

DOMINIC BEHAN AND THE BEGINNINGS OF TELEVISION 'TROUBLES' DRAMA

John Hill

Correspondence: John Hill, Department of Media Arts, Royal Holloway, University of London, Egham, TW20 OEX. E-mail: john.hill@rhul.ac.uk

*Focusing on the largely forgotten television plays of Dominic Behan, this article examines how productions such as *The Patriot Game* (1969), *Carson Country* (1972) and *The Folk Singer* (1972) made use of song, self-conscious artifice and the mixing of artistic modes in order to engage with Irish history and question traditional forms of Irish patriotism. In doing so, the article also locates Behan's work at a particular moment in television history when the conventions of television 'troubles' drama had yet to solidify and were open to formal experiment and the expression of unfamiliar viewpoints if also then liable to become the object of controversy.*

Up until the early 1970s, representations of Northern Ireland in drama were relatively scarce. The limited studio facilities available in Belfast and the high cost of drama production compared to other forms of programming meant that both BBC Northern Ireland and Ulster Television confined themselves to occasional one-off productions until BBCNI opted for a more sustained commitment to local drama production in the mid-1970s. Some television plays, written by Northern Ireland writers such as John D. Stewart, Stewart Love and Sam Thompson, were produced in England, but these too proved relatively rare. As Martin McLoone has observed, '[a]s far as mainstream British culture was concerned in the 1960s, Northern Ireland itself was an obscure and unknown periphery, little acknowledged and rarely featuring as prime time television material'.¹

This was all set to change at the end of the 1960s when the demands of the civil rights movement, and the response of the Unionist government to them, precipitated a political crisis that led to the despatch of British troops to Northern Ireland in 1969, the resurgence of the (Provisional) IRA in 1970 and the imposition of direct rule from Westminster in 1972. These developments also positioned Northern Ireland at the centre of national and international media attention and, in doing so, established the need for new ways of visualising and dramatising its political and emotional landscapes. The highly-charged

political atmosphere and increasing militarisation of the conflict also made the 'troubles' a particularly sensitive topic and, within the UK and Ireland, there was considerable scrutiny of television coverage by both politicians and broadcasters, resulting in the cutting and banning of contentious material.² While it tended to be current affairs and documentary programming that provoked the greatest concern, dramas could also prove controversial if they were perceived to be politically inflammatory or likely to exacerbate political and religious tensions.

In comparison to news and current affairs, however, television dramas dealing with the Northern Irish 'troubles' still remained relatively rare. Writing in 1980, Richard Hoggart claimed that he and his researchers could only identify 19 plays, including episodes from series and serials, that might be regarded as addressing 'the current troubles'.³ Although this is probably an under-estimation, it is certainly the case that the 'troubles' dramas of the 1970s were fewer and much less well-known than those that followed in the 1980s. They do, however, possess considerable interest precisely because they were the first television dramas to attempt to tackle the issues raised by the troubles and the first to explore the appropriate dramatic means for doing so. Although the television troubles drama has since been criticised for settling into established formats, this was less evidently so in the 1970s when it was still, to some extent, being 'invented'.⁴ It is for these reasons that the television plays of Dominic Behan hold a particular interest. Behan not only wrote what is arguably the first troubles drama of the modern period, *The Patriot Game* (Thames, 13 October 1969), but was also responsible for a series of Irish-related dramas over the following five years: *Ireland, Mother Ireland* (Thames, 3 August 1971), *Carson Country* (BBC1, 23 October 1972), *The Folk Singer* (Thames, 7 November 1972), *According to the Rules* (Thames, 9 July 1974) and *The Derry Boys* (Episode 19 of *Churchill's People*) (BBC1, 5 May 1975). Although not all of these deal directly with the 'troubles', they do all allude to contemporary events and, in the case of *Carson Country* and *The Folk Singer*, test out an artistic approach to the troubles that is both original and highly distinctive.

Despite their clear historical and artistic significance, however, these productions have attracted virtually no critical attention. Discussion of Dominic Behan himself has been relatively slight and only passing reference has been made to his work for television. One of

the explanations for this is that his accomplishments have largely been overshadowed by those of his more famous brother, Brendan, who achieved international success as a result of the Theatre Workshop productions of his plays, *The Quare Fellow* (1956) and *The Hostage* (1958). Dominic Behan's own reputation has fared badly by comparison and he is now largely remembered, if at all, as a singer and songwriter rather than as a playwright. The lack of attention to his television drama may also be attributed to the influence of Hoggart's view that the troubles dramas of the 1970s were of little critical interest. In their accounts of television troubles drama, both Edward Braun and Brian McIlroy simply accept the legitimacy of Hoggart's view before proceeding to focus on the 1980s and after.⁵ Even Martin McLoone and Lance Pettitt, who adopt a longer historical perspective, find no room for a discussion of Behan's work (although McLoone does include *Carson Country* in his listing of BBC Northern Ireland plays).⁶ This neglect of Behan's plays has also been encouraged by the genuine difficulty involved in seeing them. *The Patriot Game*, for example, was broadcast only once and not shown at all in Northern Ireland. Until recently, no viewing copy existed and it was only as a result of the AHRC-funded research project, 'The History of Forgotten Television Drama in the UK', based at Royal Holloway, University of London, that the programme came to be restored by the BFI. *Carson Country* was also only transmitted once and it was not until 2015 that it enjoyed a further public screening as part of a mini-season of Behan's work, curated by the author and hosted by the Belfast Film Festival.⁷ *The Folk Singer* and *According to the Rules* have fared rather better due to their inclusion in a series of DVDs devoted to *Armchair Theatre* released by Network in 2010 and 2011. However, as a result of Dominic Behan's relatively low critical standing, the accompanying notes attach little importance to his authorship (beyond an indication of Dominic's relationship to Brendan) and, more generally, provide no hint of the significance that the plays might possess for the history of television representations of Ireland in the 'troubles' era.

