Dogs, Ducks, and Dissent—A "Priest Play" on Tour in Ireland

John Barrett

For the past few years my research interest has been in the area of audience response in the theatre. What makes an audience engage with the action on stage and what makes them disengage? Why will different types of audience react in different ways, or give widely different responses on different nights? I select a certain number of plays that are of different style and genre and I attend each of these a number of times, on different days of the week, different stages in the run, and, as far as possible, with different types of audience—e.g. matinée audiences, audiences dominated by older or younger groups, by school-leavers, by American tourists.

When my own play, *Borrowed Robes*, was accepted by the Island Theatre Company, Limerick, it provided an opportunity to develop this study, not only because of my own involvement in the process, but also because they planned to tour it. It opened at the Belltable Theatre in Limerick on July 23rd 1998 and ran for four weeks. This was followed by a two week national tour in September and a further tour (which included Northern Ireland) in September and October 1999.

There were forty-eight performances of *Borrowed Robes* altogether, and of these I attended half. There were thirty-three performances in 1998, of which I saw fifteen; there were fifteen performances in 1999, of which I saw nine.

The play uses as its historical basis the events that occurred in Limerick in 1904, recognized as one of the most shameful episodes in Irish history. On the 12th of January of that year the Redemptorist priest (Fr. Keane in the play) who was Director of the largest Catholic Confraternity in the world (seven thousand men and boys) commenced a series of twice-weekly sermons, attacking the Jews of the city and calling for a boycott. There followed not just a boycott but vilification, rioting, assaults, attempts to burn down their houses. Despite protest from some quarters, the boycott and the assaults continued and within two years all but one of the Jewish families of Limerick had been forced to leave the city.

Borrowed Robes, however, is a fictionalized account and extends far beyond these recorded facts. It poses the question: how did it come about that a greatly respected man, a priest of power and influence, should suddenly, out of nowhere, instigate such a vicious campaign of persecution against the Jews?

The play suggests that it is the result of a jealous passion. Fr. Keane had known the Jewish woman, Sarah Levin, for many years; her late husband was a sculptor who had done a great deal of work for the Church and Keane had been in the habit of visiting them frequently. He has not seen her since her husband died six years ago (he would not think it proper to visit a single woman), but his passion for her remains unabated, though, as always, unexpressed.

His present anger and jealousy is sparked by the fact that one of the novices in his charge has left the Order, without informing him, and has gone to stay in Sarah Levin's boarding house, receiving both her attention and protection.

You don't write a play, you write material that will become a play. To bring the work into being requires actors and an audience, not to mention the expertise of director and designers of set, lighting, sound, costume etc. And this plurality introduces, even in the best of circumstances, variables, contingencies, instability. If you want stability of text, you should write novels. An act of theatre involves collaborative live performance on one side of the footlights and collaborative response on the other, so that on both sides there is volatility.

It is these volatilities that I wanted to examine. I set out to record how audiences responded moment by moment through the performances of *Borrowed Robes* and to set alongside (as far as I could) the external or non-performance factors such as venue, the architecture of the theatre, audience composition, time, media influence, the current social and political climate etc. and whatever internal or performance factors there might be, such as actors' indisposition, performance mishaps, change of cast etc.

What we noticed (on both tours) was that reaction to the play tended to differ according to age group. No group seemed to have had any trouble with the story and, because it was not improbable, accepted it in the way that people do. But the material of the play was a different matter. Younger people were curious, fascinated by a glimpse into a world that was at this point so remote to them. But older people—people over fifty, say—were disturbed, because they were re-stimulated by the sight of this representative of the Irish Catholic Church (the pre-Vatican II Church), authoritarian, severe, unjust, seemingly not accountable to any civil powers.

Another factor that would have influenced older people was the Bishop Casey scandal and its aftermath. In May 1992 it was revealed that the Bishop of Galway (a very high-profile and charismatic figure) had had an affair with a woman in the 1970s and she had borne him a son and, further, he had embezzled Diocesan funds to support him. This revelation rocked the Irish Catholic Church and among the laity there was a sense of anger and betrayal, particularly among older people. I was in a supermarket on the day that the news broke and I overheard one older woman say to another "Well, that's it. That's the last time I'm going to Confession."

