



HAL
open science

”How to ’reshape the Contours of Northern Irish Drama’? The Neo-Brechtian Use of Music in The Belle of The Belfast City by Christina Reid”

Virginie Privas-Bréauté

► **To cite this version:**

Virginie Privas-Bréauté. ”How to ’reshape the Contours of Northern Irish Drama’? The Neo-Brechtian Use of Music in The Belle of The Belfast City by Christina Reid”. *Coup de théâtre*, 2011, 25, pp.185-202. hal-00749054

HAL Id: hal-00749054

<https://hal.science/hal-00749054v1>

Submitted on 14 Nov 2022

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L’archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d’enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

How to “Reshape the Contours of Northern Irish Drama”? The Neo-Brechtian Use of Music in *The Belle of The Belfast City* (1989) by Christina Reid

Virginie PRIVAS-BRÉAUTÉ, Docteur ès Etudes irlandaises, Lyon 3

At a time when Northern Ireland needed to find political, economic and social answers to the ongoing conflicts seeping through its streets, some of its playwrights were bringing another response to the Troubles. If they still made them the background of their plays, their perspective changed so that theatre would still function as a “mirror up to the nation” but would provide other poetic means to achieve national identity (FITZPATRICK 2005: 321). Christina Reid, born in the Ardoyne area of Belfast in 1942, wrote in 1989 *The Belle of the Belfast City* in that context. Her play, which verges on a musical, looks at “ways in which class, religion, politics and gender shape the Northern Irish lives through the lens of women’s experiences” as Mary Trotter put it (2000: 173). Reid’s piece – which received the George Devine award – focuses on the experience of three generations of Protestant women from the working-class community at the backdrop of the signing of the Anglo-Irish agreement in 1985. Most Northern Irish Protestants considered this event to be a betrayal on the British government’s part (HUTCHINSON 2000: 16). Reid’s feminine characters give their own perception in turn on the rally which is about to take place to protest against this agreement. Yet, if Reid’s dialogues sound naturalistic, she tends to get away from realism, making use of anti-illusionist devices as many “women’s writings have tended away from realism and naturalism, inspired by models that include melodrama, parody, the grotesque, symbolism, and expressionism” according to Lisa Fitzpatrick in “Disrupting Metanarratives: Anne Devlin, Christina Reid, Marina Carr and the Irish Dramatic Repertory” (2005: 323).

Should we consider like Jackie Fletcher in an article entitled “Realism, Feminism and the Northern Irish Women Playwrights of the ‘80s” that Reid works within the framework of “women’s theatre companies [that] emerged as splinter-groups within the socialist fringe movement [and] adopted the model used for socialist theatre, which is defined as the Brechtian model” (8), then we may look for the clues enabling us to assert that her play has Brechtian resonances. This idea is supported by Diderik Roll-Hansen who wrote on how Reid’s previous play, *Tea in a China Cup*, “outlines dramatic strategies that have remained characteristic of [her] work, such as her flexible post-Brechtian handling of the changes of time and place both

delicate and spirited, and her command of an urgent, free-flowing theatrical form.”(2008: 393). The influence of Brechtian theory in Reid’s piece is thus here under consideration. The Brechtian use of music becomes a device for the playwright to redefine the contours of Northern Irish drama and provide an aesthetic – as well as a political and social – perspective on the Northern Irish situation of the end of the 20th century. This is how Reid’s play becomes neo-Brechtian as shall be studied. In his introduction to the *Methuen Anthology of Irish Theatre*, Patrick Lonergan explains that Reid is indeed concerned with the redefinition of national identities for her people but also for theatre:

[Reid] challenges and transgresses the boundaries that define national identity. In doing so, [she] push[es] against the conventions of theatrical form: by asking what it means to be Irish, [she] [is] also exploring how identities can be represented theatrically. Along the way, [she] crosses and redraws many other borders. The dramatic merges with different literary forms and other media, from storytelling to music to cinema. (LONERGAN 2008: vii)

For Stewart Parker, another Northern Irish playwright contemporary of Reid, Brecht was indeed one of the colossi “of the European theatre in this age [...] [to] offer a formidable choice and challenge to those playwrights caught in their historical wake”(DAWE *et al.* 2008: 23).

Since Brecht asserted that music played an important part in his epic theory, did not merely illustrate events but was rather a dramatic necessity, an anti-illusionist device, the use of music and songs in Reid’s play is under scrutiny in this paper. Before tackling the effect of distancing created by Reid’s songs as recommended by Brecht, I will first highlight how they contribute to fragment the play, fragmentation being another element part of the epic.

