Dermot Healy; local, national and international drama

Dermot Healy’s career as a playwright has, to date, not been well-known. Despite his quietly lauded reputation as a novelist of *A Goat’s Song* (2011)and *Long Time, No See* (2012), two of his most admired of his novels before his untimely death, Healy’s work as a playwright is largely unheard of. Yet he had written twelve plays, alongside one adaptation of Lorca’s *Blood Wedding*. Few of his plays garnered national attention; *The Music Box* was staged at the Peacock Theatre Dublin in 1998, *Mr Staines* was produced by the internationally renowned Pan Pan theatre company and staged at the Samuel Beckett Theatre in Dublin in 1998 while *Men to the Right, Women to the Left* (2001) was premiered at Dublin’s Abbey Theatre in 2001 and later broadcast on RTÉ Radio 1 in 2002. Most of Healy’s theatre however, has been built on a quieter, less public process of theatrical work with local social groups and smaller communities, especially those not used to having their lives the subject of representation on stage. Healy’s drama is exploring a theatrical way to express the real problems of particular demographics or under represented social groups– for example, prisoners in *Serious* (2005) or teenagers in *A Night at the Disco*(2006). Even *Men to the Right, Women to the Left* itself was devised as part of the ‘Season of Creativity in Older Age’ project. In all these plays there is a sense of Healy acting as a voice, an enabler of disenfranchised communities, the conduit speaker for unheard voices whose life experiences are rarely presented on stage.

But alongside these marginalised voices he also returns to those who are regularly silenced through absence - the exile and the migrant. His very first play *Here and There and Going to America* (1985) focuses on the lives of two young brothers ultimately determined to get to America but leaving Dublin for London in 1960s on the pretext of work in the building trade waiting for them on arrival. Actually they have no work, but use the work as an excuse for the Irish department of employment to pay their fare to the UK. On arrival they get no support from the British version of the same office have to sleep rough in Victoria Station until they are eventually found a place in a hostel. Unemployed and without money, they drift into living in a squat and petty crime, a depressingly familiar outcome of the bid for the American Dream.

But Healy’s work is not a simple naturalistic recreation of miserable life of Irish immigrants in London. For Healy a story is never just a story. Every community and its experience speaks for not only of the people themselves but also for their national and international context. The fractured love affair of Catherine and Jack in *A Goat’s Song*, for example, frames the political and colonial tension between Dublin, Belfast and London in a personal world. Similarly, though Healy’s plays often represent a particular local group, the issues they raise are resonant beyond the focus audience or the group that co-developed the work.

*Metagama* (2004) for example, takes as its main theme the story of the local Hebridean crofters forced out of their environment by landowners and the national changing ec0n0mic requirements which saw mass production of kelp outside of the local area no longer able to support the local industry. Although the story does explore the history of the area and outlines the specific problems of the local issues, it resonates beyond the specific nature of the area itself. The problems of the area are carefully documented - the forced evacuations, the starvation due to famine and unemployment, the stoic decision to try to stay on the islands despite all their problems because of loyalty to their own land and the betrayal of promises to the crofters at national political level after the failure of Lloyd George’s offers pre -World War One. The play also details the specific pressures that the crofters and their families were subject to, in targeted attempts to force them to leave the area, including refusing to repair their houses, leaving the land unfertilised and unable to grow crops and breaking up the crofts to become ‘sheep walks’. But although this local nature of the topic is fully addressed, *Metagama* also holds up this local experience as typical of a national and international experience of displacement and emigration, resonant topic for the Irish in particular, but also looking outward more widely to the national boundaries of Europe and beyond.

*Metagama* is theatrically styled in a typically modernist spare style, akin to minimalism and abstraction of a Beckett piece. The set is simply described as ‘Open space’ (1). A mound of kelp and peat is present, but aside from a boat and some timber there is nothing to give a detailed local or national context. The locale will however, be evoked most by its sounds, not by its images. The stage directions do specify ‘an intermittent sound of the sea’ during the scenes on Lewis. This eerie aural signifier is used in the play as a kind of chorus in sound, to add moments of ironic commentary. When the blatant contradictions of the Hebridean landowners is most plain and their offers to the crofters most deceptive, the sound of the wind appears like a warning banshee for the audience, suggesting a distorted logic or a glaring falsehood

The heavy and physically challenging nature of the work being represented is also carefully physicalized. The stage directions insist on incessant stage movement be maintained throughout the scene – the men and women on stage are required to fork piles of seaweed and kelp to the front of the stage ‘to form a ridge’ throughout the scene - ‘they do not stop moving over and back’ (2). The relentless back-breaking work of the crofters is established and a sense of the relentless rhythm and a kind of pulse of the island is characterized through their working practice and it is clear to see how the work of the people is their life and vice versa.

