as developed by Augusto Boal in his book *Theatre of the Oppressed*. That is why, one may view this play as a space for two actors and one ‘spect-actor’ playing political roles towards the aesthetisation of reconciliation. In his review for *Culture Northern Ireland*, Connal Parr observed that Owen McCafferty’s characters pursue ‘their own odysseys of truth and reconciliation [...] quietly.’¹ The playwright focuses on people, their relationship in

Northern Ireland in the twenty-first century and their will to move beyond the Troubles.

Performing this piece in front of Irish audiences discloses his wish to inform them, but how does he do that?

He does not voice political ideas and only mentions the conflict through the experience of two men, yet his play has political undertones. According to Boal, theater always has a political edge: '[...] all theater is necessarily political, because all the activities of man are political and theater is one of them.'² The implied political dimension of McCafferty's characters, tainted by the conflict, invites an analysis which borrows from Boal's reflection on theatre as a political act. Beyond this hopeful thematic thread, the author engages in a dual process of artistic and political shaping of his work. This is how McCafferty reshapes the contours of drama in Ireland.

1. The aesthetisation of politics

McCafferty's characters explain what they have gone through, how they have felt. They must soothe their minds, understand and make understand the Troubles as they lived through them throughout the period. They need to tell and transmit their stories as Jimmy explains: 'No point in it just being me and him,' [...] 'Has to be someone else there to pass the story on'³.

McCafferty gives them the occasion to voice their feelings in this play.

Jimmy is waiting for Ian at Robert's pub on Ormeau Road in Belfast. He has been contacted by the Protestant fifty-two year old man and he has agreed to meet him although he is a Catholic whose father was killed by the UVF some 40 years before. He knows that Ian contacted him to admit he murdered his father but reassures Robert, the bar tenant, as follows: 'there's a man comin in later on to see me – he wants to talk with me – there might be a bit a trouble with him – but it's nothin for you to worry about'⁴. At the beginning, Jimmy is not yet ready to listen to Ian and prefers chatting with Robert:

Ian i led a life – my life

Jimmy i don't fuckin care – (To Robert.) – a pint of dog piss please – score predictions – what are they

Robert three-one now – about thirty minutes to go – difficult – are we betting on this

Jimmy no – i'll make it easy for ya – poland are shite

Robert so are northern ireland

Jimmy less shite

Ian we were both sixteen an now we're both fifty-two

Jimmy we're predicting scores at the moment – as far as i know age has got fuck all to do with that

Ian it means something

Jimmy three-two to northern ireland

Robert four-three to Poland⁵

Their fragmented dialogues are always suffused with violence: Jimmy highly despises Ian and cannot hear his details of the day when he threw the bomb inside the pub. Yet, Ian insists and repeats: 'Let me say what i have to say'⁶. We cannot but note that Ian does not use the modal auxiliary 'must' in this sentence, but rather the periphrase 'have to' as if the decision was not his, as if it was imposed on him by a mighty external force – is it that of the author? Is it his own conscience? Once Jimmy gets calmer, Ian can start afresh as if he were telling a story and says: 'my name is ian gibson – i am fifty-two years old – in nineteen seventy-four i was sixteen'⁷. From that moment on, the audience – and Robert – become aware of what bonds the two men.

When they read the play, the readers are caught by the presence of many dashes which play the role of all other punctuation marks in the dialogues⁸. They are meant to echo the chaotic dimension of the conflict and at the same time, they show that it is high time a bridge between the two communities should be built.

The dashes do not only give the text a fragmented aspect, they also reflect the will of the author to imagine new forms of writing, new poetics. McCafferty has always asserted that his aim was to have his characters speak a 'heightened Belfast dialect' (quoted in an interview with Lynch). Therefore he deliberately misspells the words, has the characters mispronounce them, and rejects some grammatical rules as in: 'aye – was thinkin about not comin in at all – but then i've something to do so here i am'⁹.

To reinforce the idea that the conflict has broken the lives of thousands, the playwright uses figures of speech like anacoluthon or aposopesis. Many sentences are left unfinished. He resorts to stylistic devices so that the Belfast dialect becomes poetic. To give an example, Jimmy says: 'i pick when i want to speak'¹⁰. The violence of his tone against Ian is strengthened by the alliteration and assonance. McCafferty gives rhythm and musicality to his text to both enforce his political message and convey his aesthetic aim. His style is close to that of the great poets from Northern Ireland – Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley or Medbh McGuckian to name a few – whose artistic fiber comes from the desire to write about the conflict and violence poetically. Through the use of poetry and music, they show that Northern Ireland cannot only be characterized by violence, some appeasement through art is also possible there.

