

Suspended Lives: Lucy Caldwell's *Three Sisters* in Post-Agreement Belfast

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ABSTRACT

Lucy Caldwell's 2016 adaptation of Chekhov's *Three Sisters* relocates the play into Belfast in the 1990s. This paper examines Caldwell's adaptation in the context of Irish and Northern Irish rewritings of Chekhov's dramatic works, paying attention to the motives behind appropriating the Russian works for Irish audiences. Inspired by the perceived affinity between the two seemingly distant cultures, Irish authors have tended to adapt Chekhov (and other Russian classics) to reflect on their own social, cultural, and political environment, often with the aim of shaping the cultural-political landscape of their present. Similarly to earlier Chekhov adaptations, Caldwell's play engages not only with the original Russian work, but, most importantly, with the cultural-political context of its setting—the five hopeful years preceding the Belfast Agreement (1998), as well as the post-Agreement context of its writing. The play allows its audience in 2016 a complex, retrospective, re-evaluative view of the achievements of the peace process from the vantage point of the early twenty-first century. (ZSCS)

KEYWORDS: Caldwell, Chekhov, adaptation, Northern Ireland, Belfast Agreement

Irish versions of Chekhov's plays

Chekhov's plays have had a long and adventurous life—and afterlife—in Ireland. Russian authors' works arrived there through Britain as a cultural mediator, in Standard English translation, but from the very beginning Irish theater practitioners have had their own take on

the Russian works. The Russian craze in England in the early twentieth century was characterized not only by intense fascination with the works of Russian authors like Turgenev, Chekhov, and Dostoevsky, and the world they portrayed, but also a bewilderment at encountering a culture on the conventional English stage which was both familiar and perplexingly strange. The experience of this combination of the familiar and strange is expressed in Virginia Woolf's insightful observations in her seminal essay, "Modern Fiction," on what she saw as the inability of the English despite all their enthusiasm to truly appreciate Russian literature. Attempting to account for a lack of understanding, she pointed at the differences between the two cultures, claiming that their civilization bred into the English "the instinct to enjoy and fight rather than suffer and understand" (163), whereas suffering and understanding were seen as features of the Russian psyche. Certainly, this epigrammatic observation can be contested; nonetheless, it sounds appealing when one thinks of the apparent Irish affinity with Russian writers. Having a long history of exposure to colonization, the Irish may have more in common with this portrait of the "Russian character." This essay examines how the most recent Irish Chekhov version, Lucy Caldwell's Northern-Irish adaptation of *Three Sisters* (2016), once again discovers in Chekhov's vision of human life powerful material for representing the human condition in her own cultural and political contexts, exploring young women's lives in suspension between past and present, desire and reality.

The sense of affinity between the seemingly distant cultures of Russia and Ireland has been voiced by various commentators including critics, literary scholars, and Irish dramatists translating and adapting Chekhov's works. Already at the time of the first productions of Chekhov's plays in London, one English reviewer noted that "the essential futility of Tchekov's [*sic*] characters is precisely that of which Larry Doyle complained in *John Bull's Other Island*, a play written half a dozen years before Tchekov was heard of in these longitudes" (qtd. in Senelick 135). In Ireland, after an initial lack of positive reviews of Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* in

1915, the revival of the play by the Irish Theatre Company in 1917 brought success. Reviewers in Ireland started to notice the parallel between Russia and Ireland; *The Freeman's Journal* opined that Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* was "peculiarly interesting for the comparisons it offers between Irish and Russian characters" (Senelick 137), while *The Irishman* called the play a masterpiece, arguing that "there is a marvellous atmosphere, to use the trite phrase, about the play. It shows little action, and gains from the failure, for the mission of the author was to show wasted lives, capable of great effort, but choked by a system which restrains mental activity as effectively as it hampers civil liberty" (qtd. in Senelick 137). The reviewer's words resonate acutely with the experience of Irish audiences who had just witnessed the violent, tragic suppression of the Easter Rising.

From early on, Irish playwrights have used Chekhov's plays as material for giving expression to their own social and political concerns. Along with Chekhov's plays in British English translations, emphatically Irish adaptations and reworkings appeared already at the beginning of the twentieth century. In 1918, three years after the first Chekhov play was staged in Ireland, John MacDonagh, the brother of Thomas MacDonagh, wrote a play titled *Weeds*, which was clearly patterned on *The Cherry Orchard*. *Weeds* is set in the West of Ireland, and although the script is lost, "reviews indicate that the protagonist inherits an estate and resolves to make friends with his tenants. The tenants waiting to take over the estate are the weeds of the title" (Tracy n.p.).