1. Fragmentation

The Belle of The Belfast City revolves around Dolly, the matriarch who used to be a singer in a concert hall in Belfast in the 1940s. She is here welcoming, for the first time in Belfast, her 18 year-old granddaughter, born in England from a Black father and named Belle after her grand mother’s then scene name. Twenty-two songs of different contents, lengths, rhymes, rhythms and genres are strewn over the play. They are folk songs, ballads, nursery rhymes, Sunday school chants, negro-spirituals. The title, which not only recalls the nickname of the singer Dolly but is also melodious, sets the tone. Through the repetition of the defining article “the”, we are invited to understand that Belle is not only *the Belle of*

Belfast. There is specifically only one Belle and only one Belfast. The repetition of “Bel” in Belle and Belfast also creates music from the very beginning. Yet at the same time as it conveys some kind of articulation through the preposition “of” it entails an idea of rupture and heralds the Brechtian resonances of the play. Similarly, through the name “Belle” ambiguously referring either to Dolly when she was young or to her granddaughter, Reid creates a tension between continuity and discontinuity, all the more so as from time to time, depending on the songs she sings, Dolly becomes “Belle” again, visibly rejuvenating on stage.

Fragmentation within the play recalls the then situation of Belfast, one of disharmony and fragmentation. Similarly, the starting point of Brechtian epic realism is a fragmented reality conveyed through several principles including music (VALENTIN 2000: 197). Brecht resorted to songs particularly to give a fragmented aspect to his play¹. He gave the example of *The Three Penny Opera* as a real piece of innovation through the strict isolation of musical elements. Even though *The Belle*’s stage directions do not put forward any particular light effects, on-stage orchestra, screen on which the titles of the songs are written as did Brecht², there are changes when the characters sing. The title of Reid’s play is extracted from a line found in the chorus of the first song, *I’ll tell me Ma*, a children’s song from the 19th century which can be adapted – and indeed it has been adapted in *The Belle* – to other cities and situations:

Dolly (*sings*)

I’ll tell me ma when I go home
The boys won’t leave the girls alone
They pulled my hair they stole my comb
Well that’s all right till I go home
She is a handsome she is pretty
She is the Belle of the Belfast City
She is courtin’ One Two Three
Please won’t you tell me who is she (*TBBC*³,179).

Dolly, 77, sings the play open as if talking about her own childhood. She is then joined by other members of her family, Vi, Rose and Janet, and she will resume singing it alone, later, to close the selfsame scene of act 1. From the beginning, this song, which she had started singing in the present of the play, marks fragmentation since when it is then taken up by the others, the playwright mentions that the year is 1958. Furthermore, whereas Dolly was sitting as an old woman at the beginning of the song, when it is sung by the members of her family, “[she] joins in and becomes an agile woman of 49” (*TBBC*, 179). There is a rupture between the present and the past triggered by the singing of this song. Not only does this song frame

this very first scene, fragmenting the text visually, cut by the playwright who gives directions in between the first part and the following verses of the song but it also ruptures the chronology of time. The changing of rhymes between song n°1 and the different verses of n° 2⁴ and 3⁵ also create discontinuity. This first device highlights the notion of fragmentation as stated by Brecht in his definition of epic drama based on montage, variety show, and biography⁶. Besides, Jeske Berg explains in *Bertolt Brecht, L'Homme et son œuvre*, that in 1926, Brecht advocated the idea of a dramatic piece as a series of independent elements which interacted, completed or contradicted one another impeding a fluid, homogeneous action (BERG & JESKE 1999: 107). Brecht ultimately sought to make music, scenery, lighting, costume, acting and singing all convey the same impression of anti-illusion.

Along the Brechtian theory then, there should be no linearity, each piece has to be on its own, and there should also be no unique centre of perspective since reality is fragmentary. Songs in *The Belle* convey this impression of a fragmented play as well as they offer a plurality of voices, of perspectives. For instance, song n°18 is sung by Dolly who takes up the role of another character they knew back in the 1950s, Naomi:

Dolly (*sings badly*) and mimes **Naomi Standaloft** playing the piano with exaggerated gestures. Sound of a piano. As **Dolly** sings, she becomes **Naomi. Janet and Rose** join in as ten year olds. They are torn between giggling and fascination at **Naomi's** elaborate playing.

Dolly/Naomi (*sings*)
 Climb climb up Sunshine Mountain
 Singing as we go.
 Climb climb up Sunshine Mountain
 Faces all aglow.
 Turn turn your back on Satan
 Look up to the sky
 Climb climb up sunshine Mountain
 You and I.

She shouts "All together now!" and Rose and Janet sing the song and march around the room. As they finish the preacher Isaac Standaloft walks on. [...] Naomi heralds his arrival with a fanfare on the piano... (TBBC, 232).