After a while, Jimmy interrupts Ian again and says: 'I have to tell this my own way'¹¹. The climax of the play comes when the two men tell the same story from their two different perspectives. Their stories become juxtaposed: the audience gets two versions of that day, two

complementary perspectives¹². Previously, Robert and Jimmy's conversations were also juxtaposed many times as the following excerpt exemplifies:

Robert see where i live – you might like it – you might want to stay there

Jimmy if it's so good why didn't you stay there

Robert good save – your keeper's good – who is he¹³

While they are talking about living in Poland, they are also talking about the football match they are watching. Juxtaposition is a recurring device in McCafferty's plays.

Moreover, the playwright includes new technological devices: text messages on mobile phones. The elliptic style, cryptic meaning and particular font of the messages are other alienating elements in the text. Robert receives and sends text messages at a regular pace to give the play another kind of rhythm¹⁴. This use reminds us of the technique of montage. As soon as the first scene, Robert 'receives a text message'¹⁵. In his review of the play as it was staged at the Abbey at the end of the year 2012, Kabosh artistic director, Hugh Odling Smee, notes that the text messages were projected behind the actor¹⁶. Yet, because of the technical peculiarity of such a device and the lack of some places to provide it, the actor now reads the texts aloud on the stages. The text messages are not projected anymore.

Robert does not talk much. On the contrary, right from the start, he is meant to be a silent witness for Jimmy and Ian's encounter. He indeed watches a lot. In that sense, he can be considered as a 'spect-actor'. If talking is important in the play, watching is an activity which substitutes to speech when it is not enough to be forceful. As a matter of fact, as Ian enters the pub, Jimmy is said to '*hold Robert in place with his stare*'¹⁷. His action is so strong that he does not need any word to accompany it.

Augusto Boal thought that the spectator needed to be trained by theater to acknowledge his power in deciding for himself and his community. Hence his notion of the 'spect-actor' which can be applied to McCafferty's audiences.

In this analysis, we go beyond Boal's idea of the audience becoming actors on the stage. We start from this idea and develop it further. The audience does not intervene on the stage during the performance but, through Robert, they are invited to understand their power on changing the world. That is why it is so important that the play was first performed in Ireland and Northern Ireland and not London. McCafferty explains to Jane Coyle for *Culture Northern Ireland* that he thought *Quietly* was more appropriate for an audience in Ireland than for an audience in London, where he is well known and highly regarded. He set out to write the play for the National Theatre on the South Bank, where he is no stranger but he decided it was not a good idea. He observes:

Quietly started life as a National Theatre commission, an open commission. I wanted to write about the ripple effect of a violent act over a period of time. It was originally a bigger play, with a bigger cast. But the more I worked on the notes and thought about it, I came to realize that the reconciliation element was what was the most important and significant thing. [...] It felt like that was the aspect that was so difficult to escape from, the idea of people confronting that possibility years later. Dramatically, the aftermath is more important. The pain doesn't end with the event. Gradually, the play became smaller and smaller, more closely focused, more condensed. At the end of the day, it was not a play for the National, it would not have worked on any of its stages. So I sent it to the Abbey. 'Was it a hard sell?' It wasn't exactly a hard sell, but there was an element of risk. You have to question whether Dublin audiences are still receptive to what's going on up

here. The world has moved on and we are not the centre of the universe – not that we ever were.¹⁸

McCafferty does not believe in Northern Ireland being at the center of the world. On the contrary, he aims at showing the existence of many centers. The use of dashes, which fragments the text visually, is meant to fragment the view of the spectators and arouse their attention on stage to a myriad of centres of attention. The most telling example arises when the audience gets the different perspectives of the two men on the same day¹⁹. Jimmy explains: ‘there was flesh stuck to the wall across the road – where you were standin – difficult to scrape off – difficult because it’s flesh an you don’t want to scrape it off’²⁰. Scattering flesh across the pub is a strong visual metaphor to catch the audience’s attention to the different stories and have them react.

Boal wanted his theatre to be participatory. His aim was to get the audience participate to the action. Therefore, it was crucial that they listened carefully to the stories on stage. Listening is thus another activity required by didactic drama to teach and learn. As Ian and Jimmy both agree upon:

Ian maybe it’s just about talking

Jimmy talking

Ian yes – and listening²¹

For Connal Parr, it is true, ‘the audience resembles Robert as the other member of the Commission, just listening’²² so as to facilitate reconciliation.

