

JOHN ARDEN AND MARGARETTA D'ARCY

A LITERARY STRUGLE FOR IRELAND

I - Thorny Playwrights

Together with maybe Edward Bond, Howard Barker, or Howard Brenton, the dramatist John Arden is often seen as one of the most problematic contemporary British playwrights. In his early years he was far from successful with audiences and theatre critics, and his later work, which was in most cases written in collaboration with his wife Margaretta d'Arcy, is more or less dismissed as being so much inferior. (1) And even his most popular play *Serjeant Musgrave's Dance*, which meanwhile has become a theatre classic and forms part of the English literature curriculum at secondary schools, was not whole-heartedly accepted in 1959 when it caused a great financial loss for the Royal Court Theatre. And when he nevertheless received the Evening Standard Award for his play, Milton Shulman, who was one of the judges, commented in a mixture of hope and desperation: "I feel that he will turn up with a better play next year." And Harold Hobson's judgement of this play is also well known: "Another frightful ordeal." (2)

In a wider sense of the term John Arden has always been a political playwright. However, he reached a definite turning after his stay at the University of New York City in 1968, where he and his wife staged an eleven-hour "Vietnam Carnival", and also after their journey to India in 1970. From then on their plays were outspokenly "partisan" in the sense that they committed themselves to and fought for the rights of the oppressed and for social justice. In the theatre conditions became increasingly difficult for them since they would insist that they, being the authors, must have the last word on how their plays should be performed on stage. This attitude brought them on a collision course with the theatre directors, and eventually the crisis culminated after the Royal Shakespeare Company's performance of their play *The Island of the Mighty* in 1972. The authors accused the theatre directors of having distorted the meaning of the play and having given it an imperialistic touch by taking out certain passages. (3)

In the 60s and the beginning 70s John Arden and Margaretta d'Arcy met with a number of similar problems which made them altogether very bitter. When their play *The Ballygombeen Bequest* was published the General in Command of the British Army in Northern Ireland complained to the Arts Council about it because it showed the British Army torturing an Irish prisoner. Then a British landowner took the Ardens to Court and claimed that he could be identified as one of the characters in the play. He was successful and the play was taken out of circulation for five years. It was later altered and published under the title *The Little Grey Home in the West*. Thirdly, the company 7:84 which performed the play suffered too because their grant was taken away by the Arts Council.

II - The Little Grey Home in the West

What is so dangerous about this play ? (4) Why did it threaten Britain and her politics in Northern Ireland so that the law decided to take drastic actions against it ?

There is indeed a cruel torture scene at the end of the second act when a young man from the Republic of Ireland is beaten to death by the Intelligence Branch of the British Army during a so - called interrogation - in - depth because he is suspected of being a member of the IRA. However, there is probably more here which might well have been regarded as an attack on British politics towards Ireland.

The content of the play seems simple at first sight. An English broker inherits by chance a plot of land with a cottage and a bungalow on it in Ireland and thus becomes an "absentee landlord." In order to make money with his new property he plans to develop the site into a place for tourists. His problem, however, turns out to be that a poor Irish family lives on this land and cannot be easily evicted since they and their ancestors have been living there all their lives, and indeed for the last 600 years. From these superficially meagre facts the authors develop a plot which proves to be dynamite to the topical relationship between Britain and Ireland, and especially so since a very similar event took place near to the authors' home in Galway. (5)

Right from the beginning of the play there can be no doubt on which side the authors stand. The Irish tenants are shown to be desperate and poverty-stricken, uneducated but good people, and as Irishmen having the unalienated right to live in their own country. Aggression and meanness of character is above all shown on the side of the "Brits", the "villains" who - empowered with legal tricks and a good deal of immoral tactics - attempt to evict the Irish. The English landlord sums this up aptly when he says : "I am, you see, a businessman : I look to the main chance where I can" (page 13). (6) And the authors are anxious to generalize this attitude immediately thereafter, and attribute it not only to the English when they say : "Private enterprise runs about on all four feet like a wolf in the night..." (p. 22) but also to the Americans who "have a prodigious huge bomb" (p. 23) which they want to station in Ireland as well as to collaborative Irishmen who attempt to exploit their own countrymen. By this device they enlarge a minor conflict into an international one and declare it to be a symbol of a universal phenomenon. They turn it into a conflict between capitalism and the exploited masses.