In these circumstances, it therefore seems appropriate to take a fresh look at Behan's contribution to the emergence of TV troubles drama and offer an assessment of it. In order to do so, the article will begin by considering Behan's early work in radio, television and music and identify how this helped to shape his subsequent approach to television drama. Focusing in particular on *The Patriot Game*, *Carson Country* and *The Folk Singer*, it will go on

to examine how these productions adopted an anti-naturalist approach, involving the use of song, self-conscious artifice and the mixing of artistic modes, as a means of engaging with Irish history and subjecting traditional forms of Irish patriotism to question. In doing so, the article will also locate Behan's work at a particular moment in television history when the conventions of television troubles drama were not yet clearly established and, therefore, open to formal experiment and the expression of unfamiliar viewpoints but also then liable to becoming objects of controversy and difficulty for the broadcasters.

Dominic Behan: 'Dialectic and hymnology'

Dominic Behan was born into a staunchly republican family in Dublin but spent most of his adult life in England and Scotland where he established his reputation as a singer. Towards the end of the 1950s, he recorded the first of a series of albums of Irish songs and ballads, *Easter Monday, 1916: Songs of the IRA* (1957) for the US label Riverside. This mainly consisted of new interpretations of existing material, including four songs written by his uncle Peadar Kearney (the author of the Irish national anthem, *The Soldier's Song*), but also featured what would subsequently become his best-known song, as well as the title of his first television play, *The Patriot Game*. He also recorded a collection of children's songs, *The Singing Streets: Childhood Memories of Ireland and Scotland* (1958) with the folk singer and co-founder of Theatre Workshop, Ewan MacColl, as well as contributing to the first of the famous 'radio ballads' that MacColl made with producer Charles Parker, *The Ballad of John Axon* (1958), a ground-breaking collage of recorded speech and song drawing on the life of the railway driver John Axon. This creative milieu appears to have inspired his own attempt to experiment with musical form in the *Cantata of Christ the Worker* (BBC, 19 October 1958), which was initially performed in churches before being adapted for the BBC television religious slot *Meeting Point* by Christian Simpson, a TV producer with a history of experiment and innovation. Described in the *Radio Times* as 'a new religious work for folk singers', that mixed Behan's 'specially written words' with reworkings of 'well-known melodies and folk songs', the play was set in a studio-recreated coffee bar and featured a range of singers that included Isla Cameron, Shirley Collins, Stan Kelly, Enoch Kent, the Chinese singer and actress, Lian-Shin Yang and Behan himself.⁸ As its title suggests, the play's interpretation of Jesus's life placed a particular emphasis upon class division and

Christ's struggle on behalf of 'the poor, the meek and lowly', a standpoint that led one newspaper to refer to Behan's work, not entirely seriously, as a mix of 'dialectic and hymnology'.⁹

The *Cantata* was followed by a fully-fledged first drama, *Posterity be Damned*, that opened in Dublin at the Gaiety Theatre in September 1959 before transferring to the Metropolitan in London the following year. This seems in part to have been influenced by his brother Brendan's play *The Hostage*, concerning an English soldier held hostage by the IRA in a Dublin brothel, which Theatre Workshop had produced, with great success, in late 1958. *Posterity Be Damned* is also set in contemporary Dublin and traces the consequences of the execution of an IRA volunteer by a fellow IRA man. However, just as *The Hostage* had made liberal use of techniques drawn from the music hall and Brecht so *Posterity be Damned* likewise dispensed with many of the conventions of theatrical naturalism. As one critic explained in a review of the London production:

The play is wild, confused, chaotic and intermittently powerful... Characters rush in and rush out.... Comedy and tragedy join hands and dance unsteadily across the stage to the lilt of a street ballad or a sugary Irish melody; early O'Casey meets rock'n'roll... [I]t is splendidly alive, imposing against all odds its own idiosyncratic style to gather together the disparate elements in a turbulent spate of words.¹⁰

Like *The Hostage*, *Posterity Be Damned* also exhibited a demythologising attitude towards Irish history and a concern to debunk what it took to be misguided patriotism. Behan himself appeared onstage – divorced from the main action - to sing a version of *The Patriot Game* which at least one critic interpreted as making explicit 'the tragedy and futility of those overgrown schoolboys who think civil war is a Gaelic football match with medals'.¹¹

However, although this production may be regarded as having laid the artistic and ideological underpinnings of his later television plays, it was to be another ten years before these appeared. Behan did, however, continue to work for BBC radio and collaborated with the Irish writer and journalist H.A.L. Craig on a series of 'radio operas', including *A Grand Year for Mushrooms* (1961) about the Irish famine, as well as an adaptation of *The Hostage* (1962). He also turned his 1961 'autobiographical novel', *Teems of Times and Happy Returns*

(a title taken from James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*) into a 'sound portrait of a Dublin childhood' that was broadcast under the title *Anybody Here Seen Friday?* (taken from Joyce's *Ulysses*).¹² During this period, he also continued to perform and make records (at a rate of about one album per year), achieving particular success in Ireland in 1964 with his song *Liverpool Lou* (which subsequently became a hit for The Scaffold in Britain).

It was, however, in his television plays that his musical, literary and political enthusiasms were most successfully fused. The first of these was *The Patriot Game*, made for the Thames Television *Playhouse* slot in 1969 and directed by Piers Haggard. Haggard had worked in the theatre before training as a director at the BBC for whom he directed a number of plays for the *Thirty-Minute Theatre* series along with episodes of *The Newcomers* (1966), *Sir Arthur Conan Doyle* (1967) and *The Jazz Age* (1968). In 1969, he also made a move into feature film production with *Wedding Night*, shot in Ireland, followed by the cult horror film, *The Blood on Satan's Claw* (1970). In this respect, Behan might be said to have been fortunate to have teamed up with such a talented young director, particularly given that they continued to collaborate on another five productions – at both the BBC and Thames - over a six-year period. This kind of partnership between a writer and director was relatively unusual within TV at this time and much of the visual inventiveness of Behan's television work may be attributed to Haggard's contribution. Given the orchestration of drama and song involved in Behan's work, however, it is also possible to see it as providing something of a bridge to what was destined to become Haggard's most famous work for television, his production of Dennis Potter's quasi-musical *Pennies from Heaven* (BBC, 7 March – 11 April 1978).