The effect of this in the theatre was that, feeling uncomfortable, and perhaps angry, older people were far more likely to express their feelings in disruptive intervention, while younger people never did. I should distinguish here between two types of audience intervention: the spontaneous reaction from those who are engaged in the play and the disruptive reaction from those who are not engaged.

Nearly all of our audiences were engaged and the responses were spontaneous and appropriate, as when a couple in front of me kept tutting and shaking their heads in disapproval of Keane's first sermon (Limerick, 22/10/99), or, on the other hand, the murmurs of approval that always went around the theatre during the love scene between the novice and the serving maid (scene 4). And we frequently heard engaged comments such as "I knew it!" (Kilmallock 15/9/98), "He's in to the pulpit again!" (Rathkeale 19/9/98) and exclamations "Oh, no!", "Oh God no!", "Oh God! Oh God!", "Not him!", such as you will get from any audience that is engrossed in a story, but perhaps particularly from an Irish rural audience.

But we did encounter a couple of severely disengaged audiences and the worst of them was at the Hawk's Well Theatre in Sligo (10/9/98) which, unsurprisingly, consisted mainly of older people. When the servant girl, Bridget, came on, an older man in the audience called up to her "Fine girl y'are!" and this seemed to set the tone for the evening. When the Jewish widow, Sarah Levin, says to Fr.Keane "You need a wife," (Barrett 51) he calls out "Sure, don't we all?"

The actor playing Fr. Keane was never given a chance by this audience; they hated him; they laughed and jeered at everything he said. A woman in the front row called out "He's mad." In the final scene when Fr. Keane is conducting the Easter Liturgy and gives the instruction "Light your candles now!" (92) and, later, "Lift up your candles!" (93) this provoked peals of derisive laughter. You feel very tempted to go over and speak to them. On that occasion I restrained myself; on a later occasion I learnt to my cost that playwrights should never intervene.

There were no programmes on sale until after the interval and this may have been a factor—in that they were not given the generic expectation that a programme affords. But the posters and all the pre-publicity declared it as a serious play. What could they have been expecting? "No Sex, Please, We're Redemptorists!"? "There's a Redemptorist In My Soup!"?

Certainly the age factor was important in establishing that audience dynamic. What other factors were operating we will never know; perhaps we had just been unlucky in encountering this particular mix of people. Whatever the reason, an audience from hell. A less common type of disengagement, but just as bad, is the response critical. The actor who played Fr. Keane, John Anthony Murphy, rightly received a nomination for Best Actor in the Irish Theatre Awards for 1998. When we played in Enniskillen (17/9/99), we could see three or four people sitting together who were making comments during his scenes, clearly analyzing his performance. We presumed they were from the local amateur drama group. No one else, I believe, could hear what they were saying, but to anyone sitting behind them their disengagement was very distracting.

Curiously, the night following the Hawk's Well debacle, in the same venue, the performance was greeted in almost total silence, with hardly a single response in the entire evening. The actor playing the Father Superior confidently delivered the line that always got a laugh: "I mean, basically, what is a Jew? A sober and energetic Irishman" (44), and was greeted with silence. He said later that he was tempted to say: "Excuse me. I will repeat that line."

The lack of response did not mean that the audience was disengaged and, indeed, after the show we discovered a reason for it. A party of some twenty young students from Sweden occupied the front rows. Though they understood what was going on (I asked them), they didn't have the confidence to respond. In the theatre the axiom is "laughter travels backwards"—laughter and appreciation and other responses spread from the front to the back of the auditorium in what is known as "the ripple effect" This is something that the Royal National Theatre in London understands: tickets for the two front rows of the stalls are sold only on the day of performance; they want them to be filled with the eager patrons who have had to queue from an early hour. For a similar reason—to enhance the communal feeling of the fortunate punters—the two front rows are without armrests.

What we learned from our experiences in 1998 was this: it was not an easy or a comfortable play and it ran great risks, though I suppose I must say that if the risks were great, the rewards were great also.