1. Absentee Landlords and the State of Ireland

The time from 1959 to 1968, that is the years in which almost the whole of the first act is set, is comparatively peaceful between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. Businessmen and bankers from the North move freely in Dublin and even "a Unionist, an Orangeman indeed is seen there as a kind of man they need." (p. 25) Apparently the English mistake this vision of peacefulness for a genuine reconciliation brought about and necessitated by sheer poverty and unemployment in the South. And even when detonations like a distant dangerous grumble are heard near the border they still stay incredulous to the fact that this could have been caused by the IRA since, as everybody knows, this organisation has no longer the support of the population. The detonations might have been preventive acts on both sides of the border to keep the people at bay. (p. 26)

When the English landlord's lawyer with the telling name Crotchet hatches out a contract which shall define the Irish tenants' status on their land and which lures them into the belief that this is made in their favour, the authors generalize this peculiar incident again by contrasting it with the treaty between England and Ireland in 1921 which resulted in the declaration of a Free State. However, two essential disadvantages of this treaty split the population : the Irish Parliament was only free insofar as it pledged allegiance to the English King and the northern six counties were finally not included in the territory of the Free State. According to some historians the leader of the Irish delegation, Michael Collins, was confused and intimidated by Lloyd George and did not understand the final implications of the treaty (7). So, in the play, the poor and naive Irish tenants, are equally irritated and were finally cheated when the English absentee landlord offered them life-tenancy on their own land. This did imply, of course, that they could be evicted as soon as the father of the family had died. "Every corner of every paragraph of every law in his country was ravelled up by some Englishmen," (p. 16) says Teresa, the Irish family's mother - she being the only one in the family who understands the fraud although without having the power to object to it.

The second act of the play begins in the year 1968 in which the civil rights march in Derry took place and it proceeds to the year 1972 when on "Bloody Sunday" 13 civilians were shot dead by the British Army on the streets. This was also the year when direct rule was introduced and Stormont was suspended. In the play the Irish tenants are under severe threat of being evicted from their land following the death of the father of the family. There is no hope for them to win their case in court, so their only trust seems to lie in arousing popular feeling and "to make friends with a few certain people" by which the Republican Movement is meant. And since, together with the father, the old more passive generation of Irishmen has died, from 1968 on a fresh start is being made by their sons and daughters. They can now see that "an apparently minor affair (is) a straight indication of all that is wrong with this country - the ownership of the Six Counties, the subjection of the Fianna Fail government to multi-national industrial syndicates, the offences against the State Act, internment for Republicans, the lot." (p. 48).

It is a historical fact that the Republicans, at that time, did not sympathize with the IRA. It was the Republicans who had been prominent in organising the Civil Rights Movement for Northern Ireland, which was modelled on the American Civil Rights Movement under Martin Luther King. However, when on October 5, 1968 the March was brutally broken up by the Royal Ulster Constabulary the history of Northern Ireland changed irrevocably. (8) In the play, Padraic and Mulholland, a teacher and Republican comment on this event with a song :

Let the men of Stormont tremble now
At the Work they have begun
For by the blow that they have struck
Their power is all undone.
The blood they shed in Derry town
on the pavement let it lie.
Till Ireland's free from north to south
Those pools will not be dry. (p. 50)

This warning strongly hints at the IRA's return to power which, in fact, they achieved. The IRA, after many years of near oblivion, became the only organisation

that could fill the urgently needed leadership for the Catholic part of the population which felt equally as harrassed by the Protestants as by the British Army. In 1968, they had split into two sections : the Marxist inclined Officials and the traditional Provisionals (named after the "Provisional" government of Ireland announced by Pearse in 1916.)

