

“Taking Comedy Seriously”: Humour in Lisa McGee’s *Girls and Dolls*¹

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Abstract. Laughter in the midst of tragedy can be one of life’s most disturbing, cathartic and enlightening experiences, a maxim experienced in Northern Ireland during the Troubles, one of the most painful periods of Irish history. Northern Irish playwrights were acutely aware of this when dealing with violence in their plays and so, however grim the events they depicted, the comic element was very much present. After the Good Friday Agreement, along with the change in the political situation in Northern Ireland, there was a generational change in the theatre. What seems to characterise this new wave is the ironic distance taken towards the sectarian divide and the consequences of the conflict on Northern Irish society, which is revealed above all in their use of humour. Lisa McGee, one of the most important representatives of the new generation thanks to the popularity of her television series *Derry Girls*, had already shown her maturity in her 2006 play *Girls and Dolls*, performed by Tinderbox the same year. McGee mixes the tragic and the comic to present the terrible consequences of childhood trauma alongside the violence of the late Troubles, while raising questions about guilt, the meaning of friendship and the subtle ways in which violence affects us. This article aims to analyse the different uses of humour employed by McGee to deal with tragic episodes and their theatrical effect, drawing on the existing research on humour in literature and McGee’s own observations given in an interview with the author on 3 March 2023.

Key Words. Humour, theatre, violence, *Girls and Dolls*, Lisa McGee, Northern Ireland.

Resumen. Reírse en una situación trágica puede ser una de las experiencias más perturbadoras, catárticas e instructivas en la vida, una máxima experimentada en Irlanda del Norte durante los “Troubles”, uno de los periodos más trágicos de la historia irlandesa. Los dramaturgos

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norirlandeses eran muy conscientes de ello cuando mostraban la violencia en sus obras y por ello, por muy nefastos que fueran los acontecimientos que representaban, el elemento cómico estaba muy presente. Tras el Acuerdo de Viernes Santo, junto con el cambio de la situación política en Irlanda del Norte, se produjo un relevo generacional en el teatro. Lo que parece caracterizar a esta nueva ola es la distancia irónica que han adoptado respecto a la división sectaria y las consecuencias del conflicto en la sociedad norirlandesa, que se revela sobre todo en su uso del humor. Lisa McGee, una de las representantes más importantes de la nueva generación gracias a la popularidad de su serie de televisión *Derry Girls*, ya había mostrado su madurez en la obra de 2006 *Girls and Dolls*, representada por Tinderbox ese mismo año. McGee mezcla lo trágico y lo cómico para presentar las terribles consecuencias del trauma infantil junto a la violencia de finales de los “Troubles”, al tiempo que plantea cuestiones sobre la culpa, el significado de la amistad y las sutiles formas en que la violencia nos afecta. Este artículo pretende analizar los diferentes usos del humor empleados por McGee para tratar episodios trágicos y su efecto teatral, basándose en la investigación existente sobre el humor en la literatura y en las propias observaciones de McGee expresadas en una entrevista con la autora el 3 de marzo de 2023.

Palabras clave. Humor, teatro, violencia, *Girls and Dolls*, Lisa McGee, Irlanda del Norte.

Laughing in the midst of tragedy can be one of life’s most disturbing, cathartic and illuminating experiences. Exposure to humour² in literature that deals with unpleasant or distressing events produces in the reader/spectator a momentary relief from stress, an escape valve that will allow them to continue watching/reading without being distracted from the important matter at hand. This effect is articulated in what is known as the “Relief Theory” in humour studies.³

For his part, Vivian Mercier, in his seminal book *The Irish Comic Tradition* (1962), demonstrates that the comic element has been present in Irish literature from its earliest days as an oral tradition, and traces the presence of different types of humour in early Gaelic texts. Although this is a trait shared with most cultures, he attributes to the fact that poetry was a profession among the Irish the reason for the importance of the comic in these texts, a feature subsequently inherited by Anglo-Irish literature, that is, written in English by Irish authors. In his study, Mercier does not distinguish between comic and serious literature, but rather illustrates the comic side present in different literary genres in Ireland. Regarding theatre, Mercier argues that Beckett’s plays are one of the best examples of how to represent the comic as inextricably linked to the tragic in all human endeavours.⁴ And yet, humour is too often neglected in literary criticism, thus prompting Johnston to claim the need to start “taking comedy seriously” (2004: 173). This article attempts to partially alleviate this deficiency by highlighting the uses of humour in a play that can hardly be qualified as a comedy.