We have the double perspective of Dolly and her daughters on Naomi, but also that of Naomi who is remembered as she was perceived by Dolly and her daughters back then. Again, the absence of chronological linearity stands out through this embedding of points of view. There is also a rupture in the fluidity in term of space. All the characters pretend they are at the chapel where Naomi, being the piano player and wife of the reverend of the

parish, used to meet them on Sundays for cult.

Another element in the songs hindering fluidity in the play is conveyed through the repetition of lines, such as in song n°9, another children's song:

Our Queen can birl her leg
Birl her leg, birl her leg
Our Queen can birl her leg
Birl her leg leg leg (*TBBC*, 203)

This repetition gives the impression that it is difficult to proceed, to move on. Continuity is further hampered by the fact that the songs tackle different themes and are not only sung by Dolly but also by her daughters, her niece, her nephew, and even her grand-daughter.

Lisa Fitzpatrick explains about *Tea in a China Cup* that Reid “uses music, an episodic structure, and minimal properties, and typically divides the stage into different spaces, depicting different times and spaces simultaneously to create juxtapositions and to allow actions to comment upon each other” (2005: 329). This idea can be taken up for *The Belle* in so far as juxtaposition, another Brechtian element called *montage* and conferring a fragmented dimension within a play, is here conveyed through songs. Even if most of the time, several pages, several dialogues or even several decades, separate two songs, there are occasions when two songs, of different themes and contents, of different genres, are juxtaposed. This is the case for songs n° 16 and 17. Dolly first sings a nursery rhyme while the rally is about to reach her street, then she pulls a party popper, Belle hands her a drink (only one line of stage directions to separate the two songs) and she resumes singing a historic and political song this time:

Dolly (sings) Vote vote for Maggie Thatcher
In comes Belle at the door, io
For Belle is the one that'll have a bit of fun
And we don't want Maggie anymore, io. (*TBBC*, 224).

Like song n°1, this song has been adapted to the situation since the original characters mentioned were Harry Midgley – the sitting labour MP candidate for the 1938 elections in Ireland – instead of Maggie Thatcher on the one hand, and James Collins – the Nationalist candidate opposing Midgley in the constituency of Dock in Belfast – in lieu of Belle⁷ on the other hand.

Kim H. Kowalke, in “Brecht and Music: Theory and Practice”, for *The Cambridge Companion to Brecht*, further explains that “even a solo performance is a kind of montage, a combination of mimetic immediacy and diegetic distancing, a composite of dissected realities” (2006: 254). Indeed, many a time does Dolly sing alone as she did when she was on

stage 40 years earlier and was renowned for being the Belle of the Belfast city. Her numerous breaks from the present reality lead Jack, her nephew, to call her a crazy senile old person.

An experimental play as were Brecht's, Reid's *The Belle of the Belfast City* resorts to songs to interrupt dialogues. They are not introduced and do not illustrate an event; they are part of the plot. When he wrote on experimental drama, Brecht advised modern playwrights to continuously propose new effects (VALENTIN 2000: 312). That is why Reid has many of her songs interrupted too. For instance, Dolly's song n°4 is suspended by her daughter Vi's refusal to know the end of the line for decency:

Dolly (*sings*) There was an owl woman down Donegall Street, who went to the doctor' cause she couldn't...

Vi: Mother! (*TBBC*, 183)

We may think that this old woman is Dolly now in the present as if she suddenly realised she has been ageing.

2. Social Gestus

As songs are devices to interrupt the play and highlight its episodic structure, they belong to what Brechtian theory calls social gestus. For Brecht,

Gest is not supposed to mean gesticulation: it is not a matter of explanatory or emphatic movements of the hands, but of overall attitudes. A language is gestic when it is grounded in a gest and conveys particular attitudes adopted by the speaker towards other men. The musician sees this as an artistic principle. From this, we may judge the political value of the musical score" (BRECHT 1964: 104).

On gestic music, Brecht further explains "it is that music which allows the actor to exhibit certain basic gests on the stage. So called 'cheap' music, particularly that of the cabaret and the operetta, has for some time been a sort of gestic music"(BRECHT 1964: 87). Drama like the opera may mirror the contemporary social issues artistically. In *The Belle*, [Reid's] "Brechtian dramaturgical style reflects upon the shaping of the characters by their environment" (FITZPATRICK 2005: 329) in a musical-like fashion, not only through the leading theme of the cabaret itself, but also, through the songs in the play, such as the role of women in Northern Ireland – all the more so as she tackles social problems. Reid explores the "relationship between women and community, the writing of women into histories from which they have traditionally been excluded, the links between sexual repression and silence, and the mother-daughter relationship"