But though their bodies form a united entity working together on stage, their minds are rather more divided. The combined history of the island, part Gaelic part English part Scottish is demonstrated again through sound and often through speech. The songs sung by the workers are recited in a combination of Gaelic and English. But as might be expected for a writer whose primary medium has been narrative prose, the conflict between the people of Lewis and the landowners takes place at the level of language.

When the workers sings shared songs, the repeated refrain, sung in Gaelic is ‘Lifting the kelp, turning the kelp’, emphasizing the repetition and routine of their working lives. However, the description of the crofters’ identity, perceived through their work, is expressed in English ‘My hair is made of kelp/My legs are kelp/My head is kelp’ (2). The bodily identification of the kelp and its resonance ‘My arms are kelp/my blood is kelp/my heart is kelp’ figures the heart and soul of the crofter in Gaelic as more greatly connected to their role on the land.

This separation between the work of the crofters in Lewis, those connected to the land through work and soul and those landlords who oversee the supply of goods made by the crofters to the metropolitan centre is clearly posited through the connection between the women covered in the black grime of the seaweed and the women in London who use the soap produced from the seaweed of Lewis, (harvested by the women as well as the men)

Miss MacD In London the ladies are cleaning their faces on the weed that we collect. (3)

Connections between those wealthy enough to buy the soap and those strong enough to farm are clearly pointed in the play, the remote Highland islands may seem far away but their link to the metropolitan economy is direct and defined. The workers are at once both central to, and detached from, the results of their day’s work

Aengus: So the rest of the country can wash themselves and preen themselves we must be covered in dirt.

Miss MacD: And the thing is I never once saw the soap that comes from the kelp.

Miss T: Nor did I (3)

The crofters and the workers serve only to provide the goods, not to benefit from them personally. But there is a curious complication that the workforce appear to see the use or ownership of the material goods they produce as not part of their culture, but as rather something only for those who want to leave or to in a sense betray the community. The soap is a marker of otherness and exile

Miss MacD: You think I will see that soap someday

McKenzie: I do, if you were meant to see the soap then you can take the boat.

MacTavish: To Canada

Miss MacD: and I can give myself a good rinse there

Miss Tullo: Deagh bhoiseag (A good rinse)

McKenzie: You can if you want, with the rest of them, who left, the incessant complainers (3)

The stoicism and pride in the workers’ ability to do without the fripperies of the landowning classes, associating the use of the goods they make with a kind of weakness akin to leaving the country is the rhetorical overtone here. McKenzie sees those who complain about the lack of access to the goods they create as akin to those bemoaning the state of the land and environment they live in. For McKenzie these are the islanders who will betray their land by moving abroad to Canada.

Miss MacD: Do you not think it strange that soap rhymes with kelp

Aengus: You’re wrong there Blondie, kelp rhymes with help.

Miss Tullo: And soap rhymes with boat

Aengus: And that’s the story (4)

Aengus’s comments imply his recognition of the economic situation of the islanders. The kelp workers will need financial assistance and investment in the land to survive but the only alternative to their current way of life being offered to them is to leave the land they grew up in and have farmed all their lives to emigrate. Even the stage directions point to the doomed nature of their current lifestyle. In an eerie Beckettian-style stage direction Healy notes ‘*This is tight concentrated work. Done neatly, like making a grave’* (4).