On the other hand, the comic and the scatological have been a ubiquitous presence since before the dawn of written culture, and in that sense, the archetypal character of the trickster, later renamed the fool or the clown, has been in plays from the Renaissance to the present day. He spoke the truth without incurring any conflict, although he was often reprimanded for his

² I will use here Weitz’s definition of humour as a “social transaction between at least two people – and, by extension, between a performer or writer and audience – through which one party intends to evoke amusement or laughter” (2009: 2; original emphasis).

³ For a detailed explanation of the three theories on humour – the Incongruity Theory, the Relief Theory and the Superiority Theory – see Critchley (2002: 2-3); Morreall (2009: 4-23); Weitz (2009: 66-67).

⁴ In this respect, Nell’s statement in *Endgame* that “nothing is funnier than unhappiness” encapsulates Beckett’s understanding of black humour, or, as Mercier calls it, the macabre humour (1961: 1).

lack of discretion. This is often the function of the comic in theatre, as criticism is more devastating and acute when a sad or grievous event is seen through the eyes of humour.

These two aspects of humour, political criticism and comic relief in a tragic situation, were undeniably necessary in the theatre being made during one of the most painful periods in Irish history, what has come to be known as the Troubles in Northern Ireland (1969-1998). The most significant Northern Irish playwrights of the time – namely Brian Friel, Anne Devlin, Christina Reid, Stewart Parker, Frank McGuinness, Martin Lynch and Marie Jones – addressed the atrocity of this civil war through the use of history, symbolism and metaphor. Yet, all of them had a feature in common, that, however dire the events the play depicted, the comic element was there, sometimes to disguise the playwright's point of view, as Brian Friel acknowledged in an interview, paraphrasing Behan: “[Y]ou keep the people laughing in a theatre for five minutes and then in the sixth minute, when they're helpless laughing, you plug your message, if you want to plug a message” (Murray 1999: 6). Playwrights found that the absurdity of conflict could be most effectively tackled through comedy. But not only that, the weariness with violence that writers and audiences shared favoured the use of elements that could defuse the constant tension, while allowing for a scathing criticism that would have been lost in the identification fostered by the tragic genre.

With the beginning of the peace process and the subsequent approval by referendum of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, what had seemed impossible for many of these playwrights suddenly became a reality. Along with the change in the political situation in Northern Ireland came a generational shift that has been particularly felt in the theatre. What seems to characterise this new wave (Tim Loane, Stacey Gregg, Rosemary Jenkinson, David Ireland, Abbie Spallen, Lisa McGee, Michael Patrick and Oisín Kearney, among others) is the ironic distance they have adopted towards the sectarian divide and the consequences of conflict in Northern Irish society. This is particularly evident in the use of humour, with comedy and satire as the most common genres. To these we should, however, add a more recent hybrid genre, to which I will refer here as “dramedy” – a term borrowed from Media/Television Studies – because it matches the tone of these television series in which the comic and the serious merge.⁵ In this type of play, the general tone is one of comedy, although a tragic event will cause the play to evolve towards a sombre resolution. This would be the case with *Girls and Dolls* (2006), Lisa McGee's first play professionally produced by Tinderbox, directed by Michael Duke, and winner of the Stewart Parker Trust Award in 2007. The humorous intention is already apparent in the title, a parody of Frank Loesser's most renowned musical *Guys and Dolls* (1950), however black this humour may be, as the dolls in McGee's play prove to be indicative of the lurking tragedy.