But everything depended on the audience feeling at least somewhat sorry for Father Keane. They must see that, despite what he said and did, he was not a monster, but someone, who because of his upbringing and training—sent off to boarding school at the age of six and to the seminary at twelve—was never really given the chance of a normal life. Most nights we lived on a knife edge of suspense. Would the audience just laugh at him and mock? Or would they see how the odds had been stacked against him? This was the tightrope we walked—my concern reflected in the journal entries I made— "Laughed all through the Confession scene," "More sympathy for Keane to-night," "God! They hated him."

We noticed too, with a wry smile, that the audience's reaction to Keane's racism, strong as it was, was not without an element of paradox, in that they exhibited some racist tendencies themselves. There was invariably laughter, on both tours, at the notion of Keane being sent on "the Foreign Missions" and some of the biggest laughs (and applause) came on his Superior's comment: "I am having you transferred to the Foreign Missions. You can perform these antics for the Watusi" (75) and on Fr. Keane's own comment, later, when he tells Sarah Levin that he is forbidden to speak further: "Until I get to Africa. As Father Superior says, my next sermons will be to a more sophisticated audience" (88).

Between the performances of July and September 1998 and the performances a year later in 1999 there occurred a major change in Ireland in people's attitude to priests and religious. The clerical scandals, which had been simmering for years, finally erupted in the revelations made in three RTE television programmes under the title *States of Fear*, broadcast on the evenings of 27th April, 4th May and 11th May 1999. These revealed the systematic cruelty and physical, sexual and psychological abuse that had been inflicted on Irish children for decades in schools and orphanages run by Catholic priests, nuns and brothers and provoked a sense of outrage. The journalist Brendan O'Connor, writing in Ireland's best-selling newspaper, *The Sunday Independent*, on May 16th, summed up the mood. Under the headline "Disgraced Orders Should Disband," he wrote

> Let no religious continue to disgrace the faith and mock the innocents who suffer, by carrying in the name of Our Lord, the name Christian Brother, or Sister of Mercy, or Sister of Charity, or Brother of Charity... the list goes on. Any other institution found to have been responsible for the kind of mass scale torture perpetuated by these Orders would immediately have to cease operations. (O'Connor 9)

The change in attitude was noticeable immediately. Priests and brothers who continued to go out dressed in clerical garb risked verbal abuse. Perhaps rather unfairly, it affected Protestant clergy as well. The Rev. Robert MacCarthy, Dean of Saint Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin, writing in *The Irish Times* of 18th September 1999 commented: "Anyone who walks down any Irish street in clerical dress today soon knows the difference. There has, to put it politely, been a lowering of esteem for all clergy, and it is often expressed very impolitely indeed" (17).

Keane was not guilty of any of these abuses—else the play would be unstageable—yet in the general climate there was bound to be an erosion of sympathy for him, precarious at the best of times. Had we more time, I would have tried to offset it with some substantial changes, but it was not possible to ask actors to accommodate these in a six day re-rehearsal period.

My fears were well-founded. After the first performance of the new tour (Portlaoise 15/9/99) we knew we were in trouble. The 1998 audiences had very often applauded Fr.Keane's sermons—not for their content indeed, but for the fine displays of rhetoric. In 1999 these were never applauded.

The two scenes that appeared most problematic were the scene in which he makes his Confession to his Superior (scene 11) and the Barricade scene (16) in which we have the final confrontation between Keane and Sarah Levin.

The 1998 audience had been generally sympathetic to Keane revealing his inner torment under the seal of Confession; the 1999 audience too often dismissed it with laughter. John Anthony Murphy played the part with great integrity, conceding nothing of its unpleasantness, and there could be no question of asking him to soften it. The solution, then, was not to take away from Father Keane's severity, but to offer a counterbalance: to show how others had treated him very shabbily and to reveal more of his vulnerability. The actor playing the Superior now played it with more hardness; he was more impatient and abrupt with him, and I added a line where he interrupts in exasperation: "James, I have Archdeacon Fetherstone waiting downstairs!" (56) but this was using band aids where surgery was required.

An even greater difficulty awaited us in the Barricade scene. In the 1998 version, the bitter quarrel between Keane and Sarah Levin ends with:

> I will have you removed from this city. I will not have you here. I will not eat, I will not rest until it is done. (*He fumbles in his pockets, takes out coins and slams them down on the table*) I believe there was some damage done to your property. (*He turns to leave. Sarah picks up the coins, goes after him and throws them at him. Pause. Alarmed at what she has done, she follows him.*) (86)

The scene then continues with Keane in angry mode.