Especially the existence of a communist section of the IRA helped to spread the rumour that there was an international conspiracy of the communist world. So, the English absentee landlord is convinced that "... the IRA (is) identified as a front for international C-O-M-M-U-N-I-S-M..." (p. 52) which provides London with a badly needed reason to attack and suppress it. Consequently, London sends an intelligence agent to Ireland, being absolutely convinced that in this very little hamlet IRA headquarters are to be found. His orders are to unmask Padraic as an IRA agent and his mission is successful in a terrible sense : when Padraic is sent to Northern Ireland he is caught by British troops, tortured and finally killed.

III - Melodramatic devices and politics

The authors have called their play a melodrama, and indeed a lot of melodramatic devices can be detected (9). The division between the good and the villain is prominent right from the beginning and continued until the end. The poor Irish population belong to the good side, the exploitive English to the bad side. However, among the Irish too we find conspirators who work hand in hand with what the authors qualify as capitalist exploitation and this is not only so for sections of the population or the IRA but also for the Dublin government which is accused of encouraging speculation and betraying the hard-won victories of 1916 and 1921.

The villains are always shown as true die-hard villains, they are never sympathetic at all throughout the play. They represent capitalism and exploitation in its most ugly manifestation. The English landlord is a virtual devil who dispises the Irish, treats them like underdogs or uncouth savages.

Another important melodramatic device is the use of songs. Their function is manifold : With regard to the audience they break the illusion of identification, they explain the political background and sum up the historical development. At the beginning of Act. 1, Scene 2, the period from 1945 to 1958 is characterised as follows :

So many years for good or ill
The Age of Austerity over the hill
the Tories are in and Labour out -
Private enterprise runs about
On all four feet like a wolf in the night
He chops with his teeth at all in sight...

The song on the years 1959-1968 stresses the widening gap between the rich and the poor world :

From the year of nineteen fifty-nine
to nineteen sixty-eight
The fat man of the fat half world
Had food on every plate.

The lean man of the naked world
Grew leaner every day
And if they put their faces up
their teeth were kicked away

Thus the speed of the play is accelerated, time is "condensed" by employing this time-lapse technique.

And a very emotional song about Padraic's torture and death puts him in line with the Irish martyrs like Emmet and Wolfe Tone :

He has not gone from you - he was dragged
and torn away to die :
They murdered him in darkness
With a blindfold round his eye :
They butchered him like Connolly
Or Emmet or Wolfe Tone
Or a thousand thousand other ones
Who likewise are all gone !

The fate of the Irish freedom fighters who are regarded by a part of the population as martyrs is quite unhesitatingly used by the authors to arouse a strong feeling against the English.

For employing these and other devices in their plays the Ardens have often been reproached as being literary propagandists. Although there can be no doubt about their uncompromising socialist standpoint one must not confuse this with the literary quality of their plays. In *The little Grey Home in the West* there is a rich set of allusions to a great variety of historical developments in Irish history, to names, places, personalities etc. which convey a very differentiated picture. There are also "play-within-a-play" devices, the narrator technique, songs, irony and a lot of laughter ingredient to the play. Though it cannot be denied that it is a partial play it is much more concerned with explaining how exploitation works, how political aims interlink and connect and how interests of quite different parties are interlocked (10).

When all is said, *The Little Grey Home in the West* is a very courageous play. It was first produced in Belfast in 1972 at the very peak of tensions. The audience could relate the theatre events quite easily to real events outside and the authors never faltered for a moment to speak their minds in an altogether explosive political situation.

IV - History and Presence : *Vandaleur's Folly*

In their elaborate preface to *Vandaleur's Folly* the authors take pains to emphasize above all that in this play they "tell a true story of how an agricultural co-operative commune was set up in the west of Ireland in 1831, how it succeeded beyond all possible expectation, and how just two years after its foundation it collapsed in a sudden and personal disaster" (p. V). They explain meticulously the historical background of their play, how the commune Ralahine was inspired by Robert Owen's utopian theory of socialism and how the Irish scholar Thompson was a widely used source for Marx but was hardly ever mentioned as such and so fell into oblivion like so many Irish poets, novelists, and other intellectuals.