But it is the combination of Irish and English language in the dialogue of the characters that demonstrates the complexity of the divided national identity of each figure throughout the play. English, when spoken exclusively, is associated with the landowner and not with the worker. The interloper and the outsider do not understand the language of the people in either a literal or metaphorical sense. The landowning class is depicted as curiously uninterested in the future of the land they own. Murdo, one the crofters, is caught attempting to take a bag of kelp home. When challenged he explains that he is taking some home mostly dulse ‘Duilsg a th’ann’ to use as fertilizer on his potatoes and to help to feed his children, using Gaelic to show his affinity with the natural world around him and to underpin the organic purpose of his use for the crop. The landowner replies exclusively in English, indicating his detached relationship with the crofter’s home landscape and his strictly business approach to the kelp, he is callous and unaffected by the crofter’s concern for the future of the land

Sir:…the kelp is for incineration. It shall not manure the land. Every scrap of seaweed shall find its way into the kiln. You hear?

Murdo: How am I to maintain the earth?

Sir: The earth is not my concern.

Murdo: But it is mine. (6)

The landowner, concerned only with immediate profit and return, does not think of maintaining the croft for the forthcoming generation. His overriding consideration is that the land should yield maximum profit for him now, not for Murdo’s children or for farming to continue in future. While Murdo’s holistic understanding of the land is expressed in Gaelic, his uncompromising insight into the consequences of the landowner’s behaviour towards the croft and to him, is conveyed in English, the language of his oppressor

Murdo: Is e sin a tha air a bhi biathadh na talmhainn ‘sa mhachair ‘son linntean (That [the kelp] along with the machair has gone to manure the earth for centuries). You are trying to kill off the earth and kill off my family. (6)

Healey’s characters are not three dimensional or highly psychologically realized, as they are in his novels. But that is not their purpose on stage. Instead, they function to demonstrate an attitude, point of view and feeling, not as a stereotype but as an expression of a human and emotional response to an issue. We do not have insight into Munro’s family, we do meet the children that he tells Sir he will need the kelp to help feeding. It is as if the playwright feels that approaching the issue of exploitation and land clearance through a family tale would be too straightforward, even bathetic. What Healy does instead is allow the audience to see the consequences of each action taken towards the crofters in an emotional, but not excessive or sentimental manner. There is a reserve in Healy representation of character, a theatrical detachment which has more in common Brecht’s attempts to maintain his audience as an engaged observer and critic rather than absorbed in an emotional encounter with people who are not even real. The characters are not fully realized quite deliberately because such a depiction encourages the audience to maintain their focus on issues rather than a sentimental escape into an insincerity of feeling. Like Brecht, Healy does not seek to encourage faux emotion in his audience, they are not asked to feel sorry for individuals but instead to direct their distress about the events depicted towards questions about the social, political and national choices made which create these problems.

‘The Figure in Robes’ (7) for example, declaims that ‘the kelp worker is a burden on the state’ and explains that while to date their rents have been paid in a combination of cash and produce, in future all rent is to be ‘…paid in hard cash. *(Pause)* This will spur on emigration.’ (7) Rather than tell the story of one family’s experience of this kind of policy, Healy’s play presents the statement of policy and allows the audience to imagine the consequence of such a ruthless approach themselves. How will a family who has no money and been used to paying their rent in kind be able to transform themselves overnight into tenants who pay in cash alone? It is clear they will not and the stage ‘*Pause*’ there allows a grim Pinteresque reflection on exactly what that will mean for the families involved. The pause contains all the misery, starvation and trauma that the audience knows the family will experience before the next part of the sentence will be enacted – the ‘spur’ to emigration will be certain death if they do not go.

Similarly, the play’s depiction of life on the croft, unsupported economically and rife with disease is simply alluded to, rather than demonstrated through a representation in one family. The harsh conditions are instead pointed by the ardent denial of any problem by the Figure in Robes

‘…These black houses reared healthy men. Talk of illness is mere lies….The Hebrideans are lying on their backs waiting for you to feed them. I think the people should be left to work out their own salvation. (8)

The history of the Hebridean croft, the long exploitation of the workers, the clearance of the crofts to make way for sheep walks to provide a cheap source of meat for the capital, the potato blight, the enforced displacement and pressure to emigrate to Canada and the consequences of that choice is all carefully depicted in the play in such a way that the story about the Hebrides as an environment remains paramount. The play is not simply a family story or a personal history, it is an account of a landscape, the place is embodied and becomes the focus of the drama.