(FITZPATRICK 2005: 332). Carla McDonough, in “I’ve never been just me: Rethinking Women’s Positions in the Plays of Christina Reid”, explains that “Reid’s plays examine how religious ideology affects a woman’s upbringing. In this ideology, woman is the temptress, Eve, the fallen woman” (2000: 184). One of the main examples shedding light on the problematic situation of women is dramatized by the character of Janet. In act 1 scene 3, Janet, psychologically imprisoned by Jack, her brother, and Peter, her husband, stands centre stage in between them. While Jack quotes from St Paul’s epistle to the Corinthians, chapter 7, “it is good for a man not to touch a woman”, Peter sings her a love song (song n° 10):

Janet *is situated centre stage between them. She looks from one to the other.*

Peter *(sings)*

Green gravel, green gravel
Your grass is so green you’re the fairest young damsel
That ever I’ve seen
Green gravel, green gravel
Your true lover’s dead.
So I’ve sent you a letter
To turn round your head
I washed her and I dressed her
And I robed her in silk
And I wrote down her name
With a glass pen and ink.
Green gravel green gravel
Your grass is so green
You’re the fairest young damsel
That ever I’ve seen.

Jack *(quoting from Saint Paul)*

[...]

Peter I love you. Come back to me.

Jack I love you. Come back to me. (TBBC, 209).

They both end their replies by saying they love her. Janet then realizes that for both these men, women are seen alike: “a devil [– Jack –] and a saint [– Peter –] are the same thing. Afraid of women. Afraid they will tempt you. Afraid we won’t” (TBBC, 209). To Liza Fitzpatrick,

in this scene both men express their ideal images of femininity: in Peter’s case, the woman on the pedestal, the Angel in the house; for Jack, the virgin sister, sexually unattainable. In each symbolic dimension, the woman is denied agency and a voice.” (331).

Some critics, like Laura Kane, have pointed out the fact that “some women in Belfast still suffer from a lack of material opportunity that prevents them

from articulating their own identities and reforming their citizenships” (KANE 2005: 40). Therefore we may see songs in this play as possible weapons for women to reach freedom, reconstruct their identity far from patriarchy, while men remain trapped in the myths they were raised to believe. Furthermore the main character, Dolly, is a former cabaret star leading an unusual life for a woman at the beginning of the twentieth century. Her songs were both “politically and religiously irreverent” (MCDONOUGH 2000: 187), which was provocative. This first theme, emphasized by the use of music, becomes a social gestus.

Mary Trotter also overtly refers to Brechtian social gestus through another song in the play, the last (song n°22^s), sung by Dolly’s granddaughter at the end of the play, after Dolly who suffered a heart attack cannot talk and, as a consequence, cannot sing anymore. Trotter gives the following analysis:

This Belle of the Belfast City sings a contemporary political ballad. Since this song, Ballad to a traditional refrain, by Maurice James Craig, is an ironic politicization of a jingoistic song tradition, Reid ends the play with two translations. Craig’s song translates the literary/ music genre of the sectarian ballad into a call for the end of sectarian violence. She also semiotically translates Dolly’s now silenced voice into the body of her half-Irish, half African American granddaughter. A song protesting Belfast sectarianism sung by a body with both Irish and African American identity markers becomes a Brechtian gestus, a call to the audience to think critically about the historical conditions which have led to the constructions of identities in Ireland and around the world.(2000: 175).

In playing his role, the Brechtian performer must convey a social message to the audience. This task might be facilitated by songs if we believe Kowalke who explains that “gestic music could articulate that which the text does not make explicit and thereby provide a sub-text ready-made for the performer” (2006: 251).

3. Distanciation

In Reid’s drama, songs do not only interrupt the stories for aesthetic innovation but also, as Brechtian theory points out, to criticize the contemporary world at the light of the past. This is part of what Brecht called “Verfremdungseffekt”. This effect translated in English by “distanciation” for lack of better word is much present in *The Belle*. As Diderik Roll Hansen says of one of Reid’s previous plays, “we move swiftly from scene to scene, quite often in defiance of chronological time”

(2008: 393). Likewise in *The Belle*, even if the time of the play is 1986, flashbacks are legion. Dolly seems to regret her past life in cabarets. She lives in the past as the old photos on her wall illustrate and as the children's songs she sings let us know. Through this play, Reid seems to raise our "awareness of how the past can both anchor and restrain us" (LONERGAN 2008: xi). If song n°1 takes the performers back to 1958, there are other numerous songs bridging the gap between the past and the present. Many traditional Irish songs have been adapted to present situations like song n° 11:

Dolly *sits cradling Janet's head in her lap. She strokes Janet's hair and sings.*

Dolly

I know where I'm goin'
And I know who's goin' with me
I know who I love
But the dear knows who I'll marry
I'll wear gowns of silk
And shoes of fine green leather
Ribbons for my hair
And a ring for every finger.
I know who is sick
And I know who is sorry
I know who I've kissed
But God knows who I'll marry. (TBBC, 211)

The characters are called to take some distance from their present at the light of their past; but it is not Reid's only goal. Still along her decision to create anti-illusionist effects, she has Belle, in the present, become a spectator of the past of her family. This is how Reid writes:

Sound of a train. A British customs officer walks on. Belle watches as Dolly, Vi, Rose and Janet dress up from the box. They assume position as if on a train. They eat the dulce and yellowman. The year is 1959. (Dolly is 50; Vi 30; Rose 9; Janet 9.)