The director, Terry Devlin and I devised a way of retaining the essential action but making it more sympathetic to Keane. The revised version reads:

> (*He reaches into his pocket, takes out some coins, shows them to her, and drops them with contempt at her feet.*) I believe there was some damage done to your property. (*She slaps him hard across the face. Shocked, he turns and runs out. Alarmed at what she has done, she hurries after him.*) (86)

The audience was stunned by the slap on the face; but this was followed by laughter, huge applause, and several interventions (engaged) such as "Good for you!", "Oh, yes!", "Now!" That was the initial reaction. But then they began to feel sorry for him. And John Murphy played the rest of the scene, not as angry, but as crushed and humiliated, "like a lost little six year old," as one member of the audience put it. This was a simple enough change, but it saved not only this scene, but the play. By allowing the audience to express their anger at Father Keane at this point, it made them more willing to accept his later behaviour and final repentance.

We finished the 1999 tour in Northern Ireland, visiting Enniskillen, Downpatrick and Coleraine. The main difference between these and Southern audiences was that they were more serious. We might have expected this—questions of religious conflict and inflammatory sermons are not academic matters in the North of Ireland. These audiences were intent on the play, but quieter and less demonstrative than their Southern counterparts, and, being out of the loop of the clerical scandals, their reactions to Father Keane were far more muted. Their laughs were small laughs, often more murmurs than laughs. You felt very safe with this audience; you knew they would behave—no raucous guffaws, no disengaged interventions.

We played in Enniskillen for two nights, a town that is ethnically fairly evenly divided. The actors told me that they could tell where the groups of Protestants and Catholics were sitting, according to their responses. The Catholic groups in the audience reacted to the Catholic rituals with murmurs and quiet laughs of recognition, as in the Easter lighting of the candles (scene 19), and, especially, in the Confession scene (10) :

KEANE. I accuse myself of having bad thoughts.
MACNAMARA. Impure thoughts?
KEANE. Yes.
MACNAMARA. Do you dwell on these thoughts? (56)

The Protestants showed more interest in the Biblical quotations and the religious arguments. Their biggest laugh of the evening always came on the reference to Saint Paul:

KEANE. No. Mortify the body. "The flesh wars against the spirit and the spirit against the flesh. And these are contrary."
MACNAMARA. Saint Paul, God help us! Excellent for some people, I'm sure, but disastrous for you. (58)

Predictably, there were murmurs on the line "The Protestants are opening a soup kitchen for them" (73) and, in the same scene (15), "What the Protestant clergy say or think should be no concern of ours" (74).

As these examples indicate, the difference in audience reaction tends to stem from non-performance factors. Of course it can result from performance factors too—an actor who has a cold, props that are mislaid, a set that collapses, lighting and sound cues that are off—but much less frequently.

All performances are influenced, more or less, by non-performance factors. Some of these you can try to control as best you can by pre-publicity—advertisements, posters, fliers, display boards with photographs and extracts from the reviews, articles in local newspapers, interviews on local radio, and, of course, contacts with local people, such as the amateur groups. The most powerful publicity of all is word-of-mouth.

From theatre management's point of view this is to get people into the theatre, but from the writer's point of view, it is also to "position" the audience—that is to give them an expectation, considerably beyond the mere title, of what sort of play it is going to be. At a later stage, the display boards in the foyer, the music that is played, the programme and programme notes may create a different expectation, or heighten the sense of the original expectation.

Theatre managements and playwrights are not always going to agree on matters of pre-publicity. Alan Bennett comments on his play *Forty Years On*:

> Management are worried because advance booking is poor. They believe it is because there is no national publicity, no gossip, no tittle-tattle. They want articles about the show—gossipy, taste-whetting pieces, all the silly paraphenalia of showbiz which I loathe.
> I stand firm on this. I am gambling on the show being a success and think this is more likely to be so if it is a surprise.Theirs is an understandable point of view commercially, but artistically it is wrong. (251)

For my own part, I was none too happy with the display board we used on the Northern tour. I would have argued—on both grounds—against including one review that was particularly misleading.