The Patriot Game: 'I'm not a patriot. I'm a republican'

The Patriot Game takes its title from the song of the same name which Behan originally wrote in 1957. It was inspired by the death of Fergal O'Hanlon, a twenty-year old IRA volunteer who was killed - along with Sean South – during a raid on the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) barracks in Brookeborough near the Irish border on New Year's Day in 1957. The television production of the same title, however, is set during the earlier 1939 IRA bombing campaign that took place in England. Although dealing with a fictionalised attempt to blow up Battersea Power Station on Derby day in 1939, the plot is loosely based on a planned attack on an electrical generating station in Coventry which, due to the

abandonment of a bomb-carrying bicycle by the panicked bomber, resulted in a number of deaths and injuries.¹³ This was not, in fact, the first television drama to deal with the 1939 campaign. The BBC had broadcast a version of Roger MacDougall's play *The Gentle Gunman*, produced by George More O'Ferrall, as far back as 1950 but, in comparison to this earlier work, *The Patriot Game* employed a much less straightforward, and more ideologically complex, approach.

This ambivalence may be traced back to the song which gives the play its title and is used at various points within the production to complement the action. In his original sleeve-notes to the LP on which the song first appears, Behan indicates that it was written 'in honour' of O'Hanlon and the song has commonly been regarded as belonging to a tradition of Irish ballads commemorating Irish republican martyrs.¹⁴ However, the song has also been understood to be a cautionary tale, lamenting the loss of young life due to the pursuit of a romantic nationalism (and an attachment to 'the patriot game') passed on from one generation to the next. Thus, in his loose biography *Teems of Times*, Behan complains of how 'old fanatics with a misguided attitude to the political needs of the country are for ever tempting boys of sixteen and so to throw their lives away for their misguided conceptions'.¹⁵ For Behan, however, this was not so much a moral argument as an economic one, indebted to James Connolly and rooted in a socialist concern for the living conditions of ordinary Irish people rather than, as he put it, the mere possession of 'rocks and lakes'.¹⁶ Indeed, for Jim Smyth, *The Patriot Game* may be regarded as 'the first revisionist rebel ballad' insofar as it corresponds to a shift within republicanism, increasingly evident in the wake of the failed border campaign of 1956-62, away from 'military and nationalist purism towards political agitation on social and economic issues'.¹⁷

It is, of course, possible to overstate the song's 'revisionist' credentials. Written in the first wave of emotion to sweep across nationalist Ireland in the wake of the two men's deaths, the song undoubtedly remained locked within the militarist paradigm that it is otherwise critiquing as a result of its apparent willingness to condone the killing of policemen and its criticisms of the presiding figure in Irish political life Éamon de Valera for 'shirking his part in the patriot game'. The meanings attaching to the song, however, also underwent change as its popularity grew and different versions of it appeared. The version recorded by the Clancy Brothers and Tommy Makem became particularly well-known but omitted the more

controversial verses and removed the song's reference to de Valera. In the process, the song became less politically specific and began to acquire a reputation as an anti-war song, providing, in part, the inspiration - courtesy of the Clancy Brothers - for Bob Dylan's own attack on patriotic war-mongering 'With God on our Side'. Although Behan was initially unhappy about the removal of the song's most outspoken verses, he was later prepared to rewrite the song himself, particularly following the emergence of the Provisional IRA in the 1970s (to whom he became strongly opposed). This is also evident in the television production of *The Patriot Game* in which Behan himself, at various points, mixes lines taken from his original version of the song with lyrics that are newly-written.

The song is employed both to punctuate the action and comment on events. In doing so, it suggests not only the folly of the 'patriot game' but also grounds it in a specific dispute within Irish republicanism. The plot involves the arrival in England from Dublin of the middle-aged bomb-maker Martin Stewart (Patrick O'Connell) and his young companion Frank O'Neil (Donal Cox). Accused by Stewart of being 'just off the boat to sling bombs about in a country you know nothing of', O'Neil represents the raw IRA recruit whose naïve 'love of one's land' has led to his involvement in the 'patriot game'. Thus, on his first night in England, he is shown praying and preparing for bed (located below a crucifix) while Behan's slightly reworked version of the song's second verse tells how 'I learned all my life cruel England to blame and so I'm a part of the patriot game'. When the operation goes badly wrong and O'Neil and Stewart are arrested (and subsequently sentenced to death), O'Neil comes to recognise the 'waste' of life involved and laments how his own sacrifice will have been 'for nothing'. However, the play's critique of the IRA campaign does not involve a rejection of Irish republicanism per se. This is most evident in the play's treatment of Stewart who remains a committed republican despite his belief that the campaign is 'hopeless'. As he attempts to explain to an uncomprehending O'Neil, 'I'm not a patriot. I'm a republican'.

The play, in this respect, is not so much offering a commentary on the futility of violence as seeking to retrieve the socialist components of the Irish republican project at a time when it appeared that republicans were prepared to countenance alliances with the Nazis. Indeed, in its account of the programme, the *TV Times* indicated that Behan's 'purpose in writing the play was to clear up some of the confusion that still exists in Britain about the allegiances of

those pre-war IRA men: “They weren’t fascists – a lot of them had fought against Franco in Spain, and hated the idea of being thought of as a Nazi fifth column”¹⁸. As a result, the play draws a clear distinction between Stewart, who fought on the republican side in Spain, and the actual bomber, George Macken (Wesley Murphy), who fought with Franco’s forces (and expresses his support for Nazi Germany now that it is at war with Britain). Given his evident doubts about the value of what he is doing, Stewart’s involvement in the London campaign remains largely unexplained (beyond his loyalty to the republican movement) but he is nonetheless clearly identified as an ‘anti-fascist’ who, despite his sentence to death at the hands of an English court, believes in the underlying political justice of his cause. Macken, by contrast, is shown to be a coward, responsible for the deaths of innocent civilians and the alienation of people in England, who, as a result, is court-martialled by his own organisation. Thus, while the inter-cutting between the trial of Stewart and O’Neil at the Old Bailey and the court-martial of Macken in Dublin suggests a degree of parallelism, there is also a clear sense in which the allegiances of Stewart and Macken are distinguished.