The staging of *The Proposal* by the Abbey Theatre was another remarkable early Irish rewriting of Chekhov's work. In 1925 the Abbey, abandoning its long-time reluctance to stage non-Irish plays, decided to acquaint Dublin audiences with Chekhov's one-act play. Although Constance Garnett's 1923 translation was used for the script, it underwent significant changes: the British English, Anglicized text of the Garnett translation of the vaudeville was confidently turned into an Irish farce using a distinctively Hiberno-English dialect. Most of the Russian

realia, or culture-specific elements, were omitted, the characters' Russian names were altered to sound more familiar, Russian place names were changed—Marushkin, for instance, became the Dublin suburb, Ballsbridge, and the charred swamp “the bog”; the term “peasant” being a slur in Ireland, was changed to “tenant,” and instead of the emancipation of the serfs, the Irish Land Act came in as a point of historical reference (Younger 293–94). In the wake of the establishment of the Irish Free State, which had acquired a great measure of independence, Chekhov stopped sounding British and assumed a distinctly Irish voice.

The last two decades of the twentieth century saw a new surge of Chekhov translations and adaptations by Irish playwrights, many of them intent on the creation of a distinctly Irish Chekhov to replace the British image of the author. Thomas Kilroy's adaptation of *The Seagull* (1980)—a wholesale cultural appropriation that transferred the play to the West of Ireland in the nineteenth-century—opened a long line of reworkings (with Brian Friel, Frank McGuinness, and Michael West creating versions of multiple Chekhov plays), whose steady stream attests to the fact that Chekhov continues to be appreciated in late twentieth-century Ireland for offering analogies with both the past and present of the country. Distinct similarities between the two cultures may account for the affinity felt for Chekhov by the Irish from Shaw to Friel and beyond:

The condition of Ireland after Parnell, with no apparent chance for political change, resembled that of pre-revolutionary Russia. The paralysis Joyce depicts in *Dubliners* echoes the stasis in which Vanya and Sonya, Astrov and the three Prozorov sisters live, while the situation in *The Cherry Orchard*—gentry unable to keep the estate they lose to Lopakhin, the gombeen man—is recognizably Irish. (Tracy n.p.)

Irish authors adapting Chekhov often refer to perceived similarities between Chekhov's world and their own as their source of inspiration. Thomas Kilroy saw "extraordinarily vivid and apt" parallels between the two cultures and histories, and also, psychologies, especially concerning the Russian and Irish gentry:

there are the ingredients of the plays themselves which Irish audiences can respond to with recognition. A provincial culture rooted in land ownership. A familial structure that is so elastic that it can hold all sorts of strays and visitors and drop-ins in painful intimacy. All that talkativeness, tea-drinking and dreaming, above all that dreaming, "the torturing, heart-scalding, never satisfying dreaming" as Shaw put it of his fellow-countrymen in *John Bull's Other Island*. Chekhov's dreamers are immediately accessible to Irish audiences in all their illusions, none more so than Sonya dreaming of angels, as contrastingly, Vanya weeps at the end of [the] play. (Kilroy, "Programme notes" n.p.)

Common factors between the Russian and Irish gentry, beyond the political parallels, also readily offer themselves in the form of

provincial isolation in a period before modern communications. Both worlds were at a remove from their metropolitan centres. These centres, London and Moscow serve as the same focus for Anglo-Irish and Russian sensibilities, a focus of desire and ambition, of illusions and dreams, magnifying the pent-up emotions of those remote households and offering a prospect, a lure, too often unattainable by sensitive souls. (Kilroy, "The Seagull" 82)