Another part of the preface deals in detail with the difficulties the authors encountered when actually performing the play. Not only were their posters, news-cuttings and handbills, which were meant to establish parallels to present-day political events, removed from the proscenium by the director of the performance - a deal which inevitably turned the play into a "nineteenth - century historical melodrama" - but actors too felt intimidated into speaking lines which seemed dangerous in a politically sensitive situation. "There is another way of preventing words being done and that is by the insidious intimidation of actors... In Vandaleur's Folly, when this was presented in 1978, the last line say : 'As it was from all four provinces in exile we regathered, we were re-dedicated, the Fenian Brotherhood, made safe for the cause with great oaths - and we have never to this day given up in the work we put hand to. Let the red soldiers of the redstained crown pay heed to us yet... Our Brotherhood in due course became known as the Republican Brotherhood'. Now, that sounds like a straight historical statement, which it is. But in the context of what is going on in Ireland today some people find that very frightening including the actor who had to speak it. We had a great deal of trouble. A friend of the actors told them : 'Don't you know what those lines mean ? They mean that you are asking the people to join the IRA. Now in England, under the Prevention of Terrorism Act... for an actor his career would be ruined" (11).

The play *Vandaleur's Folly* is set at the beginning of the 19th century. Ireland is again in the midst of turmoil and belligerent upheavals. The Catholic leader O'Connell has just won the famous election of 1828 in County Clare and begins with what became known as "monster meetings" in which a million Catholics or more came together to listen to and to celebrate O'Connell the man who after more than a century of subjugation and oppression had given them new hope. The rebellion of Wexford in 1798 still evokes the most gruesome memories for the Catholics as being the final crushing and extinction of the United Irishmen and their supporters by English troops. And the decade after the French revolution in 1789 had been one of the most terrible in Irish history when the English army virtually killed thousands of Catholics by way of flogging, torturing and hanging although it cannot be denied that atrocities were committed by the catholic population as well.

Why did this happen ? To answer that question one has to take into consideration the fact that Ireland, in the 18th century, was virtually a Protestant State in which the Catholics had no rights whatsoever. They did not even have churches but were forced to practise their religion in the open air or in whatever place was convenient. No Catholic had the right to vote, nor stand for Parliament, nor join the army, nor practise at the bar, nor buy land or hold land on lease for longer than 31 years. By 1775 barely 5% of the land remained in catholic hands. It was the Protestant Ascendancy who held all the wealth in their hands and who had developed a rich, especially literary culture : names like Swift, Sheridan, Goldsmith, Burke come to the mind easily. And it was the Protestants who demanded a United Ireland. Influenced by the events in America they even set up a Declaration of Independence (12).

The impact of these very contradictory political forces and strategies, the confusion and terror of assassinations and murders throughout the centuries is established theatrically as early as the first scene of the play when an Irishman is killed in an ambush which takes place at night by another Irishman who himself is a member of a secret society called "Lady Clare and her Boys". The man assassinated

was a steward on Ralahine, an agrarian cooperative run by Vandaleur. The existence of this cooperative in which there are no longer landlords and tenants but companions with equal rights and duties is not at all supported by the English Ascendency. They fear that their influence with the Catholics will be thoroughly disturbed and threatened. For them Ralahine is a product of the agrarian terrorism of the Catholics which they wish to destroy and "to utterly ruin the O'Connollites, the midnight murderers, the Jacobin socialists". (p. 39) Major Baker-Fortescue, one of the most cruel of their members, is filled with cynical glee when he remembers the atrocities he and his likes committed in the Dragooning of Ulster in 1797 : "Armed horse-soldiers like reaping hooks into every village, every townland, Catholic, Protestant, who cared ?" (p. 33) The historian Robert Kee quotes an eye-witness of similar events in 1798 : "There was no ceremony used in choosing victims, the first to hand done well enough... They were stripped naked, tied to a triangle and their flesh cut through without mercy. And though some stood the torture to the last gasp sooner than become informers others did not and one single informer in the town was enough to destroy the United Irishmen in it". (13) Baker-Fortescue is the very person too who is embroiled in the slave-trade whereby cheap goods are brought from England via Ireland in exchange for salves for America. And later the new steward on Ralahine, Craig, who comes from Manchester and is, as he points out, used to squalor and filth there, describes the deprecation of the Irish population in the following words : "Clustered like lice into their rat-ridden cabins, enthralled with disease and blank apathy of congenital vice - have you ever seen a faction fight ? Debased gentlemen of the countryside stand grinning between two mountains while their ignorant tenants will beat each other's brains out. ...To be frank I have despaired " (p. 36).