This essay aims to analyse the way in which the author has mixed humour and seriousness in this play and what she has achieved by this, drawing on the existing research on humour in literature and McGee's own observations given in an interview with the author of the present piece on 3 March 2023. I will also explore here how the play partakes of the features of the carnivalesque literature described by Bakhtin in his discussion of what he called the “serio-comical” genre.

The Ghost at the Table

The play presents an oblique view of the Troubles, which are a backdrop to the main plot, since, as McGee acknowledges in the interview (2023), she played with the audience's preconceptions of the direction of the story, which seemed Troubles-related, thus provoking the shock of discovering the other tragedies that were occurring at the time and had been largely ignored

⁵ Lancioni defines “dramedy” as a genre that “fosters the weaving together of comic and dramatic elements across storylines, thus creating a highly complex text” (cited in Bednarek 2011: 56).

because of the conflict. Fitzpatrick already observed that women playwrights in Northern Ireland favoured the individual over the conflict, which is usually the background to the plot (2013: 307). Yet the author sees the theme of the Troubles as unavoidable. As mentioned above, this new generation of playwrights has not focused on sectarian conflict, but neither have they denied its consequences. McGee confesses that she had not sought to write about the Troubles but had discovered that her true voice could only be conveyed by addressing the trauma of the conflict:

I never wanted to write about the Troubles, and I spent a long time working this out. But here's the thing: it doesn't feel truthful because there is no Northern Irish experience without the Troubles. It happened and the ghosts of it are still everywhere [...] So, let's not deny that, but let's find interesting ways to tell all our stories and incorporate the pain of coming from that [...] There's lots of Northern Irish writers now and artists who are very interested in this kind of inherited trauma, how you never really get away because it's the ghost at the table. (McGee 2023)

McGee's sentiment, voiced in 2023, following the success of her Channel 4 series *Derry Girls* (2018-2022), differs in fact from that expressed when the play premiered in 2006, a time when there was an impatience born out of a weariness of dealing *ad nauseam* with the Troubles. This can be seen in an interview with *Derry News*, in which, because the play's plot dates back to 1980, she is questioned about its political overtones, and replies that, although the conflict is "in the far distant background" (*Derry News* 2006: 36), it is not part of the main plot, and the events could have taken place anywhere. Yet today, the author acknowledges that the psychological damage inflicted by routinely experiencing violence undeniably colours the behaviour of the characters in *Girls and Dolls* (McGee 2023). Hence, one can see the links that the play has with the theatre of the previous generation not only because it deals with the trauma-related conflict but, above all, because it also employs the comic to do so.

Great Expectations

The play premiered by Tinderbox featured four actresses, two playing Emma and Clare as ten-year-olds and two playing these girls twenty-six years later. However, this is not the text that can be found in NHB nor the script that was revived in 2018 at Derry's Millennium Forum. The reason was explained in the interview: the original play which McGee had scripted was for two actresses, there was no secret meeting brought about by the adult Clare in a hotel in which both attempt a reconstruction of the facts leading to the tragedy – as the 2006 version showed – but two women who, in the solitude of their memories, recurrently return to that summer when everything changed forever. Thus, the Tinderbox version had the characters interacting between themselves and not with the audience, whereas the original play, the only one that exists in published form and that has the author's permission to be performed, employs the storytelling technique whereby Emma and Clare, addressing the audience, narrate their version of the events. The two actresses shift fluidly from children to adults and vice versa, also impersonating the other characters: parents, other children and other adults. The transformation, however, was not just a matter of the number of actors. In McGee's opinion, the Tinderbox production differed too much from her original intentions in terms of rhythm and comedy: "It was very slow and very theatrical [...] in the end, it had lost its sense of humour and it had lost its colour" (2023).

It should be noted that the changes were much more profound than a mere matter of humour or rhythm as the original version allows for the expression of the subjectivity of the two characters in a shared storytelling. This recourse to the technique of storytelling is related

to a trend in Irish theatre in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries⁶ – presumably under the influence of Brian Friel’s *Faith Healer* (1979) – which favours the exhibition of the subjective experience of the process of remembrance in plays dealing with memory and trauma.