Despite the play’s relatively sympathetic treatment of Stewart (described in one review as ‘looking like a tough super masculine version of that hero of the 30s... George Orwell’), the production was generally well-received by the critics who appreciated its subtlety and supposed ‘authenticity’.¹⁹ This was, to some extent, due to the production being regarded as something of a period piece, recreating the London of a bygone era and dealing with events that were now safely in the past. Although there was an awareness of the growing political crisis in Northern Ireland, the programme was, nonetheless, broadcast prior to the launch of the Provisional IRA’s armed campaign and a number of years before its decision to embark upon a bombing campaign in ‘mainland’ Britain in 1973. Nevertheless, despite the apparently arcane character of the divisions within the IRA that *The Patriot Game* identifies, these also possessed reverberations for the contemporary period, particularly given the split between the Official and Provisional IRA at the end of 1969 (and their political counterparts in Sinn Féin the following year). Although the immediate cause of the split arose from a dispute over the abandonment of parliamentary abstentionism, it also involved a more general argument about the relationship between political activism and the physical force tradition (which the ‘Officials’ were subsequently to abandon as well). Given Behan’s connections with the leadership of the ‘Officials’ his interpretation of the splits within the

IRA during an earlier era may therefore be understood to be offering some degree of commentary upon the contemporary situation. This would appear to be confirmed by his return to the subject in his next play for Armchair Theatre, *Ireland, Mother Ireland*, in 1971, dealing with Republican prisoners in a Dublin jail during the Second World War following the introduction of internment by de Valera's Fianna Fail government. Although the plot involves a series of betrayals within the IRA, its central concern – like *The Patriot Game* – is the dispute between left and right-wing factions within the same organisation. However, although both productions might be said to involve a critique of 'the patriot game', their positioning within a socialist-republican discourse did, nonetheless, render them problematic for the television authorities in Northern Ireland where neither of the productions were shown. Although Thames TV, the company responsible for *The Patriot Game*, insisted that the play revealed 'how fanatical patriotism puts innocent people into danger', it was still regarded as unsuitable for broadcast by Ulster Television.²⁰ In the case of *Ireland, Mother Ireland*, the *TV Times* argued that the play was about 'the futility of war and death by war'.²¹ It was, nevertheless, held to be 'inappropriate' for broadcast by UTV after the IBA's Regional Officer for Northern Ireland declared the play to be in 'bad taste'.²²

Carson Country: 'It's a question of class'

Given the unfolding of events in Northern Ireland and the growing sensitivity towards media coverage of these, it is perhaps not surprising that Behan's work continued to prove controversial. The BBC had commissioned Behan's next play about the Unionist leader Sir Edward Carson and his opposition to Home Rule (provisionally entitled 'The Uncrowned King') for the *Play for Today* strand in 1971 but, even before it entered production, it was subject to managerial scrutiny. At the meeting of the Board of Governors in January 1972, the Director-General, Charles Curran, reported that that a recording date for the play had been set but that '[i]n view of the subject matter and of Mr. Behan's past association with Irish Republicanism', he had asked the Director of Programmes, Television, David Attenborough, in consultation with the Controller, Northern Ireland, Waldo Maguire, 'to take a decision as to whether the programme should be broadcast'. Curran himself was to be consulted on any 'proposed placing' of the play 'which would clearly be conditional on the events in Ulster'.²³ This meant that, although the play was recorded in February 1972, it did not obtain approval to be broadcast until October when it was transmitted as *Carson*

Country (23 October 1972). As Attenborough explained in a memo to the Director General, he had viewed the play with the Head of Programmes at BBC Northern Ireland, Ronnie Mason, and come to the conclusion that 'because of the current situation in Northern Ireland and the onset of so many marches and parades' it would be advisable to defer transmission. They also took advice on the play's historical accuracy and insisted upon cuts to a sequence that involved the induction of new recruits into the Orange Order.²⁴

However, the play might still not have been transmitted had the BBC not become aware of ITV's plans to transmit Dominic Behan's first contemporary television play, *The Folk Singer*, in early November. This too was the subject of close scrutiny with the IBA requesting to see it prior to transmission and the ITV companies eventually showing the programme at a later than normal slot (at 10.30 pm).²⁵ However, given how long the BBC had been sitting on its own Behan play, Attenborough was concerned that *Carson Country* should be shown ahead of *The Folk Singer*, if only, as he put it, 'to avoid the criticism that we had held it up until Independent Television had courageously tested the water for us'.²⁶ Although the Director General gave the go-ahead for this, he remained sufficiently anxious about the decision to write to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, William Whitelaw, to give him 'advance warning' of the play's transmission. It appears that he had already discussed the play with Whitelaw at an earlier meeting in Belfast and agreed that it should not be shown if any 'particular anniversary or circumstance stood in the way'. He hoped that Whitelaw would now support the decision to show the play, suggesting to him that 'to suppress the play entirely would attract much more adverse comment than to allow it to be shown in its present state on the date suggested'.²⁷ Thus, in spite of the lukewarm attitudes of both the BBC and IBA towards Behan's work, the concern to avoid being seen to ban it meant that his two most accomplished works for television were broadcast within little more than a couple of weeks of each other (albeit that they were then destined never to be shown again).