In recent years, playwrights of the younger generation have again turned to rewriting Chekhov—Michael West, for example, created two retranslations of *The Seagull*, the second one in the same year, 2016, that saw Lucy Caldwell's adaptation of *Three Sisters*. West produced a new translation of the play in 1999 for the Corn Exchange in Dublin, updating the language compared to earlier versions but, in general, creating a rather close translation, which he thoroughly reworked in 2016. While West's first, 1999 version did not follow the earlier Hibernicizing trend, keeping most of the Russian realia intact and not foregrounding Irish concerns in any conspicuous way, the 2016 version transfers the action to contemporary Ireland, and thus it emphatically reflects on Irish reality in our globalized world today. The characters talk of using cars, taxis, headphones, laptops, and they watch films and TV. Even Joyce is casually mentioned in their conversation, which indicates that the characters assume an Irish identity. The most important change West introduces to the play that resonates with the present, however, is that the young writer in Chekhov's play, Konstantin, becomes a young woman, Constance. Chekhov's conventional love triangle of one man and two women is turned into that of three women, adding same-sex love and gender issues to the play's themes. What is striking is that same-sex love is not commented on in any way by the characters, which creates the sense that it is taken as normal and there is nothing extraordinary about it. Clearly, this is a reflection on a liberal, secular, and progressive Irish society that produced an overwhelming yes vote to the legalization of same-sex marriage just a year before, in 2015.

Lucy Caldwell's *Three Sisters* in Belfast

The dialogue between Chekhov and Irish contexts continues with Lucy Caldwell's reimagining of Chekhov's *Three Sisters* (2016, Lyric Theatre, Belfast) set in Belfast in the 1990s. Similarly to Kilroy's and West's adaptations of *The Seagull*, Caldwell's *Three Sisters*

involves a complete cultural translocation, and it engages with the cultural-political context of its setting, the five years preceding the Belfast Agreement (1998)—a period awaking the hope of peace in a conflict-ridden society—and the post-Agreement context of its writing. Thus, in addition to the intertextual dialogue with the original Russian play, Caldwell also creates a dialogue between the recent past and the present of its Northern Irish audience. Revisiting the 1990s from the vantage point of 2016 allows the audience—well-aware of how the peace process and the Belfast Agreement fared in the subsequent years—to have a retrospective and re-evaluative, even ironic view of the events. Irony arising from this double perspective is at work most intensely when characters discuss the peace process and the hopeful future after the signing of the Belfast Agreement. The audience knows all too well not only that the sisters will not manage to leave their stagnating lives in Belfast and start over in America, but also that the peace process did not achieve the much hoped for resolution. Thus, the play deals not only with the thwarted ambitions and suspended lives of the sisters, but also with the thwarted expectations of people in Northern Ireland after the Agreement.

Caldwell is not the first to find in Chekhov's *Three Sisters* an analogy for Northern Ireland, a place that, as Nicholas Allen and Aaron Kelly have argued, "can be imagined in suspension" (qtd. in Heidemann 6) between a violent past and a peaceful future.¹ Although not an intentional re-writing of Chekhov's play, Anne Devlin's *Ourselves Alone* (1980), representing the destructive effects of the sectarian conflict on individual lives from a female perspective has strong Chekhovian echoes. Devlin's play depicts the stagnating lives of three quasi sisters (two sisters and their sister-in-law) attempting, without success, to escape from the oppressive patriarchal conflict dominating their lives, a conflict that puts female lives on hold, marginalizing them as minor characters in a masculine political struggle.

The most important predecessor of Caldwell's *Three Sisters* in a Northern Irish context, however, is Brian Friel's version created for and staged by The Field Day Theatre Company in

1981.² Friel's version of Chekhov's play about lives in stagnation poignantly conveys the cultural and political stagnation during the Troubles in the 1980s. As Elmer Andrews has observed,

Russian disenchantment and frustration have their easily recognisable counterparts in the Ireland of the 1970s and 1980s. The continuing Troubles [in Northern Ireland] enforced a sense of impasse and endless malaise, a feeling of stagnation and depression. . . . Politically, no progress seemed to be possible and the resulting vacuum was filled by the terrorists. In Ireland as a whole, the ongoing process of modernisation was attended by the usual traumas of dislocation and the break-up of traditional values. (183)

Field Day's *Three Sisters* did not simply reproduce a safe classic from a distant corner of Europe, but rather, in Stephen Rea's words, the staging of Friel's version "was politically very important, it [was] an important assertion" (Pelletier, "Creating" 57)—an assertion of the status of Irish English as a fitting vehicle for classics of literature, and through this, the assertion of an independent Irish cultural identity. It was hailed as "a translation in the truest sense" (Friel *Three Sisters* blurb);³ but indeed, it is an adaptation rather than a "translation proper": Friel added numerous lines introducing allusions to Irish culture and literature.⁴ Hibernicizing Chekhov through the use of a strong Irish-English dialect for a Russian classic is a way of "making English identifiably our own language" (Murray 87), and as such, the play was an important part of the cultural-political endeavors of the Field Day Theatre Company, that is, the "decolonisation process of the imagination" which, in Friel's opinion, was "very important if a new Irish personality is to emerge" (qtd. in Richtarik 121).