Dolly (*sings*)

At the oul Lammas Fair Boys
Were you ever there
Were you ever at the fair at Ballycastleo
Did you treat your MaryAnn
To some dulce and yellowman
At the oul Lammas fair at Ballycastleo (TBBC, 201).

Through this anti-illusionist disruptive effect in which Belle – in 1986 – watches her family sing in 1959, the Brechtian performer is asked to take some distance from her role. She becomes a spectator in turn. This leads

the audience to be challenged too in their role as spectators. They are asked to take some distance from what they are watching. Once again, there is an embedding effect: the audience watches a performer who is watching a scene on stage. But on this occasion, reality is challenged as well. In fact, the performer watches the past. In his plays, as Llewellyn-Jones explains in *Contemporary Irish Drama and Cultural Identity*, “Brecht draws upon devices that, from time to time, distance the reader through the exposure of the creative processes thus challenging ‘realism’ not only through a deliberate lack of closure but through representation of competing and contradictory discourses” (2002: 45). Thanks to music and songs, Reid orchestrates a reconciliation of impossible elements: the past and the present. Moreover music, along Brecht’s epic theory, is designed to comment on and explain what is happening on the stage and in reality; it is not particularly meant to arouse emotions; it should lead to a social reaction. Music is thus distanced from its primary aesthetic role too and is endowed with a social mission.

History and the past are privileged places of dramatisation in which historic periods mentioned are linked to the present. The fact Belle watches the past on stage is part of a process of historicisation, which is a fundamental means of distancing. The play therefore puts to the fore the many alternatives which could have happened. What is historicized in Reid’s play here according to Patrick Lonergan is “the resultant sense of anger and anxiety” entailed by “the implementation of the Anglo-Irish agreement, now regarded as an important step in the development of the peace process, then seen as a betrayal by the Unionists by the British government at that time” (2008: xi). For Brecht the effect of distancing generated by music enabled to link history and politics too; this is how music may be used as a political weapon in his plays. (LECOUVEY 2009: 20).

In Northern Ireland, the political issue at that time was also triggered off by segregation from the Protestants towards the Catholics to cut a long story short. But Reid seems to have chosen not to talk about religious segregation as bluntly as that. On the contrary, she displaces the subject by having her marginal characters being either Black (Belle) or deaf and mute (Davy). Effectively, Reid seems to be interested in neither class nor religious conflicts as Brecht was, but rather in male-female oppositions. Her characters are alienated, estranged; alienation – or rather defamiliarisation⁹, as should rather be said, being another possible translation for the “V-effekt”. This alienation is also connected with music as Davy, mute, exemplifies: he cannot sing, yet he can tap out rhythms (act 1). Another example is brought about by the song opening the second act.

This song is turned into a poem since Dolly “recites” it:

Dolly (*recites*)

In a mean abode on the Shankill road
Lived a man called William bloat
He had a wife, the curse of his life,
Who continually got his goat.
So one day at dawn, with her nightdress on,
He cut her bloody throat.
With a razor gash he settled her hash,
Oh never was crime so quick,
But the steady drip on the pillow slip
Of her lifeblood made him sick,
And the pool of gore on the bedroom floor
Grew clotted cold and thick.
And yet he was glad that he'd done what he had,
And she lay there stiff and still.
But a sudden awe on the angry law
Struck his soul with an icy chill.
So to finish the fun so well begun,
He resolved himself to kill.
Then he took the sheet off his wife's cold feet,
And twisted it into a rope.
And he hanged himself from the pantry shelf.
'Twas an easy end, let's hope.
In the face of death with his latest breath,
He solemnly cursed the Pope.
But the strangest turn to the whole concern
Is only just beginnin'.
He went to hell but his wife got well,
And she's still alive and sinnin',
For the razor blade was German-made,
But the sheet was Irish linen. (TBBC, 21)

This engenders a rupture in the pattern of the play: it is the only time a poem is recited. Reid is here close to songs as Brecht wanted to have them: “poems sung” (DORT 1960: 57). The ironic contents of this poem also points to racism in a way – another theme that permeates Reid's play – since it draws a parallel between the poor quality of a German razor and that of hard-wearing Irish linen.