This kind of detached storytelling is underpinned by Healy’s use of stage form in a self-conscious and often cinematic in style. *Metagama* intercuts different styles of communication to present the story of what happened to the islands ironically and to constantly require the audience to critique unreflective assumptions about place and people. The sense of loss and damage to the community as a result of the emigration policy promoted in The Figure’s speech, for example, is also dramatized on stage without language, via a series of poetic stage images. After the Figure’s pronouncement ‘ I suggest that a third of the population should be moved abroad….Immediately….To the new lands of Canada’ (9), the spotlight on him goes out and the sound of sheep nearby is transformed into a *’nightmarish sound’* which is blended with that of a ship’s horn and segues into an ‘almighty’ sound of wind and rain . In a scene in which ‘*no human is on stage’* the cinematic stage direction is that the stage lighting should ‘*pan*’ across the stage to reveal a series of signifiers of the life on the islands that has been lost and the connections between these communities and other displaced communities internationally. This shared heritage is evoked through a line of clothes which are quite specifically required to feature as ‘blowing’ in the wind on the washing line. The figures depicted include

*a complete soldier’s army outfit, with rifle, a fisherman’s outfit from the 18th century, a kelp workers clothes, a large wet cloth of tweed…a landlord’s silks, a Miss MacDonald’s dark religious church-going clothes , a child’s 19the century long trousers outfit, complete with cap, a viking outfit, with headgear, a Red Indian’s headdress and lastly vicar’s outfit with collar.’ (10)*

These visual signifiers link together the contemporary narratives of emigration of the current Hebrideans to the migration and colonization of other oppressors and the oppressed, from the Vikings to the Red Indians. The play thus connects historical emigration over multiple continents and extended time periods. This is not an attempt to flatten the experience of emigration into a deeply conservative narrative of colonization as a never-ending and unavoidable or part of an international condition of change and development. Instead, the play casts a regretful eye over such a lamentable tradition of repetition and cultural exchange, Vikings for Norsemen, Red Indians for Caucasians, Kelp workers for the sheep and fishing industry and asks the audience instead, how much longer can this continue? The inclusion of the religious clothing points the religious complicity in the justification of land domination and questions the contradiction between spiritual faith the exploitation of indigenous peoples. There is no commentary or dialogue as these clothes blow in the wind on stage, the clothes are in a sense inhabited by the wind and become ghost-people created by the air. That the time of these people and their heritage is over is suggested through the gradually dying wind. This mystical moment of presence and connection between the colonized past and present is brought back into a more conventional sound effect and a return to reality as the ‘wind eases, the clothes go still, the wind turns into a version of mouthmusic (Port a Beal)’ (10). The play has linked national and international, present and historical colonization for a brief moment and is now transformed back into a more naturalistic aire.

While the wind alludes to the independence of the Hebridean people and their landscape in the play, the ocean liner the *Metagama*, the name of the liner on which hundreds of islanders emigrated to North America in 1923, becomes both a symbol of its betrayal as a landscape and the focus of its betrayal.

The journey on the liner marks the end of the islanders’ long struggle to gain their own land after years of rescinded promises. Lord Leverhulme arrives in Lewis after the First World War offering the islanders a new industry - fishing. But instead the islanders are anxious to take ownership of their land, the consistent request they have made throughout their history on the island.

John C: […] What of the promises made to us that every man upon his return from war would be given a new croft with a number of acres

LL: I am promising you something greater than that. Forget the cursed croft. It is an obsession that will keep you impoverished[…].

John C: […] But when will we be given the croft and the land that we were promised.

LL: (To Himself) Dear God. This constant refrain would drive one senseless. (48)

The desire of the people to own the land they work and to feel that the area they farm and manage finally belongs to them had been a regular refrain as Leverhulme’s character suggests. The play makes it clear that the one desire that the locals have is one that will never been granted, since it is not understood as reasonable or any longer relevant to those who are outside the area. In the years immediately after the war it is clear that the islanders’ wish will never be met and that those who became soldiers in World War 1, on the understanding that their wish for independence would be granted at the end of the conflict realise that they have been betrayed by a landowner’s vacuous promise.