While Friel's version is a covert adaptation of *Three Sisters*, Caldwell's is a radical

reworking of the play. In her introduction to the play, Caldwell describes the creation of an adaptation metaphorically in terms of “inhabiting utterly” a house built by someone else for someone else . . . making this house belonging to someone else your own home—“fill it with everything that’s meaningful to you, let yourself belong to it, or it to you” (9).⁵ She indeed fills Chekhov’s *Three Sisters* with immediate relevance for her contemporary Northern Irish audiences and readers, endowing the play with context-specific new meanings. The sisters, Orla, Marianne, and Erin, whose names echo the Russian names of Olga, Masha, and Irina, are daughters of a deceased officer of the British Army, so the military background of the family becomes politically loaded, signaling the violent conflict in the region, while their hybrid family setup (an English Catholic father and an Ulster Protestant mother) conjure up the divisions prevalent in Northern Irish society, and both these factors relegate them to the position of outsiders. Instead of longing for Moscow, the sisters are keen to move to America, a popular destination for Irish emigrants, while through the transformation of Natasha’s character into the Chinese Siu Jing, the contemporary theme of immigration is also foregrounded. The fire in town, which is a mere accident in Chekhov, metamorphoses into a symbol of the political calamity—petrol bombs thrown during the riots—in the immediate aftermath of the signing of the Belfast Agreement. Therefore, the theme of longing for a better future in Chekhov becomes specifically focused on hope for a peaceful future for Northern Ireland. The opening scene, Erin’s birthday party, can also be read symbolically—her entering adulthood is celebrated at the beginning of the play, potentially reflecting on a hopeful, new beginning for Northern Irish society approaching a much-awaited resolution of the sectarian conflict.⁶

The vibrant atmosphere of the 1990s is recreated by Caldwell’s use of pop-music and other cultural references, which serves also as an analogy for Chekhov’s method of quoting well-known literary and philosophical works to convey the mindset as well as emotional states of the characters. In Caldwell, the constantly philosophizing Vershinin reads Nelson Mandela’s

book *Road to Freedom*, and quotes Albert Einstein: “Peace cannot be kept by force: it can only be achieved by understanding” (71). The characters often sing and hum snippets of the lyrics of Kylie Minogue, Oasis, Queen, and Leonard Cohen lyrics and tunes, and these quotes from pop music reveal, often with a touch of irony, the emotional states of the young women and the men surrounding them.

The themes of the Russian play that resonated with the audience of Friel’s version—longing for change and a better future; craving to leave behind a place of stagnation; a sense of being trapped and existing on the periphery—were just as meaningful, although in different ways, in 2016. As opposed to the early 1980s, when Friel’s *Three Sisters* was produced, and when the resolution of the conflict seemed unattainable, the political developments between 1993 and 1998, the period covered in Caldwell’s play, generated hope culminating in the Belfast Agreement. So, while the optimism of the philosophizing characters in the play, Vershinin and the Baron, probably rang painfully empty and pointless for Friel’s audience in a time of total stagnation, the same elevated, positive words in Caldwell attain subtle dramatic irony: in the context of the 1990s, the characters’ optimism might as well seem well-grounded given the palpable political progress in those years, but it sounds a lot less genuinely optimistic for Caldwell’s audience in 2016 as they have a retrospective perspective on the political achievements of the late 1990s, as well as on post-Agreement events.

Three Sisters, a play centering on young female lives, also fits into Caldwell’s oeuvre, as her works often portray teenage and young adult women in Belfast in the 1990s. Her short story collections, *Multitudes* (2016) and *Intimacies* (2021), are perhaps the most notable works that feature stories of girlhood, womanhood, and young motherhood. It has been observed about her plays—including *Leaves* (2007), *Guardians* (2009), *Notes to a Future Self* (2011), and the radio play *Girl from Mars* (2008)—that “her work addresses the lingering effects of the Troubles on young people” (Coleman Coffey 252). As Caldwell herself has pointed out,