Predictably, the play’s 2018 revival at the Millennium Forum received a very different critical reception to the Tinderbox production, largely due to the expectations raised in her hometown by the fact that the play’s author was the writer of *Derry Girls*, and that the first season of the series had been a hit just a few months earlier. In addition, the production featured one of the show’s actresses, Jamie Lee O’Donnell, and, inevitably, every news story that appeared in the media used the name of the series to talk about the forthcoming play. In short, it gave the impression that this Derry revival was relying on the enthusiasm generated by *Derry Girls* to appeal to a varied audience who would not normally be theatregoers and certainly knew nothing of the 2006 production. *Girls and Dolls* was portrayed in advertising and the media as a feel-good comedy, whose tragic denouement was conveniently omitted. McGee expressed her doubts about what information the audience would be privy to, placing the play in the genre somewhere between tragedy and comedy: “I remember thinking, I hope they warn people that this is dark. And when I did a little bit of press for them, I always said that this isn’t a comedy really, something bad happens. Because if you’re expecting *Derry Girls*, that’s quite a rug pull” (McGee 2023).

The *Irish News* review of the revival graphically portrays the shock of this “rug pull”. The title of the article is, unsurprisingly, based on the allure of *Derry Girls*: “*Girls and Dolls*, a stunning but brutal play from *Derry Girls* writer”. From the outset, one can observe how misguided the reviewer’s assumptions about the play had been:

It’s probably the most anticipated work of the year, thanks to the comedy genius of *Derry Girls* [...] But anyone seated in the Millennium Forum craving two hours of madcap humour, light-hearted banter and sweet nostalgia that *Derry Girls* spoon-fed us for weeks would have been bitterly disappointed [...] although laugh-out-loud hilarious in some parts, [it] is also brutal, dark and very disturbing [...] Darkness eventually envelopes the Gerard McCabe-directed piece [...] as the drama comes to an edge-of-your-seat, heart-pounding, horrifying conclusion. (O’Neill 2018)

As a comparison of the reviews of the play from 2006 and 2018 reveals, what critics of the first production, when the playwright was unknown, saw as a suspense drama with some humorous parts, had evolved into a comedy in the promotion of the 2018 revival, following McGee’s huge success with *Derry Girls* – even if later critics, once they had seen the play, dropped that label.

Functions of Humour in *Girls and Dolls*

The reasons for using humour in a play can be manifold and may not even be obvious to the playwright. Often there is an instinct that dictates where to place comic relief, or when humour will serve to enhance the tragic or the dark lurking behind it. Weitz exemplifies the uses of humour in tragedy with Marina Carr’s *By the Bog of Cats*...: “Comically tinged characters and moods make it a different world from the one that it would be without them – they augment the affective range of the stage world as well as its thematic impact [...] the comic remains an effective tool for illumination and impact in its own right, and has a powerful contribution to make to the resonance of tragic worlds” (Weitz 2009: 137).

⁶ In Conor McPherson’s early plays, for example, the protagonists narrate their story to the audience. Marie Jones’s *A Night in November* (1994) is probably the most notable case in the Northern Irish theatre of the late twentieth century. Maguire, discussing Charabanc’s *Somewhere Over the Balcony* (1987), regards the use of monologue as a tool for shifting the focus from the social world to the “subjective experience of individuals” (2006: 115).

As noted above, Friel and Behan recognised the importance of the use of humour as a political weapon, what Bakhtin considered the “ritualistic practice or directing laughter toward something higher” (1999: 127). This may also be observed in the way McGee dismantles the Republican mythology by ridiculing some of its totems, such as the murals and the brave rebels, as seen when some local boys are painting Emma’s wall. The mother is so angry that she calls the mythical Republican hero they are portraying “Cù fucking Chulainn” (McGee 2016: 38),⁷ describes him as “A nine-foot man in a frock”⁸ and is afraid they will write something because “they can’t spell either. Mary Kennedy got stuck up with ‘up the rebellies’ in big black letters all over her coal shed” (38). Jarazo Álvarez’s observation about how McGee challenges the male ethos within the highly gendered rendering of the Troubles in *Derry Girls* is also pertinent here. Moreover, the fact that the murals are the butt of the joke accentuates the challenge because, as Jarazo points out: “the cultural legacy of the murals [...] still bombard men and women with dominant imagery of what it means to be a man” (2022: 3).