For the greater part of the first act of the play the audience is meant to believe that the cooperative of Ralahine is truly what the authors wish to recommend for the amelioration of the Irish miserable condition. The utopian theoretician Owen is quoted with the belief that if there was only one small estate like Ralahine in the country this would serve as a model for the whole land and finally change everything for the better. "What need then of the Orange Order or even of Dan O'Connell within a commonwealth so harmonious...! (p. 27) And when the first harvest is brought in on the commune of Ralahine the "peasants are all very respectably dressed in new white festive smocks..." (p. 44) There are, however, throughout the first act various warnings that this experiment of Ralahine was bound to fail in the end, as it did. In the prologue Thompson, the radical socialist, sums them all up in his phrase about the "furious contradiction of Ireland" which is "the alleged revolutionaries all over Europe believe that the Age of Revolution has given way to the Age of Reform" (p. 4). In the eyes of the authors this can only mean that a character like Vandaleur who himself belongs to the English Protestant Ascendency can eo ipso not be able to solve the Irish problem. He is not Irish and he belongs to a different class. So, the authors define the failure of the experiment as being a national and a class conflict at bottom. Although he tries hard to improve social conditions, Vandaleur still belongs to the capitalist class of exploiters, of the "haves", whereas all his peasants are part of the exploited, the "have-nots". At the end of the play he falls back into the very wicked and criminal behaviour which according to the authors is so common in his class, that is : gambling. And in one night he gambles away Ralahine and thus destroys the very existence of the peasants and their families. Although he is tricked into this gamble by the villain Baker-Fortescue and his companions he has in no way

the moral power to withstand them but, once he has started, he is ready to proceed in an altogether irresponsible manner. When he recognizes what he has done he sees clearly the size of his injury and also the entanglement with the imperialist behaviour of his class. "It was not to rule Ireland my Anglo-Saxon forebears came in their black keels to the seacoast of England... We should have kept our own maggots within the putrefying flesh of our own privy members - not to scatter them broadcast upon the green fields of the world like God's manna to the men of Israel, bringing death to red deer, the trout in the swift rivers the seed of the corn before even it springs... I make desolate. I abandon." (p. 85) It seems to be quite clear that the authors wish to bring home the point that, for Ireland, there can be no hope in a member of the capitalist class because there is evil and exploitive thinking at the bottom of all their doings. The Irish should rather make an effort to solve their problems themselves.

VI - Suffering for the Freedom of Speech

Ballygombeen Bequest was played on the Falls Road, Belfast, in the middle of the riots of the year 1972. By that time the British Army had moved into Ulster, the "shoot to kill policy" had been announced and "direct rule" was brought in, suspending Stormont, the Northern Irish Government. On "Bloody Sunday", January 30, 1972, British soldiers opened fire on a civil rights march in Derry and killed 13 civilians. In Dublin, the British Embassy was burnt down. The following years were marked by emergency laws, the "Prevention of Terrorism Act" and various bombings caused by the IRA as well as by an increase of killings.

Arden and D'Arcy had produced more plays during that time. There was *The Island of the Mighty* which saw its first production in 1972. Although it is a long play about the Arthurian Cycle of legends and set in the sixth century, Arden deliberately links it with the present time. "National myths of this sort", says Arden, "present a picture of a way of life remarkably similar to that which exists today in the 'Third World' ... The Third World of our own day will find its own Homers from among its own people. We have attempted to indicate - from a rocking and sinking post-imperial standpoint (for what else is the stage of a subsidized London theatre in 1972 ?) - something of how the history of Britain foreshadows twentieth-century turbulence..." (14) For Arden the emphasis of this point was rather more important than the glorification of an old legend.

The Non-Stop Connolly Show is a play on the Irish socialist leader James Connolly and the Easter Rising of 1916. It was only produced once at full length for 26 hours in Liberty Hall, Dublin, in 1975 and in a shortened version at the Almost Free Theatre in London in 1976.