Aengus: We came back, that’s what’s wrong with us. We should be Presumed dead. Or missing. Or lost in action. Not in the Great War But in the Great Lie. On all of the other islands the soldiers are getting the land they were promised. But here we are getting nothing …(54)

The experience of the crofters clearly mirrors that of Irish soldiers who fought in the First World War believing that their desire for an independent land would be granted as a result of supporting the English in the conflict. Like the Irish, the people of the islands of Lewis and Harris were betrayed by those in charge. Whereas for Ireland however, the consequence of this betrayal was the growth of an even stronger sense of national identity and determination to be an independent nation, for the crofters here there is simply a complete destruction of who they are. As Aengus says ‘We are ghosts now. Ghosts only. We are not clan. Neo ‘nar teaghlach (Nor family)’ (55). The empty clothes on the washing line are even more significant now, all of those people who once were have been lost to the islands and the sense of a legacy is lost.

Again it is a surreal dramatic quality of Healy’s drama that evokes the pain and loss of the decision to make the voyage to Canada. The islanders are gradually starved out of their homes, partly because of the famine of 1921-22, partly because there is no work and no prospect of owning their land, despite the promises of Lloyd-George. The children of the islanders are shown films in schools, featuring attractive scenes of the fertile Canadian landscape,

Aengus: …The lush fields. Apples and oranges. Apples and oranges.

Mac K: Your mouth would water at the thought of Canada.

Aengus: B’aithne dhuinn an duthaich sin ‘ms b’fhearr ‘n ar n-eachdraidh fhein

(We learned more of that country than we did of our own history) (63)

Again the pain of the detachment from their own landscape and heritage is expressed in Gaelic rather than English, only the Celtic language can express the sense of the distinct history from which they are now becoming ever more detached.

The returning soldiers faced prosecution for trying to re-inhabit or ‘raiding’ their own farms after the war, and even the most loyal islanders are finally driven to book their passage to Canada. They are sent to the doctor to be passed as fit for the journey. One short scene, again expressed through sound rather than language or plot, characterizes the reaction to this final decision to leave their native land. Murdo, a doctor, asks Aengus to ‘Say Agh’. Aengus replies with the sound which ‘rises into a great long echo of pain that is amplified throughout the theatre’ (67). This howl of pain expresses the anguish of those leaving their homeland far more eloquently than any scene of fond farewells suggesting the deep visceral pain of leaving your homeland. The evocation of loss through sound is underpinned by the gradual loss of the sound that has accompanied the play as a kind of aural landscape so far. As the boat moves further away from the Hebrides and closer to Canada ‘the last sound to die is the sound of the sea…’ (75) As the next scene opens with the islanders having arrived in Canada the first stage direction is *(Silence. No sound of sea)* This sense of an alien environment so different from their own background is evoked by sound and silence, not that of language as in Pinter or Beckett but through the disjuncture between rhythm and lyricism and the breakdown of comforting harmony; it is when the music of the sea stops that the sense of loss is most acute.

For what the migrants do not realize is that their new life in Canada will be much the same poverty as their old life in the croft. ‘When they were showing us the slides they didn’t mention the snow’ (79) said Murdo. The cattle that they buy are caught in storms and killed by lightning bolts and they still have to repay the debt of their loan to pay their passage in to the country. The migrants have been sold into effective slavery, a kind of indentured servitude, working for wages nearly all of which is returned to the company who have in some ways simply changed the continent of their workplace. The migrants find they do not belong in the new country but cannot let go of the old. As the Doctor remarks when he translates Miss Tullo’s views of her new life to the interviewer from The Emigration Board

Murdo: When she was in Lewis her thoughts were always abroad, away from the great war, and now that she’s abroad she is home in Lewis. She brought Lewis here, so she is home. (91)

The Irish diaspora of the mind maintains the homeland wherever the individual is geographically located. But again it is the sound of the sea that works to dramatise their dislocation just as effectively as any description in language. Aengus asks his fellow workers ‘What is you can’t hear? […] The sea captain. That is what we can’t hear. And we lived with it all our lives’ (99). The sea, the wind and the land have all been characterized as integral to an understanding of what has been lost after the islanders move from Lewis; not only people but a whole continent is destroyed through emigration and Healy’s work underpins the loss of a place as well as its people.