Although *Carson Country* focuses on Sir Edward Carson's opposition to Home Rule during the 1912-14 period, it is neither a biography nor a conventional historical drama. Indeed, Carson himself does not appear as a dramatic character within the production and is only to be seen in still photographs and snippets of newsreel that identify him as a historical figure. As such, Carson's role within the drama is mainly expressed through the use of readings of extracts from his speeches and writings which are introduced at various junctures in the

action. As a dramatic strategy, this may partly be seen to constitute a shift towards 'history from below', whereby the centre of attention is directed away from political elites towards the actions and experiences of 'ordinary' people. As Behan himself put it, *Carson Country* was not 'an upper class drama' but one that was 'written from the point of view of those it affected most'.²⁸ In this respect, the documentary material is employed to establish the political context in which Carson was operating while the drama explores the impact of his ideas and activities on the lives of a range of characters in Belfast with whom Carson had no direct dealings. In doing so, the play also sets out to re-frame the terms in which the conflict is understood by emphasising the significance of class rather than ethnicity or religion. Aided and abetted by the Orange Order and Low Church Protestantism, and indirectly helped by the Catholic church's hostility to socialism and republicanism, Carson's political demands are held responsible for encouraging 'anarchy' and violent sectarian division within the working class. The alternative is presented by the Connolly-quoting Protestant trade unionist Archie Heron (Denys Hawthorne) who seeks to promote a common working-class cause through peaceful means but is foiled by the teachings of – both Catholic and Protestant - religious leaders, the manoeuvrings of off-stage politicians and the growing threat of armed conflict represented by the Ulster Volunteer Force (and the arms-running of the military man Major Crawford).

The attempt to combine the general and the specific also structures the way in which the play deals with this subject-matter by bringing together both documentary and drama, black-and-white and colour, speech and song, social observation and formal stylisation. The propriety of mixing documentary and drama, and by implication fact and fiction, had been a recurring concern of the broadcasting organisations, and the BBC in particular, for a number of years.²⁹ Although *Carson Country* was vetted for historical accuracy prior to transmission, the play's employment of documentary devices, such as stills and newsreel, in the context of drama did not prove to be a major source of contention. Indeed, the vetting process appears to have actually led to the addition, rather than removal, of documentary material, in the form of an anonymous voice-over (possibly spoken by Behan) in which the bare facts of Carson's life are recounted alongside Carson's own words. This apparent lack of concern about a possible confusion between 'fact' and 'fiction' seems partly to have derived from the absence of any actual 'impersonation' of Carson, even though other characters, such as

Archie Heron and Major Crawford, were also based on real people (albeit ones that were much less well-known). However, it is also explained by the anti-naturalist features of the drama which clearly distinguish it from the surrounding documentary material.

Unlike many of the high-profile 'documentary dramas' of this period (such as the work of Ken Loach and Tony Garnett), the body of the play is shot in the studio rather than on film. While the previous Behan-Haggard collaborations – *The Patriot Game* and *Ireland, Mother Ireland* – had employed film for location shooting, they too were primarily studio productions. However, in the case of *Carson Country* the presentation of the studio drama is not only considerably more stylised than its predecessors but also more concerned to draw attention to its own status as artifice. This is largely in line with the semi-Brechtian conception of the piece as a whole: a loosely-structured episodic drama consisting of emblematic moments punctuated by the use of song, stills, newsreel and readings from Carson. As in previous productions, the addition of songs - and Carson's speeches – to the soundtrack are used to amplify the meanings of a particular scene though, in some cases, the performance of a song – such as the children calling upon the women of a Catholic neighbourhood to 'rattle yer bins' – becomes virtually a scene in itself extending beyond the normal conventions of verisimilitude. The action itself is clearly shown to be staged and, at various points, there is a 'laying bare of the device' by virtue of the way in which changes of lighting and camera movements are used to shift dramatic focus and, in so doing, reveal the 'unrealistic' positioning of the sets in relation to each other (as in the way in which the Reverend William Piggot's front room is shown to open onto the cemetery). The production also makes use of visual techniques such as dissolves, superimpositions, changes of colour and slow motion that not only disrupt the 'illusion' of the drama but also provide the means for condensing both action and meaning into a significant 'gestic' moment (as when, to the accompaniment of an ominous voice-over spoken by the actor playing Carson, flames are superimposed over a close-up of a Lambeg drummer on the eve of the Twelfth of July).

Given the production's emphasis upon the 'constructed' character of the events with which it deals, it is perhaps unsurprising that it not only avoids a fetishisation of period detail but also indulges in a degree of historical anachronism. This seems to be so of the play's climactic scene in which a hand grenade is thrown into a loyalist bar owned by the Worshipful Master of the local Orange Lodge Tom Curdie (J. G. Devlin). As there is no

historical evidence for an event of this kind occurring in Belfast in the 1912-14 period, it would seem to have been included in order to draw a parallel with events in the present (especially given the rise in violence that had occurred in the 1971-2 period). Behan's purpose, in this respect, appears to be to offer a historical perspective on the resurgence of the violence in the contemporary period and to identify the continuing role played by sectarianism in dividing the working class. There were, of course, complaints that, as a Dublin-born socialist-republican, Behan was not best-placed to understand the Protestant working class of Belfast and his portrait of Orangeism could hardly be said to be a sympathetic one. However, as in *The Patriot Game* and *Ireland, Mother Ireland*, the effort of the drama is directed towards an understanding of the specific socio-political context in which violence is occurring rather than simply to lament it. As Behan himself was to claim, albeit not entirely accurately, the play was 'not pro-this or anti-that' but rather 'an explanation'.³⁰

The novelty of this approach was welcomed in some quarters. Writing in the *Times*, Stanley Reynolds argued that '[w]e have waited for some time now for television drama to come to grips with the new troubles, and this humane, moving, and often very funny piece was a little of what we have been waiting for'.³¹ However, other reviewers were less welcoming and complained that that play was 'disjointed' and 'confusing' and assumed too much prior knowledge of the situation in Ireland.³² Certainly, while the socialist slant of the piece was generally recognised, the complexities of the piece were not always fully apprehended and the use of the pub explosion to end the play may be seen to have encouraged a more general interpretation of the Northern Ireland situation in terms of recurring tragedy. This was certainly how the BBC management preferred to view the play and, in making his case for it to be shown, David Attenborough indicated how it should be understood as 'a cry for tolerance and an agonised protest against the bigotry of both sides'.³³ While this was partly the case, it also succeeded in divesting the play of much of the substance underlying its political critique.