however, she is intent on telling stories that do not belong to the canonized, mainstream representation of the violence of the Troubles dominated by a male perspective. Her short stories and plays prove that stories dealing with the everyday lives of those on the margins are also worth telling, and they are as much part of the fabric of Northern Irish life as the trauma narratives of the Troubles. With respect to her short story collection, *Multitudes*, she noted that she felt it a moral imperative to truthfully write about Belfast as she experienced life there as one of three sisters going to an all-girls school; therefore, her work emphasizes the female experience outside the male-dominated narrative of the country. She stresses that she “wanted to assert the right of other stories to exist: if you grow up in a place like Northern Ireland during the Troubles, it can sometimes seem that only certain stories are worthy of being told. And of course, it’s important to tell those stories, and continue to tell and retell them, and to question the ways they’re told—but it is important to tell other stories, too” (Stitch n.p.).

Three Sisters, a play focusing on women, readily lends itself to creating a predominantly female perspective as an alternative to masculinist depictions of the impact of the Troubles and the peace process on individual lives, and it also allows Caldwell to present such alternative narratives as immigrant experience in the region that do not often get told in the shadow of mainstream Troubles narratives. It is the radical transformation of a specific Chekhov character that establishes the centrality of these two dimensions and creates a link between them. Caldwell invents a prologue to the play—a monologue by Siu Jing, the daughter of Chinese immigrants, who will become the sister-in-law of the three sisters. Her equivalent in Chekhov, Natasha, is a minor character, but in Caldwell she literally takes center stage right at the beginning and, as a result, we are made to observe and interpret the events from multiple perspectives, hers—the immigrant’s—emphatically included. It is the outsider, Siu Jing, who introduces to the audience the three sisters in an expository speech, and with her assertive words claims a legitimate place for herself in the Northern-Irish family: “These are my sisters. Well,

they're not yet my sisters, but they soon will be. . . . These are my sisters and this is their story. It is also my story. It might not have my name on it, but it is my story too" (18).

The central element of the Russian sisters' desperate but passive longing to move to the metropolitan center, Moscow, has its parallel in the Northern Irish sisters' desire to move to America, a commonplace theme of Irish drama, reflecting the centuries-long tradition of Irish emigration. Through *Siu Jing*, the traditional theme of emigration is juxtaposed with the theme of immigrants' uneasy reception in Northern Irish society. In Chekhov, the sister-in-law, Natasha is scorned by the sisters mostly because she does not belong to the intelligentsia, and therefore she is not an appropriate partner for their brother, Andrey, a promising scholar. More importantly, she is seen by the sisters as an intruder who gradually takes over their house, her actions verging on dispossessing them of their home, so the audience tends to side with the sisters. In Caldwell, however, the sisters' condescending and even racist treatment of *Siu Jing* takes on a wholly different meaning, drawing attention to the seldom-told story of racial discrimination in a globalized Northern Irish society.⁷ This aspect of the play is also an ironic reminder of the complexities of conflicts in twenty-first-century Northern Irish society where sectarian discrimination is often addressed in politics and art as a crucial problem, but the narratives of immigrant experiences tend to remain in the background. Caldwell's play emphasizes the destructive nature of both sectarian and racial hostilities.

The ruinous nature of the political environment of sectarianism is reflected in some younger characters' comments on life in Belfast. Both Simon's, the British soldier's, vulgar tirade and Marianne's bitter words convey their hopelessness in the face of the hatred-filled milieu where one's identity—including one's name or accent—is constantly framed by a sectarian mindset dividing the community into enemy camps, fueling persecution and violence. As Simon complains: "(*aside*) I fucking hate it. Off the chopper—what the fuck is this place? Fucking damp—fucking miserable. Field after cuntin' field then when you get to the city it's

all been bombed to fuck. Eyes everywhere. Even in the fucking fields there are eyes” (31). Although her words are more sophisticated, Marianne talks of the same frustration with being forced to be constantly vigilant:

“Whatever you say, say nothing.” Oh, I hate this place! You always have to watch what you’re saying and who you might be talking to and who might be listening and how you pronounce your consonants and what might be betraying you without you ever knowing. What’s the point of French or German or Finnish or any other language when the only question that matters is are you one of us or one of them? And we’re neither. . . (36)⁸

Because of their family’s complicated affiliations, the sisters are exposed to painful experiences, which is hinted at by Orla recalling their father’s funeral: “Why d’you reckon no one came, is it ’cause he was a Catholic or ’cause he was English?” (20). In a later scene Marianne highlights the complexities of their liminal position further: “English Catholic Dad and Ulster Protestant Mum, who gave us Irish-sounding names—I mean how fucked-up is that? We’re not one thing nor the other, we’re nothing” (36).