Emma’s neighbour, Tank, breeds dogs and has a very special one named Sétanta, who is killed by the army in a raid. The men in the pub raise money for a headstone – a rather ugly one – because, as they tell the dog’s owner when they give it to him, “Sétanta was an Irish hero” (55), thus downgrading grotesquely – that is, provoking the “aesthetic laugh”, in Mercier’s definition of the grotesque (1991: 300) – the mythological status of the Republican fighters by equating them to the dog.

Nonetheless, the best example of the demystification of the Republican pathos is the scene of the failed bombing that leads to the terrorists having tea with the two old ladies, Mags and Josie, whom they hold hostage while the British army has them surrounded. Emma’s narration of the whole event is a striking example of how to blend a tragic situation with the realistic sensibility of children watching from the outside. To begin with, she refers to the terrorists as “the boys”, stripping them of any heroic aura they might have as Republican fighters. Emma and Clare understand the whole operation as a spectacle to be enjoyed, and even go to the shop for supplies and “sat on the pavement to watch the show” (46). To underline the irreverence with which they deal with this dangerous situation, the girls sell their ice poles to the British soldiers, earning good money and angering Emma’s father with their carefree and uninvolved attitude: “Needless to say, he didn’t approve of my business transactions” (47). However, not only the girls enjoy the show: “Everyone was out. Some people had kitchen chairs, and flasks of tea” (47). There is a moment when Emma focuses on the anxiety of some of the onlookers, but it is only the first part of the joke whose reversal is again based on her irreverence, this time applied to religion: “My Aunt Rita was saying the rosary with the legion of Mary; no one led the rosary like my Aunt Rita, such speed, such precision” (47).

The portrait of the two terrorists with their hostages is hilarious because of the incongruity of the Kalashnikovs and balaclavas in the familiar and cosy atmosphere of the ladies’ flat: “They [Mags and Josie] were sitting in the middle of their sofa with a large balaclava-clad man on either side of them. Each man with an AK47 in one hand and a cup of tea in the other” (47). Macabre humour, “inseparable from terror” in Mercier’s words (1991: 301), tinges the whole scene in which the expected outcome is one of certain death. Their dialogue as they watch the news on television adds to the absurdity of the scene, as they seem ironically oblivious to their own situation:

IRA MAN 1. Jesus Christ, but the blacks have it bad in South Africa, don’t they?

IRA MAN 2. It’s unbelievable, completely unbelievable. It’s desperate.

⁷ The source for quotations from the play is McGee, Lisa (2016). *Girls and Dolls*. London: Nick Hern Books Limited. Subsequent quotations will be indicated by the page number in brackets.

⁸ A significant feature of carnivalesque literature is the demythologisation of the legendary hero, who is often debased and turned into the object of laughter (Bakhtin 1999: 132-33).

JOSIE. God, aye, my heart goes out.

MAGS. Them poor people. Digestive, boys? (47)

The last remark, in which one of the two ladies offers food with typical host courtesy, is the final twist in the dismantling of the heroic pathos, as it turns a terrorist kidnapping into an everyday social visit.

As notable as the political effect of this ironic debunking of the Republican struggle during the Troubles is, the whole episode serves another purpose in the development of the plot. This amusing scene does not prepare us for the brutal murder of the dog, which was previously presented in such a way as to make the soldier's shooting even more shocking and crueller. The tone changes abruptly, and the contrast heightens the gravity of the situation. It is the first glimpse of something violent and disturbing, as well as a scene that shows Clare's darkness. As Weitz remarks about an unconventionally humorous version of *Medea*, "Clownish behaviour can be used to draw us in, to charm us [...] The counter-comic reversal into tragedy then became sharp and devastating" (Weitz 2009: 163). Without all the lightness and humour of the first part of the narrative, what follows would not have been so dreadful.