When he elaborated his theory, Brecht had in mind that each element had to comment in a different way. By contradicting expectations and by juxtaposing two contrary moods it could create conflict in the mind of the spectators and entice them to reconcile the two elements to find coherence. Henceforth the term “dialectical” emerged. Brecht viewed theatre as part of

an enlightenment project in which discordant jarring elements (music v. text or commentary by actors, for example) would explore ideas and man's contradictory nature. If we go further, in *The Belle* Reid's goal is to go beyond the mere divide between Protestants and Catholics. The songs she has chosen shed light to other opposing notions which come against the characters' dialogues. For instance, songs n°2, 7 and 16 oppose the outside and the inside worlds, song n°14 frailty against solidity, songs n°3 and 6 nature and culture and song n°5 magic against reality. All these themes punctuate the play so as to show that the world can eventually be transformed. Likewise, while Dolly sings song n°1 Davy taps out its rhythm as if to echo her voice or reply to her. This is a conversation between two people talking different languages but understanding one another; this illustrates what Brecht meant when he suggested that each element had to be on its own but constituted a total coherent objective. The contrast between the gentle content of a song sung with a harsh voice is further relevant in an analysis of a Brechtian play. This is taken up by Reid when she has Jack sing a love song (song n°15) reluctantly only to please her aunt and cousins – and at the risk of being ridiculed since the girls dress him up with unfitting clothes, a situation he profoundly dislikes. Reid writes: “Jack becomes increasingly angry and humiliated as the song progresses” (*TBBC*, 217). He finally “runs out” (*TBBC*, 219). The way the actor playing Jack must sing this song is not overtly mentioned in the stage directions but the stage director will undoubtedly play on this.

Through the character of Davy who cannot speak Reid abides by the idea that “music has more impact than words” (KOWALKE 2006: 248), a sentence coined by Kurt Weil, one of the German musicians who collaborated with Bertolt Brecht on many pieces. This issue of impact is really interesting in the context of a Brechtian play, all the more so as the spectator is asked to be involved in the play. Indeed, Bernard Banoun in an article on Brecht and music explains that in Brechtian theory, the poietic function (that of the creator and the processes of creation) is not much present as far as music is concerned, the immanent function (the musical analysis, the technique and the piece itself), secondary; what prevails in fact is the esthetic function, that which links the piece of art with the addressee (BANOUN 2008: 336). So the didactic dimension of *The Belle* needs to be tackled. After rupturing the naturalist expectations of the audience, Reid breaks down the fourth wall when her characters directly address the audience through their songs in the manner of a cabaret (DOUBLE 1996: 47). Therefore the imperative mode used in song n°16 is unequivocal:

Dolly (*sings*)

In and out the windows
In and out the windows
In and out the windows
As you have done before.
Stand and face your partner
Stand and face your partner
Stand and face your partner
As you have done before. (TBBC, 223)

Yet, and this is crucial for Brecht, epic plays are not designed to stimulate or arouse emotions, they must examine them. The audience has to think about the music and the songs they listen to. Art had to entail criticism and reflexion for Brecht (LECOUVEY 2009: 19). Art had to teach something to the audience; it had to be didactic and entertain the public. For Francine Maier-Schaeffer, in her book *Bertolt Brecht*, didactic plays “must abolish the separation between the stage and the audience, between the actors and the spectators, between professionals and amateurs. [...] Didactic plays have become to be considered as musical genres nowadays.” (2003: 81). That is why *The Belle* becomes a didactic Brechtian play with all this music and its songs against religion, against politics, enabling to understand the present, provoking the spectators and asking them to participate in the play. The most didactic song in *The Belle*, that which stirs the mind of the audience the most effectively, might be the song which sets a jarring parallel between joy and war (song n°13). It is triggered by the word “party” in Belle’s preceding line “She votes for the Unionist Party to keep the Republican Party out.” (TBBC, 214) but is sung by Dolly:

Dolly (*sings*)
Will you come to our wee party will you come?
Bring your own bread and butter and a bun
You can bring a cup of tea
You can come along with me
Will you come to our wee party will you come?
Will you come to Abyssinia will you come?
Bring your own ammunition and a gun
Mussolini will be there firing bullets in the air
Will you come to Abyssinia will you come? (TBBC, 214)

For Bernard Banoun, Brecht was so worried about being clear and unequivocal that music for him was tightly linked to meaning. He did not want music to be played on its own, for its own sake. Therefore he conjugated it with external elements such as drama and words. He had a heteronomous conception of music whose final goal was persuasion (BANOUN 2008: 336).