The Folk Singer: 'as allegorical as he likes'

Given the controversial status of his work, and the risk that it might not be shown at all, it is perhaps not surprising that Behan himself also chose to refer to *The Folk Singer*, the first of

his plays to be set in contemporary Northern Ireland, as 'a plea for tolerance'.³⁴ While this too is true, it hardly does justice to the play's peculiar mix of farce, satire, music and political allegory. The play itself deals with the tribulations of Danny Blake (Tom Bell), a Liverpoolian folk singer - with some degree of resemblance to Behan himself - who has arrived in Belfast to perform but ends up trapped in a hotel - along with a mixture of guests and staff - as a result of an IRA bomb. An atheist, with a social conscience, Danny makes some efforts to promote peace, even suggesting taking to the streets to talk to the men with guns, but finds that he commands no support and is himself blamed for causing trouble. While dealing with serious issues, the play is nonetheless highly self-conscious about its status as a topical drama and signals, from the very start, its departure from the expected televisual norms.

Indeed, the production actually begins with a close-up of a TV set showing what appears to be loyalist paramilitaries swearing an oath. It is then revealed that the set is being watched by a Protestant couple discussing the arrival of Danny Blake in Belfast. The wife, however, indicates that she does not wish to go on the grounds that 'anyone who is not a Protestant or a Catholic is a Catholic'. Further television footage of strife-torn Belfast is then seen before we cut to a Catholic household where a priest informs the wife of the house that it will be alright for her to go and see the singer provided she is convinced that 'he is not an atheist reprobate ready to preach free love and religion by radio'. At one level, this is an elaborate comic opening that establishes how an atheistic folk-singer is apparently regarded, by Protestants and Catholics alike, as a greater threat to the stability of Northern Irish society than the fighting and destruction revealed in the flow of images shown on the television. However, the sequence also suggests the way in which such images have also become 'normalised' in contemporary Northern Ireland and appear to have lost the capacity both to shock and to explain. To this extent, the opening of the programme may also be seen to involve a self-conscious rejection of the conventional televisual preoccupation with images of 'shootings and bombings' in favour of a more discursive, absurdist and anti-realist examination of the 'inner workings' of the Northern Irish conflict.³⁵

This means that the rest of play takes place within the studio and there is no further use of location material. Although *The Folk Singer* does not employ the range of sets and visual techniques evident in *Carson Country* it shares its loose structure and strategy of interrupting the plot with songs and dramatic set-pieces. The actors' performance style is,

however, more exaggerated than in the earlier play as are the departures from the realist conventions of dramatic probability and psychological plausibility. The visual orchestration of the action, and the play's large ensemble cast, is also less precise than its predecessor, investing the proceedings with an aura of the apparently impromptu and carnivalesque. Through such means, it is implied, the hotel may be understood as a dramatically heightened microcosm of Northern Ireland society in which many of the elements at play are worked out in allegorical form (with the waiter, played by J. G. Devlin, telling another character that he should allow Blake to 'be as allegorical as he likes'). One of the central conceits of the play, in this regard, is to show how the characters in the hotel, temporarily cut off from the world outside, do not take advantage of an escape from their traditional divisions but simply set about recreating them within their new 'home', setting up 'no-go' areas and parading sectarian placards. The play also throws into question the 'religious' character of the conflict by introducing into the proceedings a cross-carrying Christ-like figure (referred to in the credits as a 'Jesus freak'). Despite his appeals on behalf of 'love' and 'peace', he is treated with suspicion by all concerned and ultimately removed from the building. This coincides with a more general scepticism about the claims on behalf of 'peace' being made within contemporary Northern Ireland and the often improbable character of those who make them. It is in this spirit that J G Devlin's waiter (a 'Jewish-Catholic convert with an address in the Shankill Road') announces that he knew Danny Blake was 'an IRA man the minute he talked about peace' and also declares that the would-be 'peacemakers' – here identified as the IRA, UDA and the British Army – are 'only here to shoot.... or intern us all in the name of tolerance'.

At the end of the play Blake is released from the custody of the Race Relations Board – members of whom have appeared dressed as British soldiers – on the grounds that the Race Relations Act did not extend to Northern Ireland. As such, the play ends on a happy note as Blake is reunited with the Jesus freak and the whole cast join Blake in a jaunty version of 'The Old Rugged Cross'. Blake, the folk singer of the play's title, is, of course, the key figure in the production, commenting – mainly through song – on the absurdities of events around him and provoking a range of reactions to his presence. However, he is also a relatively unsympathetic figure. Played by Tom Bell, he comes across as rather too self-satisfied and, in his treatment of his female assistant Miss Arrowroot (Celia Bannerman), verges on the

boorish. Moreover, in comparison to the socialist Archie Heron in *Carson Country*, he has relatively little to offer by way of a positive counterweight to the prejudice and division with which he is confronted. As result, the play treads a very fine line, successfully querying and debunking many of the conventional ways of thinking about the 'troubles' but also, as a result of its relish for the absurd, coming close to endorsing the popular perception of its 'madness' that it is otherwise sending up in its comic treatment of the visiting American psychiatrist (and his research into what it is that makes the Irish mad).

Indeed, this was in part Richard Hoggart's criticism of the play when looking back at the (non)-achievements of the 1970s. He complains that *The Folk Singer* resorts to 'crazy surrealist attitudes which the English like to associate with the Irish' and simply ends up reproducing comic stereotypes of the 'mad Irishman, mad Englishmen and the irresistible itch to burst into song on any excuse'.³⁶ This is, however, a remarkably blunt-edged critique for such a sophisticated cultural commentator. It is largely oblivious to the knowingness of the play's deployment of comic stereotypes and the ways in which these are subverted as much as reproduced. It is also underpinned by a clear critical preference for an aesthetic approach to the 'troubles' grounded in social realism rather than the more self-conscious, modernism that is apparent in Behan's best work. This may be seen from the example of the play to which Hoggart extends the greatest welcome, Jennifer Johnston's *Shadows on our Skin* (BBC, 27 March 1980). This is a very different work, shot on film on location and focused on the destructive effects of the 'troubles' upon a young boy growing up in strife-torn Derry. Although Hoggart clearly values its evident seriousness and capacity to illuminate the experiences of an 'ordinary' family, he nevertheless downplays the narrowing of focus and element of de-politicisation that this particular approach to troubles drama entails.