In 1978 when *Vandaleur's Folly* was performed in Belfast as a part of the annual festival Margaretta D'Arcy was invited to give a speech at the English Department at Queen's. In that year 350 IRA prisoners were interned in the High Security Block at the Maze prison (Long Kesh). Their refusal to accept the status of criminal prisoners ended eventually in hunger strikes from which in 1981 ten young men died. In her book *Tell Them Everything* Margaretta D'Arcy gives a vivid picture of how uncompromisingly she and her husband are ready to employ their literature for their struggle for freedom in Ireland : "I arrived in Belfast a few days before the lecture, a guest of the Northern Ireland Arts Council. The first big H Block march to

be held in the North had been banned the day after my arrival on the grounds that it would unduly inflame passions. The following day... I went, by invitation, to a poetry reading... It was a discerning audience, an artistic audience, a caring audience of sensitive, special people. The reading began. Paul Muldoon. His first poem was dedicated to a seventeenth century Spanish painter who had been banned. No ripple. Then he continued with nature poems about the Botanic Gardens. Next - Michaël Longley... He began a poem dedicated to the artist Gerad Dillon, who had lived in the Falls Road... He was a courageous gentle person... Here, I thought, were two dead artists being used by two living artists to present an impression of radical protest against censorship and the brutality of repression on the Falls Road ; did the poets believe that by merely mentioning the names they could avoid all responsibility when the prisoners' families were not allowed to march in the street ? It was hypocrisy ; it was disgusting. I leant against the wall, took out a red marker and wrote H. Block.

My marker squeaked. Heads turned round ; they registered - and they opened their mouths and yelled... I was dragged out by the museum attendants... The Black Maria arrived, and a steely-eyed RUC man tipped me in, hoping to break my neck..." (16).

For this "crime" and for taking part in an unauthorised demonstration Margaretta D'Arcy was sent to Armagh jail for three months.

Wolfgang J. LIPKE
Universität de Siegen

NOTES

- (1) See quotations from Arden's plays in *Arden on File*, London 1985 ; Colin Chambers/Mike Prior : "John and Margaretta D'Arcy : Uneasy lies the Head. In : *'Playwrights' Progress Patterns of Postwar British Drama*. Oxford 1987, p. 147 ff. ; Frances Gray : *John Arden*, London 1982, p. 1 ff.
- (2) Gray, *ibid.*, p. 11.
- (3) See Wolfgang LIPKE : "We are no longer interested in the theatre", *Gulliver* 1985, vol. 17, p. 135-142. For a short overview of the authors' literary career see : Wolfgang LIPKE : "Contemporary British Authors : John Arden and Margaretta D'Arcy. Video cassette and article. Institut f. Film u. Bild in Wissenschaft und Unterricht. Gruenwald 1987.
- (4) The authors rewrote *The Ballygombeen Bequest* and published it under the title *The Little Grey home in the West*, London 1982.
- (5) Gray, *ibid.*, p. 88f.
- (6) All the page numbers refer to *The Little Grey Home in the West*, Pluto plays, London 1982 or, respectively, to *Vandaleur's Folly*, Eyre Methuen, London 1981.
- (7) Robert KEE : *Ireland, A History*, London 1982, Chapter 11.
- (8) KEE, *ibi.*, p. 235.

- (9) For a detailed discussion cf. Michael Goering : *Melodrama heute : Die Adaption melodramatischer Strukturen im Werk von John Arden und Arden/D'Arcy*. Muenchener Studien zur Neueren Englischen Literatur. Band 2. Amsterdam 1986.
- (10) Albert HUNT : *Arden : a study of his plays*, London 1974, p. 156.
- (11) The authors in an interview at the University Siegen, FRG, 1984.
- (12) KEE, *ibid.*, Chapter 4.
- (13) KEE, *ibid.*, p. 63.
- (14) *Arden on File*, *ibid.*, p. 50.
- (15) Margaretta D'Arcy : *Tell Them Everything*, Pluto Press London 1981, p. 15f.