If songs fragment Reid's play, like Brecht, the message she conveys is not fragmented. She aims at teaching her audiences and inspiring them on the social issues of the 1980s. Yet, her goal is not only social and political; it is first and foremost aesthetic. Reid is not interested in class-conflicts and she addresses Catholics and Protestants alike, she is more concerned with conflicts of sexual genres and racism; that is why *The Belle of the Belfast City* is neo-Brechtian rather than Brechtian. This play started with a song by Dolly about Belle, as we may understand in the unfolding of the play, and finishes with a song by Belle about segregation in Belfast. This echoes the cycle of violence, the idea that there might be no way out, a repetitive pattern that the structure of Reid's play aims to deconstruct. Giving voice to women in such a male-dominated context, and involving an Irish African English character, she paves the way for a post-colonial interpretation of *The Belle* along the definition that Julia Kristeva gave of post-colonialism awareness:

A paradoxical community is emerging, made up of foreigners who are reconciled with themselves to the extent that they recognize themselves as foreigners. The multinational society would thus be the consequence of an extreme individualism, but conscious of its discontents and limits, knowing only indomitable people ready-to-help themselves in their weakness, a weakness whose other name is our radical strangeness. (1991: 195).

Indeed, Reid has stated many a time that she resists labels, and that she writes plays open to interpretation (MAGUIRE 2006: 163). If we think, with Brecht that music made possible the poetic theatre (VALENTIN 2000: 702), then Reid is not only a playwright, she is also a poetess.

Bibliography

Primary play

REID Christina, (1997), *Plays 1: Tea in a China Cup, Did you hear the one about the Irish Man?, Joyriders, The Belle of the Belfast City, My Name, Shall I tell you my Name?, Clowns*, London, Methuen Drama.

Referential books

BERG Gunter & Wolfgang JESKE, (1999), *Bertolt Brecht, L'Homme et son œuvre*, Paris, Éditions L'Arche.

BRECHT Bertolt, (1964), *On Theatre*, edited and translated by John

Willett, London, Methuen Drama.

BYRNE Ophelia, (1997), *The Stage in Ulster from the Eighteenth Century*, Belfast, The Linenhall Library.

DAWE Gerald, Maria JOHNSTON, Clare WALLACE (eds.), (2008), *Stewart Parker, Dramatis Personae and other Writings*, Prague, Litteraria Pragensia.

DORT Bernard, (1960), *Lectures de Brecht*, Paris, Editions du Seuil.

HECHT Werner, (ed.), (1988), *Entretiens avec Brecht*; traduit de l'allemand par François Mathieu, avec la collaboration de Régine Mathieu, Paris, Editions Messidor.

KRISTEVA Julia, (1991), *Strangers to Ourselves*, translated by Leon S. Roudiez, New York, Columbia University Press.

LLEWELLYN- JONES Margaret, (2002), *Contemporary Irish Drama and Cultural Identity*, Bristol, Intellect Books.

LONERGAN Patrick, (2008), *The Methuen Drama Anthology of Irish Plays*, London, Methuen Drama.

MAGUIRE Tom, (2006), *Making Theatre in Northern Ireland. Through and Beyond the Troubles*, Exeter, University of Exeter Press.

MAIER-SCHAEFFER Francine, (2003) *Bertolt Brecht*, Paris, Editions Belin.

VALENTIN Jean-Marie (ed.), (2000), *Brecht, Ecrits sur le Théâtre*, Paris, Gallimard.

Articles in periodicals

ACHILLES Jochen, "Homesick for Abroad: the Transition from National to Cultural Identity in Contemporary Irish Drama", p.435-447, in *Modern Drama*, Vol. XXXVIII, n° 4, 2005.

BANOUN Bernard, « Brecht et la musique au théâtre. Entre théorie, pratique et métaphores », p. 329-353, in *Etudes germaniques*, 2008, 63/2.

FITZPATRICK Lisa, “Disrupting Metanarratives: Anne Devlin, Christina Reid, Marina Carr and the Irish Dramatic Repertory”, p. 320-333, in *Irish University Review: a Journal of Irish Studies*, Autumn-winter 2005, 35 (2).

HUTCHINSON Wesley, « Les Nouvelles institutions nord-irlandaises : généalogie de quelques idées fixes », p.12-23, in *Sources, Revue d'Études anglophones*, Automne 2000.

ROLL-HANSEN Diderik, “Dramatic Strategy in Christina Reid’s *Tea in a China Cup*”, p. 389-395, in *Modern Drama*, 30:3, 1987.

Articles in books

CAIRNS David & Shaun RICHARDS, , “Tropes and Traps: Aspects of ‘Woman’ and Nationality in Twentieth Century Irish Drama”, p. 128-137, in Johnson Toni O’Brien & David Cairns, eds, (1991), *Gender in Irish Writing*, Buckingham, Open University Press.