In *Men to the Right, Women to the Lef*t (2001) it is again clear that Healy’s work has a much wider reach that the context of its own creation. Written in collaboration with The Clones Drama group as part of an on-going outreach and education programme, the play might seem as if it would only address a very specific local area and circumstance. The change in tone and style is immediately evident. In contrast to the large ensemble cast of *Metagama, Men*… features only three characters, a man and two women, one younger, one older. Unnamed, the three converse with one another about people and incidents they know, in a manner which will later be familiar to audiences of Enda Walsh – in B*allyturk* for example, when the two unnamed men ‘1 and 2’ shut in a room together manically theatricalise the stories of people they appear to know, but whom the audience are never sure actually exist. Healy introduces a similarly inexplicable context. The location is unnamed, the audience looks at a geographically sparse environment, as minimalist as any Beckettian set. Three chairs are fixed on stage beside one another. Next to the chair stage right is ‘*an old pram*’ (1). The stage directions indicate the potential significance of the pram, since ‘cries mimed by W1’ [Woman 1] will emanate from within. Only a ‘*small table and small bed*’ also feature on stage, alongside a more curious prop ‘A pulley rope dangling from above’ (3). The Pinteresque sense of menace and inexplicable anxiety about the presence of such an unusual object is palpable. But the only sense of connection with Ireland is suggested by the presence of ‘*The Irish Press newspaper*’ (2) in the pocket of the middle-aged man, and his social class suggested by a ‘cap’ in his other pocket, suggesting a possible working-class background.

This unidentified place populated by so few people and only one bed between three. The play gives no local, national or international location to the drama. Instead only the sound of a train offers a hint of the approximate time or place. But even that is subject to question. Instead of a comforting regularity of a train running to a known timetable, the sound of this train only initiates doubt and an immediate need for Christian support from one of the characters. The play opens in darkness, with the sound of a train and voices only

*In the far distance the roar of the train.*

*Darkness on stage*

Man: Ah Christ. Is that the –(searching ) the Ballyhaise?

W2: No

Man: Well blast it. Hold it – Clones, hah?

W2: No

Man: Well pray tell?

W2: That’s be the 6.15 to Dundalk I’d warrant.

Man: Is that her, be god.

Lights up (4)

Though this does give a national location and places the play very clearly in an Irish context, an eerie resonance is also evoked by the darkness and the sound only of the train. There is a kind of ghostly and other worldly-quality about the sound, a mystery about what this train is and where it is travelling to. The call to Christ immediately suggests not only a figure of speech, but a sense of a strong need for spiritual support to cope with the presence or significance of this passing vehicle and so a disturbing anxiety about why that might be is created for the audience.

The atmosphere of disturbance and distortion is continued throughout the play by the re-appearing image of the train. The older woman,W2, explains to the audience ‘for my sins, I was born in a railway house’ (4) . Again the use of a stereotypical colloquial phrase sounds inoffensive enough, but the connection between events connected with the railway and ‘sins’ becomes all the more resonant as the narrative reveals that the trains mentioned here are all travelling during World War 2. W2 operated the gates for the trains on the level crossings to pass through and the play evokes a number of national journeys connecting towns all over Ireland

W1: When you heard the code of rings you knew the train was due from Clones

Man: (Finger up, knowing a thing or two) Or Newbliss

W2 Maybe Cavan

W1 Or Drogheda

Man: Or (losing the knowledge) where was it…

W1 Belcoo?

Man: The very place, you’re right. And… (5)

The train continues as a troubling symbol throughout the play, uniting various disjointed narratives as the play shifts back and forth in time and all three characters play themselves as younger and older versions, alongside the many other characters that the tell the stories of. W2 recounts her past working life as a nurse, travelling to Belfast and all over Ireland as part of her role. The train functions as a link between North and South and Ireland and England as W1 travels to Birmingham to work in hospitals there. Again there is a resonant quality about her accounts of what she witnessed as part of her job which seems to echo beyond the specifics of the role itself

W2: I heard things as a nurse in Belfast and later in Birmingham that would turn your head. What the doctors told you would sicken you. The things that happen to a body are beyond belief. (41)