There are other non-performance factors that you may know about, but are beyond your control—the location of the theatre, its particular limitations (acoustic, lighting facilities, seating arrangements etc), perhaps an audience that is accustomed to a particular type of show. You know about them, but there's nothing you can do about them.

In Rathkeale (22/9/98) even before we arrived at the theatre/community hall we knew that there would be no control position in the hall itself and that the lighting and sound effects would have to be controlled by someone standing in the wings with a very imperfect view and little sense of the volume required. The results were, indeed, erratic—in scene four the duck sound effects so loud the audience must have wondered if Limerick wildfowl had mutated.

There are still other non-performance factors you will not even be aware of. You cannot know what ambience you may be walking into, what prejudices, what particular local trouble or scandal that may resonate for the audience and change the whole dynamic in the theatre.

With any live performance there is a degree of volatility and no theatre is immune—not even the Abbey in mid-run of its summer stock O'Casey—but when you are touring a new show in the smaller venues the intruding realities are, well, more intrusive. In Listowel (18 and 19/9/98) the theatre was a converted church and the stage was placed in the sanctuary area and actually incorporated the pulpit. A quick discussion among the actors, and they decided not to use it: the blocking of the play was well established and adjusting to new moves at this stage would have been confusing. But it worked against us. It looked very odd for Fr. Keane to be delivering his sermons from an imagined pulpit when there was a real pulpit not ten feet away from him.

Contingencies, however, can also work in your favour. When we arrived in Rathkeale (19/9/98) we were told that the time of the performance had been put back half an hour, because virtually all the audience were at the seven thirty Mass. They promised, however, that the priest would make an announcement to this effect from the altar. An audience coming from Mass? Perfectly positioned. You'd pay good money for that.

When we played the smaller towns, we were generally introduced by the theatre management and welcomed: award-winning play, highly successful, honoured to have the author present, raffle at the interval etc. For the most part these were kept short and were helpful in that they created an audience that was well-disposed. In the second Listowel performance, however (18/9/98), the manager who introduced us went on at some length:

> MANAGER. And I want to introduce a very special person here tonight. Mrs.O'Brien, the merry widow from Glin, who kissed President Clinton's hand on his visit to Limerick. And (*He goes over*) I will now kiss that hand (*He does*) and you can all kiss me afterwards.
>
> WAMAN. I hope he won't be impeached because of it.
>
> WOMAN FROM BACK. I want to say that I also kissed President Clinton's hand.

And so it continued. All very well, but not an ideal introduction to a serious play.

Worse was to follow—in the shape of a significant, hairy, four-legged non-performance factor. A stray dog had wandered in and—a very compact theatre—could be seen by everyone and quickly began to divert attention from the actors' performance to his own. I tried to remove him, got bitten for my pains, and had to leave the theatre, my hand streaming blood. A disengaged response, and, worse, the dog it was who stayed. This gave rise to further difficulties. Scene 14 opens with the Bishop exercising his dogs, with sound effects "dogs barking off" (69) and lines such as "Fionn, behave yourself, sir!" (69). Fortunately our sound man had the presence of mind to cut these effects, and the actors to cut the lines.

In Longford (8/9/98) the set itself became volatile; in the final scene at a dramatic moment the kitchen table collapsed, and one of the actors, who was supposed to be lying "dead" on it, found himself lying on the floor, trying to suppress his laughter. The audience, however, thought it was intended—an emblematic expression of the riotous behaviour that was going on outside.

Whether the play will be revived or not is an open question. It is quite possible; the treatment of immigrants is even more relevant in Ireland today. Whatever happens, touring with the play has proved to be a most valuable exercise; I was looking for volatilities, and volatilities came thick and fast.

And another benefit accrued. I was priviledged to be a close observer of a great tradition—the band of players travelling the land, as they have done for centuries, with all they need in a single van, setting up, reaching out to the new and unfamiliar audience, then striking the set together and moving on, never really sure what food and drink and shelter they will find. And never knowing what new crisis may be around the corner, but certain that there will be one. But this is the attraction of theatre, the precarious nature of it, defined as "a table, two chairs, and a passion" (Robinson, 157)—and the attraction perhaps all the greater when the table is a bit rickety.

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