2. Expressing reconciliation

In the magazine *Northern Irish Theatre*, Ryan Crown states that ‘McCafferty’s play is the epitome of the perfect peace process – one that is completely initiated by the individuals involved, and that happens on a personal and intimate level.’²³ The playwright confesses to Jane Coyle: ‘Reconciliation is difficult when you don’t know what is going to come from it. What Ian does is massive and courageous. He has no idea what will happen when he confronts Jimmy, but these two men need to tell their stories. Hard stories. That’s at the core of reconciliation.’²⁴ Robert, a Polish barman, is watching a match on TV in his pub when he should be serving drinks. There are no clients but Jimmy, and eventually Ian, in his pub. And it seems first that Jimmy has also come to watch the match. The repetition of the verb ‘watch’ (which is an action), and not ‘see’ (which is a passive activity) – ‘They watch the match’²⁵ – punctuates the dialogues. It is telling that the match on TV should show the teams of Poland and Northern Ireland competing for the world cup, since years before, in 1974, Jimmy’s father was killed in the same pub as he was watching Poland playing for the cup final. The football match is what links the two periods, while the pub links the two spaces.

In the stage directions, the playwright writes that ‘*Ian enters*’²⁶, and from that moment on, Robert becomes a ‘spect-actor’. He does not only watch the match, he also is a silent witness of the conversation between the two fifty-year-old men. In his review of the play, Connall Parr wonders about the presence of Robert as follows: ‘As Jimmy and Ian piece together what happened all those years ago, Robert hovers in the background. We wonder, why is this man here? He is, in answer, the honest broker: neutral, independent witness to this microcosm of truth and reconciliation.’²⁷

If we study the movements on stage, we realize that the characters seldom move. They remain seated most of the time. This absence of movements echoes the static situation of Northern Ireland. But the rare movements reflect the necessity to go beyond and move. In the stage directions it is said that ‘*Jimmy stands up. Ian stands up. They face each other. The moment lasts, then they sit down.*’²⁸ Finally, later on, ‘*Ian stands up and offers Jimmy his hand. Jimmy stands. They shake hands.*’²⁹ This is a highly symbolical gesture which lets us foresee a possible reconciliation between the two men reflecting a possible reconciliation of the two communities.

Another Northern Irish playwright, Stewart Parker, once wrote that his English teacher, John Malone, had said in the 1970s that ‘drama is the most natural form of education’³⁰. Talking and watching cannot be separated from listening along those lines and this last activity is also crucial in *Quietly* since it is at the heart of reconciliation. As Jimmy admits it, it is the right time for him to listen to what Ian has to say. It would have been too early back then if Ian had wanted to be forgiven. They explain:

Jimmy maybe we should travel back in time – one sixteen-year-old kid saying
they’re sorry to another

Ian i wouldn’t have said it then

Jimmy i wouldn’t have listened³¹

Maturing is the key process for the author when it comes to dealing with the past. McCafferty implies that now, and only now can his characters say sorry and listen and eventually forgive the past actions of a foolish teenager. For Boal ‘theater is change and not simple presentation of what exists: it is becoming and not being.’³² McCafferty aims at underlining the power of man in changing the mentalities. Their lives could have been different as Jimmy states: ‘if that

incident had not have happened i might still believe in god to this day.³³ Jimmy here takes some distance from what happened then.

Distanciation is a further device that McCafferty uses in a new way. His aim is to have audiences learn out of his play. That is why we can qualify it to be neo-didactic. It is first through the projection of the text messages behind the actors that McCafferty aims at creating distance so that spectators understand that it is not real life on stage but a play about reality. It is part of a series of anti-illusionary effects.

Then, the lack of punctuation in the text conveys misunderstandings for readers but also for actors and spectators since it is up to them to interpret the intonation of the sentences depending on the situations. For example, on stage, we can hear:

Robert what's the point in scoring a goal then playing like headless chickens

Jimmy if the could stop themselves from playin like that do ya not think
they'd' do it

Robert it wasn't a question

Jimmy right – sounded like one³⁴

Robert's line could have been a question but, since we have no interrogation mark, it is not, and the character must say it clearly.