The concept of liminality is widely used in discussions of postcolonial cultures, but as Birte Heidemann argues, in the case of Northern Ireland, the positive vision of liminality “as a site of negotiation and re-identification” is not easily applicable (8). Instead of conceiving of liminality as “thoroughly enabling,” Heidemann advances the notion of “negative liminality” as a *disabling* condition which, in the context of Northern Irish literature, pertains to a suspended state of (fictional) subject positions that resist closure and resolution” (8 emphasis in the original). The characters’ situation in Caldwell’s *Three Sisters* can be described in terms of negative liminality, since their lives become suspended by a political conflict without a closure, as is also suggested by the play’s retrospective re-visioning of the hopes and setbacks

of 1990s political peace-building efforts leading to the Belfast Agreement.

Chekhov's play is full of discussions of the past, present, and future of society, and his most verbose characters are obsessed with philosophizing about what the future might hold—quite understandably, as the play premiered in 1901, at the turn of a new century, on the eve of cataclysmic changes in Russia. While these passages in Friel's 1981 version have an ambiguous ring to them as both hopeful prophecies and empty political clichés, in Caldwell, the retrospective view adds strongly ironic overtones to Vershinin's gushing about the future: "After us will come more, and more, who live and love and think as we do, and a time will come when life on earth will be beautiful, and it will have started here, with us, when we first imagined it into being. . ." (73). His hyperbolic optimism is ironic because his words are not followed up with action to attain this future. Even more importantly, a sense of irony is created by the fact that his belief in an idyllic future is expressed immediately after he describes mankind as barbaric and history as fraught with violence. As he is the son of Lithuanian Jews who have fled their home country, the current state of affairs—his own young daughters being forced to flee the burning house in the play's present—evokes in him visions of large-scale violence:

it suddenly occurred to me they could have been my parents, or their parents, in the pogroms of the thirties, or 1919. . . We think we're civilized, we think we've come so far. But people in two, three hundred years are going to look back on the twentieth century, on the First World War and the Second, on the Cold War, on Vietnam, on the Gulf War and the Bosnian War and the Troubles and Rwanda and the countless other conflicts and they're going to think—how barbaric we were. (73)

The family history of Vershinin—the only Chekhov character whose foreign-sounding Russian name is preserved in Caldwell's version, possibly as an act of homage to the Russian original

or a way to emphasize the multicultural set-up of Belfast society—thus becomes symbolic of violence as ubiquitous in human history, of which the conflict in Northern Ireland is but one specific instance.

Caldwell's play demonstrates in various ways that cultural trauma can be passed down from generation to generation, "a phenomenon that has deep resonance in the North . . ., [in] young people who came of age during peacetime are unable to escape the pervasive influence of the Troubles, causing them to act out with violence towards themselves and others" (Coleman Coffey 176). Andy's bitter description of the mentality of his compatriots in the last act highlights the inherited hatred and prejudice that obstruct the road to reconciliation:

The ones who insist that nothing's going to change, who make sure that nothing ever changes. . . . Working themselves up into a fury about things that happened hundreds of years ago—fanning their own self-righteous flames—because they have nothing else, nothing—nothing to hope of [*sic*], dream about, aspire to—they refuse to listen, refuse to see—refuse to know that they're totally blinded and crippled by their own prejudices—and they ram it down their children's throats, so their children grow up the same fucking zombies as the rest of them and the cycle goes on and on and on. (95)

The repeated discussion of the present in relation to an imagined, ideal future in Chekhov allows Caldwell to also explore how Northern Ireland as a postcolonial site grapples with the past and creates its own future. In stark contrast to the lingering traces of "a pathological fixation with history," "retarding the emergence of a fully modern society" in the region (Maguire 61), post-Agreement political discourse focuses on the hopeful future. Numerous commentators and artists have called attention "to the disabling impact of the Agreement's rhetorical suspension of the country's violent past in favor of 'a new beginning'" (Heidemann 6–7). As Birte

Heidemann observes, in post-Agreement times, Belfast's sectarian past is "systematically relegated to the 'blank page' of the Titanic Quarter," a new area symbolizing the "progressive future" while the "regressive past" is ignored (4).