The use of humour to ridicule the powers that be also applies to the Roman Catholic Church, a real authority for the Catholic community in Northern Ireland, thus again evidencing the carnivalesque mockery of power described by Bakhtin. As seen above, Emma displays a blatant irreverence in relation to all religious practices, and especially to the sanctimonious such as her Aunt Rita. The way her godmother coerces Emma with the Virgin Mary, "Do you know what happens when wee girls don't go to mass? Our Lady cries, and her tears make rain, and wee girls can't go out to play" (27), only to be confronted by her own past use of this form of coercion, "You said that's what happens when wee girls swear" (27), demonstrates the unreliability of old beliefs and their potential for comedy. The mass scene builds its humour from the interspersed interventions of the priest and Emma's inner monologue to show their lack of connection, displaying thus the absolute meaninglessness of the ritual for the children who were forced to attend:

PRIEST: A reading from a letter of St John according to the Ritty Titty Tu Tu's.

EMMA: I wonder how the altar boys decide who gets to ring the bell.

PRIEST: This is the word of the Lord.

EMMA: They must take it in turns (28, 29).

The whole scene is designed to incite carnivalesque laughter in its "parodia sacra", that is, the "parody of sacred texts and rituals" (Bakhtin 1999: 127).

Humour also helps to portray the essence of humanity in its most mundane expressions. McGee believes that theatre can only be transformative if the audience can relate to what is happening on stage. In her opinion, the genre of tragedy is not true to the human experience because we use humour to deal with the unbearable: "If someone dies and you go to their funeral, you remember laughing at things because that's just how humans are. I just felt like I didn't really recognize some of the portrayals of tragedy. And when you're Northern Irish, you're seeing tragedy a lot. I haven't seen this portrayed" (McGee 2023). Her rebuttal of the tragic genre in referring to the Northern Irish experience is highly symptomatic of a generation born and raised during the Troubles. This use of humour as protection, as Freud describes it,⁹ can be seen in the dialogue between the friends after the dog has died and they go to pay their respects to the owner, two ten-year-old girls pretending to be responsible adults in a tragic situation.

⁹ "[T]he super-ego tries, by means of humour, to console the ego and protect it from suffering" (cited in Weitz 2009:140).

From Guffaw to Grimace

The rhythm of the play is shaped by the intertwined fibres of humour and seriousness. The more frequent comic pieces at the beginning gradually pave the way for the darker side of the situation, which enhances its sombre character by contrast with the lightness of the first scenes in what is a typically dualistic image of carnivalesque literature (Bakhtin 1999: 126). The denouement is made all the more horrifying by the comic dialogue and descriptions with which the plot is spiced up. Thus, although at first the interventions of the adults Emma and Clare seem to be in agreement and serious in tone, very soon the first traces of humour can be seen in the contrasting versions of what Emma and Clare remember, and which at the same time enlighten us about each girl's personality:

CLARE: The park keeper was...

EMMA: A nice enough man.

CLARE: A creep.

EMMA: His name was Jim.

CLARE: John... something.

EMMA: When he walked he kind of dragged his feet.

CLARE: Because he had a limp.

EMMA: Because his boots didn't fit him properly (12).

As may be observed, Emma conveys a sense of naivety and goodwill while Clare is perceived as more mean-spirited and down-to-earth. The two girls, with their contrasting personalities, can be seen as an embodiment of the reverse twins of the carnivalesque (Bakhtin 1999: 126).

The alternating interventions then describe school and neighbourhood routines, focusing on behaviour that would be labelled eccentric,¹⁰ such as that of the two older sisters, Mags and Josie, for whom the girls ran errands and who, later in the summer, would be taken hostage by the IRA men. Another arresting character is Dennis O'Donnell, the shopkeeper, who also appears in *Derry Girls*, since, as McGee acknowledges in the interview, he is based on a real person from her childhood memories, the perfect object of caricature, a *commedia dell'arte* Pantalone: "he was just this terrifying local shopkeeper that didn't want to sell anything or didn't want kids in there or anything" (McGee 2023). In *Girls and Dolls*, the fear he inflicts is also a comedic element: "The thrill of stealing from Dennis O'Donnell lay in the fact that if he caught you, he would actually kill you" (23). But again, the thread of comedy is inextricably intertwined with the menace of the looming tragedy, even if it is not perceived by the spectator.