One of the objectives of such a device is to hinder the identification process. In fact, following Brecht's theory, Boal said that 'empathy must be understood as the terrible weapon it really is. Empathy is the most dangerous weapon in the entire arsenal of the theater and related arts (movies and TV).³⁵ McCafferty aims at preventing his audiences from identifying with the characters and feeling empathy for them. Starting with Robert who does not feel any empathy for Jimmy and Ian. On the contrary, McCafferty promotes universal drama. He explained:

I may set plays in Belfast, but in my head I am not writing specifically about here. My job is to open things up and try to convey the bigger picture, the universal stories. This situation is not exclusive to us here [in Northern Ireland]. This is a universal one, which is being experienced over and over in countries across the world. It does feel like the further we get from the conflict, the more obvious it is that we are really some kind of provincial backwater.³⁶

In this play, McCafferty imagined a Polish barman, a foreigner who would have an objective viewpoint on the conflict. Yet, the problem of racism is also tackled in *Quietly* since readers and spectators learn that Robert has gone through many racist assaults, which Jimmy justifies in these litotic terms: ‘we’re not very good with foreigners’³⁷. What he says is then enacted by Robert who ‘takes his baseball bat and stands waiting’³⁸ at the end of the play, as he hears threatening voices outside the pub.

Thanks to distanciation, McCafferty aims at offering objective alternative versions through his work. His spectators are trained to become the actors along Boal’s idea: ‘the spectacle is a preparation for action.’³⁹

So as to offer alternative versions, the playwright also relies on dialectics. By contradicting expectations and by juxtaposing two contrary notions it could create conflict in the mind of the spectators and entice them to reconcile the two elements to find coherence. Henceforth the term ‘dialectical’ emerges from Brecht theory. Brecht viewed theatre as part of an enlightenment project in which discordant jarring elements would explore ideas and man’s contradictory nature. In *Quietly*, the notions of silence, immobility, past, violence, hatred, losing, death and lack of education in particular are opposed to noise, mobility, present, peace, love, winning, life and education. The opposition between separation and reconciliation (as studied be-

fore) as well as private and public spaces is also particularly put to the fore such as in the following dialogue between Ian and Jimmy:

Ian can we do this in private

Jimmy no

Ian i think it should be in private

Jimmy i think it should be open – if this succeeds we will be seen as the first – we will be held up as a beacon – a fuckin nobel prize maybe – robert will be our committee – won't you robert⁴⁰

Robert paves the way for the audience to listen and to watch. As a silent eye and ear witness, he is the key to open the meaning of this neo-didactic play with boalian undertones. Indeed, as Boal explained:

The poetics of the oppressed focuses on the action itself: the spectator delegates no power to the character (or actor) either to act or think in his place; on the contrary, he himself assumes the protagonic role, changes the dramatic action, tries out solutions, discusses plans for change – in short, trains himself for real action. In this case, perhaps the theater is not revolutionary in itself, but is surely a rehearsal for the revolution.⁴¹

McCafferty thus places his faith on the relationship between the artist and the audience, between his play and his spectators.

Augusto Boal said that 'all these experiments of people's theater have the same objective – the liberation of the spectator, on whom the theater has imposed finished visions of the world'⁴², an opinion that McCafferty obviously shares. Through his drama, he aims at reaching a political goal and delivers an overt criticism of the conflict. The Troubles have broken

the lives of teenagers who need to come to terms with the conflict publicly and privately now. McCafferty looks forward to liberating the 'spect-actor'. But he also aims at reshaping the contours of Northern Irish drama aesthetically through borrowings from Brecht and Boal. The point is thus on the power of the artist and having faith in art and not politics. Stewart Parker explained that 'it falls to the artist to construct a working model of wholeness by means of which this society can begin to hold up its head in the world.'⁴³ That is what McCafferty is also striving to achieve.

¹ Parr Connal, “Theatre Review: *Quietly*”, *Culture Northern Ireland*, <http://www.culturenorthernireland.org/article/6363/theatre-review-quietly> read on 11/04/2014

² Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed* (Theatre Communications Group, New York, 1985), p.ix.

³ Owen McCafferty, *Quietly*, (London : Faber and Faber, 2012), p.18.

⁴ Owen McCafferty, *Quietly*, (London : Faber and Faber, 2012), p.16.

⁵ Owen McCafferty, *Quietly*, (London : Faber and Faber, 2012), p.24-5.

⁶ Owen McCafferty, *Quietly*, (London : Faber and Faber, 2012), p.35.

⁷ Owen McCafferty, *Quietly*, (London : Faber and Faber, 2012), p.32.

⁸ But punctuation is re-established in the stage directions. This intervention on the author’s part aims to remind the reader that the playwright is always in control.

⁹ Owen McCafferty, *Quietly*, (London : Faber and Faber, 2012), p.12.

¹⁰ Owen McCafferty, *Quietly*, (London : Faber and Faber, 2012), p.26.

¹¹ Owen McCafferty, *Quietly*, (London : Faber and Faber, 2012), p.35.