Conclusion

Although Behan did continue to write for television, *Carson Country* and *The Folk Singer* represent the high-point of his television career and his major contribution to 'troubles' drama. Other productions did follow but, after 1976, his television career began to falter. This might be linked to a growing resistance, on the part of broadcasters, towards 'radical' drama during this period as well as a growing concern for the particular problems that plays

about Northern Ireland might generate.³⁷ Behan himself sought to move beyond Irish material but also struggled to find a form that appealed to the broadcasters. So, while BBC Scotland was prepared to produce *To Glasgow with Love* (BBC2, 24 October 1976), a play about a trio of Scots drinkers returning home with the remains of a deceased friend, it also rejected a number of other scripts. The senior producer, Pharic Maclaren, found the ‘double (or multiple) plottery’ and ‘coming out of reality into a kind of farcical/fantasy’ in *Metamorphosis* too hard to take while the ‘satirical element’ in a play entitled *Ureka* was held ‘to explode into a cloud of unconnected atoms’.³⁸ Behan did eventually return to Irish subject-matter in the form of a novel set in Dublin, *The Public World of Parable Jones*. This was not, however, published until 1989 shortly before his death at the relatively young age of 60.

However, despite the brevity of his television career, Behan’s television plays possess an undoubted importance not only as some of the first dramas to engage with the escalating political crisis in Northern Ireland in the late 1960s and early 1970s but also as an indication of an alternative historical possibility for troubles drama that has now largely been forgotten. According to Christopher Morash, in his survey of Irish theatre, the ‘Troubles play’ had begun to emerge as an identifiable genre by the mid-1970s, focusing on ‘the effects of violence, usually on a family, while the political roots of the problem remained offstage’.³⁹ Although, as has been seen, Behan’s work was open to competing interpretations, it is also clear that, as in *Carson Country*, he was concerned to address the ‘political roots’ of the violence and locate familial tensions within a broader socio-historical context (rather than simply set the ‘private’ world of the family in opposition to the ‘public’ sphere of politics and violent conflict). Adapting Brecht’s distinction between ‘dramatic’ and ‘epic’ theatre, it may therefore be possible to identify two alternative, albeit overlapping, ‘paradigms’ of ‘troubles’ dramas as follows:

‘Social realism’	‘Anti-realism’
Dramatic ‘unity’	Generic mixing
Psychological characterisation	Social types
Fixed physical environment	Constructed environment

Determinist plotting

Episodic or fluid narration

Effects

Causes

‘Liberal-humanism’

‘Socialist-republicanism’

Film

TV Studio⁴⁰

Clearly, Dominic Behan’s work sits on the right-hand side and represents a relatively short-lived moment in the history of televised ‘troubles’ drama (and, indeed, of ‘radical’ television drama more generally). However, what it also seems to represent is a relatively bold attempt to address the Northern Irish ‘troubles’ in ways that extended both the formal vocabulary of conventional television drama of the time and the range of political viewpoints that it expressed. As such it undoubtedly merits more attention than it has so far received.

Acknowledgements

This article is one of the outcomes of the AHRC-funded research project *The History of Forgotten Television Drama in the UK* (2013-17). My thanks to Trish Hayes of the BBC Written Archives Centre, Simon Coward, Ian Greaves, Ken Griffin, Hugh Jordan, James Jordan, Martin McLoone, Leah Panos, Chris Perry and Jeremy Shields for their help with the research for this article.

¹ Martin McLoone, Drama out of a crisis: BBC television drama and the Northern Ireland Troubles, in McLoone (ed.) *Broadcasting in a Divided Community: Seventy Years of the BBC in Northern Ireland* (Belfast, 1996).

² Liz Curtis, *Ireland: The Propaganda War* (London, 1984); Philip Schlesinger, *Putting ‘Reality’ Together: BBC News* (London, 1978); Liz Curtis and Mike Jempson, *Interference on the Airwaves: Ireland, the Media and the Broadcasting Ban* (London, 1993).

³ Richard Hoggart, Ulster: a ‘switch-off’ TV subject?, *Listener*, 28 February 1980, 261.

⁴ The term ‘the troubles’ has been applied to events in Ireland between 1916-23 - the Easter Rising of 1916, the Irish War of Independence (1919-21) and the subsequent civil war (1922-23) – as well as to events in the North of Ireland following the resurgence of violence in 1969. As such, the roots of

the modern 'troubles' play lie in the work of Sean O'Casey, particularly *The Shadow of a Gunman* (1923), *Juno and the Paycock* (1924) and *The Plough and the Stars* (1926). For a discussion of the cinematic tradition of 'troubles' dramas, see John Hill, Images of violence, in Kevin Rockett, Luke Gibbons and John Hill, *Cinema and Ireland* (London, 1988).

⁵ Edward Braun, 'What truth is there in this story?' : The dramatisation of Northern Ireland, in Jonathan Bignell, Stephen Lacey and Madeleine Macmurrough-Kavanagh (eds), *British Television Drama: Past, Present and Future* (Basingstoke, 2000); Brian McIlroy, *Shooting to Kill: Filmmaking and the 'Troubles' in Northern Ireland* (Trowbridge, 1998). Braun directly quotes Hoggart while McIlroy cites Rob Ritchie's paraphrase of Hoggart's claims.

⁶ McLoone, op. cit.; Lance Pettitt, *Screening Ireland: Film and Television Representation* (Manchester, 2000).

⁷ For more information on the season, see:

<https://www.royalholloway.ac.uk/mediaarts/research/thehistoryofforgottentelevisiondrama/news-and-events/dominic-behan-on-screen.aspx>.