The humour with which McGee invests this character overshadows the hint of the tragic resolution, the red carpet. The girls have got a tree house from a friend and are furnishing it with things stolen from their homes. They decide to buy a carpet from Dennis, but he refuses to sell it in instalments. This results in two sets of scenes, one at Emma's house and one at Clare's. Emma tries to get the money from her father, in a very comical exchange where the father appears amusing and affectionate; then, we see the contrast with the scene between Clare and her mother, humourless, and where the spectator appreciates Clare's mother's fixation on appearances – Clare's dirty dress – and her habit of going out at night and leaving the girl behind. This disturbing scene, in which Clare's anxiety is related to her abandonment by an unloving mother, is followed by another in Emma's kitchen, again in comedy key, in which Emma's mother is portrayed as a traditional maternal figure in stark contrast to Clare's. Once more, after the humour of this scene, the audience is struck by one of the most harrowing, the dialogue between Clare and her father on arriving home. In it, the suspicion of her father's

¹⁰ Bakhtin considers eccentricity as a "special category of the carnival sense of the world" (1999: 123).

abuse is confirmed when he forces her to take off her dress on the pretext that it is dirty, and Clare is terrified but dares not disobey:

CLARE'S FATHER: Take it off now.

CLARE: But, Daddy...

CLARE'S FATHER: Don't make me get angry with you, Clare. Do as I say.

She does.

CLARE: We bought the red carpet from Dennis.

EMMA: I think her father gave her money.

CLARE: She was really excited. I didn't like it, how it looked, how it felt. In a way, it spoilt it for me (40).

The closing lines of the episode tie the horrific act to the innocence of childhood play.

In the same way that Clare rejects her expensive dolls, she ends up rejecting the red carpet which she had obtained in such a repulsive manner and which, therefore, irremediably defiled her childish pleasure. The red carpet will go from being the symbol of the girls' friendship and summer adventures, to the evidence of corruption in Clare's family, to the tool used to cover Clare's murder of her toddler neighbour, Shannon, after kidnapping her and taking her to the tree house: "We wrapped her in the red carpet, we pulled it from the tree house – it was so wet and heavy" (77). The red carpet becomes, by metonymy, the embodiment of the changing relationship between the girls.

As the play nears its resolution, the comedic threads disappear and the girls' rapid-fire dialogue is punctuated by longer, grimmer monologues. When Clare's mother goes away for a week, we can see through Emma's description of her friend's condition that Clare is distressed: "I didn't ask her why she had no coat on, or why she was wearing two different socks" (61). Following Emma's monologue, the scene of the two girls washing Clare's dolls, which plays with the audience's expectations of the usual childhood banter heard before, is a disquieting dialogue revealing Clare's spiralling descent into madness. Referring to her room and the dolls, Clare says, "It's filthy, it's dirty, even these, even these stupid things, they're disgusting. They all need washed [*sic*]" (66); and when Emma, who wants to help her, notices that one of the dolls should not get wet because it has batteries, Clare angrily replies, "I want her washed, I want all of them clean, it doesn't matter if the stupid thing doesn't work, I never play with it. As long as it looks okey, it doesn't matter if it's broken, it just sits there, it just sits there and gets looks [*sic*] at" (67). It can be noted that Clare's identity has become one with her dolls, as only appearances matter.