¹² Owen McCafferty, *Quietly*, (London : Faber and Faber, 2012), p.32-41.

¹³ Owen McCafferty, *Quietly*, (London : Faber and Faber, 2012), p.18-19.

¹⁴ Owen McCafferty, *Quietly*, (London : Faber and Faber, 2012), p.11, p.12, p.15.

¹⁵ Owen McCafferty, *Quietly*, (London : Faber and Faber, 2012), p.11.

¹⁶ Odling-Smee Hugh, “Theatre Review: *Quietly*”, *Culture Northern Ireland*, 03/12/2012, <http://www.culturenorthernireland.org/article/5394/theatre-review-quietly>.

¹⁷ Owen McCafferty, *Quietly*, (London : Faber and Faber, 2012), p.21.

¹⁸ Jane Coyle, “Owen McCafferty brings *Quietly* to the Lyric”, *Culture Northern Ireland*, <http://www.culturenorthernireland.org/article/6352/owen-mccafferty-brings-quietly-to-the-lyric>, 4/04/2014, read on 11/04/2014

¹⁹ Owen McCafferty, *Quietly*, (London : Faber and Faber, 2012), p.38.

²⁰ Owen McCafferty, *Quietly*, (London : Faber and Faber, 2012), p.27.

²¹ Owen McCafferty, *Quietly*, (London : Faber and Faber, 2012), p.42.

²² Connal Parr, “Theatre Review: *Quietly*”, *Culture Northern Ireland*, <http://www.culturenorthernireland.org/article/6363/theatre-review-quietly> read on 11/04/2014

²³ Ryan Crown, “Owen McCafferty: Performing post-conflict”, *Northern Irish Theatre*, August 8th, (2013), <http://nitheatre.co.uk/2013/08/08/owen-mccafferty-performing-post-conflict/> read on 25 March 2014

²⁴ Jane Coyle, “Owen McCafferty brings *Quietly* to the Lyric”, *Culture Northern Ireland*, <http://www.culturenorthernireland.org/article/6352/owen-mccafferty-brings-quietly-to-the-lyric>, 4/04/2014, read on 11/04/2014

²⁵ Owen McCafferty, *Quietly*, (London : Faber and Faber, 2012), p.23.

²⁶ Owen McCafferty, *Quietly*, (London : Faber and Faber, 2012), p.21.

²⁷ Connal Parr, “Theatre Review: *Quietly*”, *Culture Northern Ireland*, <http://www.culturenorthernireland.org/article/6363/theatre-review-quietly> read on 11/04/2014

²⁸ Owen McCafferty, *Quietly*, (London : Faber and Faber, 2012), p.27.

- ²⁹ Owen McCafferty, *Quietly*, (London : Faber and Faber, 2012), p.51.
- ³⁰ Parker Stewart, *Dramatis Personae* and Other Writings, in Gerald Dawe, Maria Johnston and Clare Wallace, (ed.) (Prague: Litteraria Pragensia, 2008). *Thresholds*.
- ³¹ Owen McCafferty, *Quietly*, (London : Faber and Faber, 2012), p.42.
- ³² Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed* (Theatre Communications Group, New York, 1985), p.28.
- ³³ Owen McCafferty, *Quietly*, (London : Faber and Faber, 2012), p.49.
- ³⁴ Owen McCafferty, *Quietly*, (London : Faber and Faber, 2012), p.15.
- ³⁵ Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed* (Theatre Communications Group, New York, 1985), p.113.
- ³⁶ Jane Coyle, "Owen McCafferty brings Quietly to the Lyric", Culture Northern Ireland, <http://www.culturenorthernireland.org/article/6352/owen-mccafferty-brings-quietly-to-the-lyric>, 4/04/2014, read on 11/04/2014
- ³⁷ Owen McCafferty, *Quietly*, (London : Faber and Faber, 2012), p.18.
- ³⁸ Owen McCafferty, *Quietly*, (London : Faber and Faber, 2012), p.55.
- ³⁹ Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed* (Theatre Communications Group, New York, 1985), p.155.
- ⁴⁰ Owen McCafferty, *Quietly*, (London : Faber and Faber, 2012), p.18.
- ⁴¹ Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed* (Theatre Communications Group, New York, 1985), p.122.
- ⁴² Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed* (Theatre Communications Group, New York, 1985), p.155.
- ⁴³ Parker Stewart, *Dramatis Personae* and Other Writings, in Gerald Dawe, Maria Johnston and Clare Wallace, (ed.) (Prague: Litteraria Pragensia, 2008), p. 26.