The desire to get rid of a "regressive past" is reflected in Orla's clichéd words in the closing scene: "And once the past is laid to rest, people will be able to move on. It just takes time" (102). It takes more than just time, of course, as the political rhetoric claiming that resolution has been achieved will not in itself bring about genuine reconciliation in a divided society. The sisters' failure to "move on" in terms of either their private relationships or their plan to literally move on and start a new life in the US corresponds to Northern Irish society's incomplete achievement of genuinely moving on.

Andrey also bitterly comments on the apparent nature of progress, providing a realistic—and pessimistic—assessment of the Northern Irish situation as reconciliation and peace that seem to be constantly postponed, thus, it forever becomes the task of the next generation, the task of the future: "This place will never change. Not really. Not in my lifetime. No matter what they say. Underneath the treaties and beneath the handshakes the same hatreds will bubble and fester until finally they erupt again. It is up to you now. (*To the baby.*) It's up to you to make this country a better place. It's your responsibility. Your burden" (96).

The future, when the past will have to be accounted for, is also envisioned by Siu Jing, who, having become a mother, has more at stake than the sisters. At the end of the play she voices her anger at developments threatening political peace-building: "They're saying on the radio it's the worst night of rioting since the ceasefires. They say the peace process may be destabilized. Vehicles hijacked, buildings smashed, houses petrol-bombed, police officers injured, millions of pounds of damage—why? I am asking a serious question: why?" (67) She is terrified that she will have no answers to the questions of her children when they call their parents' generation to account.

Caldwell's recreation of Chekhov's play portraying young women whose lives stay in suspense—who are denied fulfillment—is a way of engaging with Northern Ireland's recent past, and a creative response “to the disabling impact of the Agreement's rhetorical suspension of the country's violent past in favor of ‘a new beginning’” (Heidemann 6–7). Her Belfast *Three Sisters*, similarly to Friel's version, is an adaptation that aims “to engage in a larger social or cultural critique” (Hutcheon 94). Caldwell's social critique offers “a feminist alternative to the masculinist narratives” of the Troubles (Garden n.p.) and gains powerful momentum in the context of the conflict that still has an impact on Northern Irish society.

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Notes

¹ Birte Heidemann in her *Post-Agreement Northern-Irish Literature: Lost in a Liminal Space?* (2016) conceives of “suspension as an aesthetic category which is played out in post-Agreement literature in myriad ways” (6).

² The founders of the theater company, Brian Friel and Stephen Rea, conceived of it as a cultural-political project aiming to engage with the status quo in the North, and potentially effect change through theater as a communal art form.

³ In fact, it is not a “translation proper,” as Friel does not know Russian. However, it is accepted and discussed as such in the receiving culture, so it qualifies as translation (see Gideon Toury on a wider definition of translation). Also, Friel used five existing Standard British English translations, not a literal translation as the basis for his version—as if working against them, and in effect replacing the British-English Chekhov with an Irish-English version.

⁴ Irina has an “epiphany”; the old servant is sent “out in the bog!” (76), and the doctor's monologue of self-hatred is addressed to a mirror that may well serve as an allusion to Joyce's “cracked lookingglass of a servant” (*Ulysses* 6). Friel's audience of “the land of saints and

scholars” hear Andrey complain that their provincial town “has not produced one person of any distinction—not one saint, not one scholar, not one artist” (111). Another added line may refer to the Northern Irish conflict: “God alone knows how the way we live will be assessed. To us it’s—it’s how we live, our norm. But maybe in retrospect it will look anxious and tense. Maybe even . . . morally wrong” (25).

⁵ For her adaptation, Caldwell uses Helen Rappaport’s literal translation of the play.

⁶ Erin is an Irish-English word that means Ireland, originating from the Irish word Éirinn/Éire, and serves as a romantic name for Ireland.

⁷ The sisters ridicule her appearance and ethnic background, and they even refuse to learn to pronounce her name (“Orla: And here’s Jenny. Her real in name is Siu Jing but none of us can say it so we call her Jenny—don’t we?” (42), while Siu Jing successfully acquires the English language: from broken English in the first act, she progresses to become a fluent and sophisticated speaker of the language in the last act.

⁸ One is reminded of Friel’s *Translations*, where the question of cultural and national identity in the 1830s is linked to speaking certain languages, Irish or English. It is darkly ironic that notwithstanding the changes enabled by globalization—one element of which is the opportunity to acquire various foreign languages—traces of the tribal nature of Northern Irish society have still not vanished.

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