The feeling of dirtiness that no amount of cleaning can remove is one of the signs of the behaviour of a paedophile victim, as is their projection onto the dolls. Not only does Clare identify with these sophisticated dolls, but she also projects herself onto her little neighbour, whom Emma affectionately calls "doll" all the way to the tree house. Shannon and her mother, Dervla, had offered a testament to the possibility of a happy life without a father until Dervla's partner arrives. Emma's confirmation that this man is Shannon's father will trigger Clare's breakdown: "This is where I stop. Usually, it will all wrap up somewhere around here" (68). This is the beginning of the longest and most poignant monologue, in which Clare explains her pain, her inability to ask for help and her shock when she sees what to her was clearly an act of violence, Dervla and her partner having sex. Clare's self-hatred, projected onto the dolls she wants to destroy, will ultimately lead to Shannon's tragic death when the broken ten-year-old, unable to cope with her anguish, drops the baby from the tree house.

The abduction and killing of a toddler by two ten-year-old girls recalls the terrible events of 1993, when James Bulger was abducted and killed by two ten-year-old boys. Asked in the interview, McGee acknowledged that this had been the germ of the play:

I remember thinking [...] that's a mistake [...] They're in so much trouble [...] I had always that case in my mind because I think I was the same age as the guys who did it [...] The fact that their lives were ruined [...] I read everything about that case [...] and I just thought, because the Troubles in Northern Ireland have taken up so much of our energy, the stuff we're not looking at could be equally devastating [...] I was interested in what if something like that had happened in Northern Ireland? (McGee 2023).

As Haslett points out, *Girls and Dolls* was not the only reaction to this highly mediated crime, which acted as a powerful inspiration for what would later be grouped under the label of Inyer-face theatre, to use Aleks Sierz's term (2001). Yet, as the critic observes, the emphasis in the British plays and this one differs: "British theatre's responses to the Bulger case [...] tended to focus on the act of violence. By contrast, McGee's play [...] focuses exclusively upon the aftermath of the violence, the process of justice, and the fates of those who were directly involved" (Haslett 2013: 91). Haslett's conclusion refers to the Tinderbox version, in which Emma and Clare converse in a secret meeting and not only seek to clarify what happened, but also narrate the life each of them has led after the murder. In the original play, however, the play is more about the circumstances that trigger the violent act, what precedes the crime, rather than the aftermath. What *Girls and Dolls* manages to convey, without diminishing the magnitude of the tragedy of Clare's moment of madness, is precisely the horror of a life destroyed by an instant of alienation fostered by an unhealthy and traumatic environment and, in the process, provides the characters with what McGee believed these English boys had lacked, a context that could explain how the unfathomable could have occurred.

Conclusions

Girls and Dolls is Lisa McGee's first professional stage play, and it is a more than remarkable debut. Reviews of the first production with Tinderbox predicted a bright future for the playwright, although they regarded this play as a promise of what could become and not yet as a fully accomplished work. Reviews of the 2018 revival, however, declare this play to be an impressive piece of theatre. In between we have the author's unexpected fame as a screenwriter for the hit television series *Derry Girls*, which may have changed the critics' perspective on the later version. Despite the importance of this new take on the author, there is another element to credit for the more favourable assessment of the script, and that is McGee's decision to dispose of the Tinderbox version, with four performers, and return to her original idea of a two-actor play, with a faster pace and tempo and a different perspective on the narration.

The genre of the play itself can also be considered in dispute, as it was described as a suspense drama in the 2006 version and as a black comedy in 2018, no doubt again because the fame of the series had shifted the balance towards what the author was known for. In any case, this play has elements of both comedy and tragedy without being either. It arguably falls under the term used for films and television series, the "dramedy", as it begins as a comedy but harbours the seeds of the unexpected and terrifying outcome.

McGee's use of humour in a play about such a terrible subject as child abuse and violence, set against the backdrop of the Troubles in 1980s Derry, fulfils a number of purposes, while also drawing the audience into the minds of these two girls. We immerse ourselves in what is relatable to us only to be alienated by the shocking intrusion of violence, both within the family and the community. The area, neighbours, family and friends belong to the everyday world, but their seeming cosiness in Emma's memories only serves to outline the darkness that envelops Clare. The author achieves a complex and multi-layered reflection on childhood trauma and childhood friendship, on what a safe environment means for children and the

consequences of mental distress in an engaging play that resonates deeply with audiences through its intelligent blending of the threads of the comic and the tragic.

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