The suffering of the human body thus becomes integrated into the narrative and the connections between the specific story of an rural Irish family and wider context of international conflict is increasingly suggestive. The play introduces allusion to World War 2 as a background context to W2’s memories of her childhood. The memories she evokes draw together the violence at home seen in the abusive marriage of her own parents and the international context of war, beyond national boundaries. W2 gives an account of herself as the eldest of seven children, who became the substitute mother to her siblings during the war. She struggles to feed them all in a time of rationing and presents her family to the audience in a kind of Gothic image as voracious eaters incessantly demanding more. Her means of control was to threaten her siblings with the arrival of the outside terror invading the home ‘Hitler’ll blow you all to hell in your beds’ (22). The connection between the domestic abuse and international conflict has been firmly established in W2’s mind

W2: And all the time I couldn’t think with thinking we would be bombed. Everytime you turned on the radio it was going on. I used to terrify myself. I’d lie down in the bed at night and listen. And hear her crying. And downstairs my father telling my mother what would happen. Oh God!! (22)

Although the play appears to characterise the life of the family during the war, with local interest stories of going to the shops and asking for items that were available or tales about the local election, there is an overtone of much darker events going on elsewhere in the world. Domestic events in the household and in the local community form a kind of perverse allegory of what was happening in the war. W2 tells her story of being unable to make her pot to bake bread fit inside her new domestic oven. So she takes the pot to the blacksmith ‘and had the legs took clean off’ (30) so that it fits in the oven . Then follows the story of W2’s abuse and beatings suffered at school after which she would return home to suffer what was effectively domestic abuse as child as she cooked and cleaned and managed the house. But the structure of Healy’s play is such that interspersed with all of these episodes comes the sound and reappearance of the image of the train, which itself is consistently intercut with details of violence, abuse and guilty feelings of ‘sin’

W1: She [W2] was mocked, laughed at, kept in at break and lunch time, made to pull briars and nettles with her bare hands for getting something wrong…[…]

W2: Then back to the house and drop potatoes into drills that seemed to go on forever and ever.

W1 And we reported nothing

W2: No

*W2 sits.*

*Distant train.*

*Man leans his elbow onto the pram*

*The women kneel sideways to their chairs.*

W1 Bless me, father…

W2: For I have sinned

W1: (Quietly) It’s a week since my last confession.

Man: Speak up!

W1: I nearly died of shame. (34-35)

The resonance of trains, ovens and sin in the context the Second World War is not hard to connect but Healy’s play has drawn attention to events beyond Ireland and England without ever directly addressing the subject of the Holocaust. He draws together the two worlds directly through a metaphor, which has regularly been used to connect the world of the living and of the dead- that of the dance. The dance of life and of death is evoked in tandem as W2 and the Man offer a prayer together

W2: Hail holy queen

Man: Mother of Mercy

W2: Hail our light our sweetness and our hope

*Man rises, pulls the pulley.*

*Mother throws open the gates.*

*Light drops, in the far distance train bells.*

*The train goes by, light rises, hummed music begins.*

W1: And it was…

Man: Men to the right…

W2: Women to the left…

W1: And off you’d go.

*Pause*

*Humming continues from all three as they rise to dance* (41)

This moment of the play provides both the play’s title and the connection between the rural idyll of Ireland, the friendly local dances and the relatively harmless segregation of the male and females on the dance floor with another more insidious incident of separation going in World War 2. The dance and the train create a link between the recognition of sin, the means of covering up genocide by burning the bodies in the ovens and the evocation of the means to commit the war crimes through the transportation of the victims on hundreds of trains, travelling through towns and villages just like those in Ireland passing through the lives and communities of people who may or may not have known what was going on.

Healy’s drama is evocative, lyrical and disturbing. Working with specialist groups on local subjects does not limit his theatrical reach but conversely widens the resonance of his plays which are never only about one thing. By allowing the local to speak for the national, his work points to the connections between personal stories and international events and to the links between the historical and international experiences. While his prose celebrates the evocative nature of language and poetic imagery, his drama explores the visceral impact of that which cannot be captured on paper, using sound, visual imagery and music to offer his audience the feeling of a subject and historical experience rather than an simply a rational intellectual explanation. Healy’s is the theatre of the physical and as such his work will remain at the centre of contemporary stage practice and design.

Michelle C Paull March 2015