⁸ *Radio Times*, 17 October 1958, 5.

⁹ *Manchester Guardian*, 30 March 1959, 1. The shooting script for the production of *Cantata of Christ the Worker* is held at the BBC Written Archives Centre (hereafter BBC WAC).

¹⁰ *Times*, 29 March 1960, 15.

¹¹ Alan Brien, *The Patriot Game*, *Spectator*, 1 October 1959, 17. The play also contains the line 'Mother Ireland, get off me back' which is subsequently repeated in Behan's television play, *Ireland, Mother Ireland*.

¹² Behan also recorded two EPs inspired by Joyce: *Finnegan's Wake and other Irish Folksongs* and *Mrs. Hooligan's Xmas Cake* (both 1958). Although partly based on songs alluded to in *Finnegans Wake*, Joyce's use of language and departure from conventional narrative structures may also be seen to have exerted an influence upon Behan's writing for television.

¹³ J. Bowyer Bell, *The Secret Army: A History of the I.R.A., 1916-70* (London, 1972), 194-5. Although written from the point-of-view of O'Hanlon in 1957, Behan was not alone in extending the sentiments of the song to other periods of Irish history. Tom Murphy adapted the title *The Patriot Game* for his play about the Easter Rising, originally commissioned by the BBC in 1964 but not produced until it was rewritten for a theatre performance in Dublin in 1991. The song is also used in the Stables Theatre Company's play about the same events, *Would You Look at Them Smashing All the Lovely Windows?* (Granada, 2 February 1970).

¹⁴ This is Dervla Murphy's view in *A Place Apart* (Harmondsworth, 1978), 190.

¹⁵ Dominic Behan, *Teems of Times and Happy Returns* (London, 1961), 215.

¹⁶ Ibid., 215-16.

¹⁷ Jim Smyth, Review: *The Lost Revolution: the story of the Official IRA and the Workers' Party*, *History Ireland*, <http://www.historyireland.com/20th-century-contemporary-history/the-lost-revolution-the-story-of-the-official-ira-and-the-workers-party/>.

¹⁸ *TV Times*, 11-17 October, 1969, 43.

¹⁹ *Guardian*, 14 October 1969; *Observer*, 19 October 1969; *Times*, 14 October 1969.

²⁰ The play that's too fiery for Ulster, *Daily Mirror*, 13 October, 1969.

²¹ *TV Times*, 31 July – 6 August, 1971, 29.

²² Play about IRA killing banned, *Daily Mirror*, 30 July 1971; Regional Officer's Report, 16 September 1971, ITA's Regional Officer's Monthly Reports – Northern Ireland, 1 January 1969 – 1 December 1971, ITA/IBA/Cable Authority Archive Files, Ref: 3095/4/6.

²³ Minutes of the Board of Governors, 27 January 1972, BBCWAC R1/40/1. The BBC's sensitivity towards the content of Behan's work stretched back to at least the early 1960s when it was reported that Behan's album, *Easter Week and After* (which includes *The Patriot Game*), had been banned from the BBC's 'light entertainment' programmes (*Daily Mail*, 2 February 1961, 3).

²⁴ Memo from Director of Programmes, Television, to Director General, 4 October 1972, BBCWAC R78/2647/1. As the play deals, in part, with events leading up to an Orange march in Belfast on the 12 July, there was particular sensitivity about broadcasting the play during the summer marching season.

²⁵ Vetting Behan play, *Belfast Telegraph*, 4 October 1972, 6.

²⁶ Memo from Director of Programmes, Television, to Director General, 4 October 1972, BBCWAC R78/2647/1.

²⁷ Letter to the Rt.Hon. William Whitelaw, Northern Ireland Office, from Charles Curran, Director-General, 11 October 1972, BBCWAC R78/2647/1.

²⁸ *Radio Times*, 19 October 1972, p. 15. The class dimension of Behan's work is also evident in his dramatisation of the 1688-89 Siege of Derry, *The Derry Boys* (1975), in which the conclusion of the siege is interpreted as a betrayal of the 'ordinary' defenders by those in possession of wealth and power.

²⁹ For a historical perspective on the 'drama-documentary', see Andrew Goodwin, Paul Kerr and Ian Macdonald (eds), *Drama-Documentary* (London, 1983).

³⁰ *Radio Times*, 19 October 1972, 15

³¹ *Times*, 24 October 1972, 11.

³² James Thomas, Behan's baffling brew!, *Daily Express*, 24 October 1972; Virginia Ironside, It's all Irish to me, *Daily Mail*, 24 October 1972, 19.

³³ Memo from Director of Programmes, Television, to Director General, 4 October 1972, BBCWAC R78/2647/1. Curran employed the exact same words when writing to William Whitelaw.

³⁴ *TV Times*, 4-10 November 1972, 53.

³⁵ The words 'shootings and bombings' are taken from a special report on the news coverage of Belfast in the *Radio Times*, 4-10 December 1971, 65.

³⁶ Hoggart, Ulster: a 'switch-off' TV subject, 261.

³⁷ For a discussion of some of the vicissitudes facing 'radical' television drama at this time, see John Hill, *From Five Women to Leeds United!: Roy Battersby and the politics of 'radical' television drama*, *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, 10 (1), 2013, 130-150.

³⁸ Letters from Pharic Maclaren to Dominic Behan, 26 January 1976 and 26 October 1976, BBC WAC SC118/22/1.

³⁹ Christopher Morash, Irish theatre, in Joe Cleary and Claire Connolly (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Irish Culture* (Cambridge, 2005), 334-5. Morash is partly drawing on the work of Seamus Deane.

⁴⁰ See, *The Modern theatre is the Epic theatre*, in *Brecht on Theatre*, trans. John Willett (London, 1964), 37.

John Hill is Professor of Media at Royal Holloway, University of London. He is the Principal Investigator on the AHRC research project, 'The History of Forgotten Television Drama in the UK' and the author, co-author or co-editor of a number of books and journals including *Cinema and Northern Ireland* (2006) and *Ken Loach: the Politics of Film and Television* (2011).