DOUBLE Olivier and Michael WILSON, “Brecht and Cabaret”, p. 40- 61, in Peter Thomson and Glendyr Sacks, eds, (2006), *The Cambridge Companion to Brecht*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

KANE Laura, “De/re/construction Work: Female Performance of Northern Irish Nationalism in the Works of Anne Devlin and Christina Reid”, p. 32-41, in Ruth Connolly and Ann Coughlan, eds, (2005), *New Voices in Irish Criticism 5*, Dublin, Four Courts Press.

KOWALKE Kim H., “Brecht and Music: Theory and Practice”, p.242- 258, in Peter Thomson and Glendyr Sacks, eds, (2006), *The Cambridge Companion to Brecht*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

MCDONOUGH Carla J., “ ‘I’ve never been just me’ , Rethinking Women’s Positions in the Plays of Christina Reid”, p.179-92, in Stephen Watt, Eileen Morgan, Shakir Mustafa, eds, (2000), *A Century of Irish Drama, Widening the Stage*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press.

MCMULLAN Anna, “Irish Women Playwrights since 1958”, p. 110-12, In Trevor Griffiths & Margaret Llewellyn Jones, eds., (1993) *British and Irish Women Dramatists since 1958, a critical Handbook*. Buckingham, Open University Press.

TROTTER, Mary, "Translating Women into Irish Theatre History", p. 163-177, in Stephen Watt, Eileen Morgan, Shakir Mustafa, eds, (2000), *A Century of Irish Drama, Widening the stage*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press.

Unpublished theses

FATHY Safaa, (1993), « Le Nouveau Théâtre Epique en Grande-Bretagne : de Brecht à John Arden et Edward Bond », Université de Paris 4 Sorbonne.

LECOUVEY Emilie, (2008), « Témoignages de Brecht sur la musique, (1920-1955) », Paris 3, Mémoire de Master 2 en Etudes Théâtrales.

Webpages of some interest

BERTOLT BRECHT, an overview of Epic Theatre:
<http://academic.evergreen.edu/curricular/ppandp/PDFs/Brecht-a%20brief%20overview.pdf> visited 03/09/2010.

FLETCHER, Jackie, *Realism, Feminism and the Northern Irish Women Playwrights of the '80s*,
<http://www.britishtheatreinfo.com/otherresources/academic/realism.PDF>
visited 15/09/2010.

¹ Yet, a "song" (he used the English term to refer to sung poems), for Brecht is not a mere illustration of events or background music. It is part of the plot.

² "L'innovation la plus frappante était le strict isolement des numéros musicaux" (VALENTIN 2000 : 702).

³ I shall always refer to Reid's play with the abbreviation *TBBC* from now on.

⁴ **Vi, Rose and Janet sing. Dolly joins in.**

Joe Horner says he loves her
All the boys are fightin' for her
They knock at the door and they ring the bell
Saying 'Oh my true love are you well'
Out she comes as white as snow
Rings on her fingers bells on her toes
Oul Dolly Dunbar says she'll die
If she doesn't get the fella with the rovin' eye. (*TBBC*,179-180)

⁵ **Dolly (sings)**

Let the wind and the rain and the hail blow high
And the snow come tumblin' from the sky
She's as nice as apple pie
And she'll get her own man by and by
When she gets a man of her own
She won't tell her ma when she comes home

Let them all come as they will

For it's Joe Horner she loves still. (*TBBC*, 182)

⁶ “Le théâtre épique est un théâtre fondé sur le montage, la revue, un théâtre biographique aussi”(VALENTIN 2000: 228). Effectively, *The Belle of the Belfast City* relates the past life of cabaret star Dolly, juxtaposes her past and her present lives, and is somehow biographical.

⁷ On <http://www.bbc.co.uk/northernireland/ashorthistory/archive/intro239.shtml>; a short history of Ireland.

⁸ **Dolly** stares at the concert hall poster. **Belle** sings.

Belle

Red brick in the suburbs, white horse on the wall

Italian marble in the city hall;

O stranger from England, why stand so aghast?

May the Lord in his mercy be kind to Belfast.

This jewel that houses our hopes and our fears

Was knocked up from the swamp in the last hundred years;

But the last shall be first and the first shall be last;

May the Lord in his mercy be kind to Belfast.

We swore by King William, there'd never be seen

An all Ireland parliament at College Green

So to Stormont we're nailing the flag to the mast.

May the Lord in his mercy be kind to Belfast.

O the bricks they will bleed and the rain it will weep

And the damp Lagan fog lulls the city to sleep.

It's to Hell with the future, and live on the past

May the Lord in his mercy be kind to Belfast (*TBBC*,250)

⁹ This is all the more telling as Jack does not want to recognize Belle as part of his family because, she is different physically.