"To turn the whole world upside-down": Women and Revolution in *The Non-Stop Connolly Show*

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James and Lillie Connolly with Their Daughters, ca. 1895

In her article "Breaking Chains," Margaretta D'Arcy writes about the move she and her husband, John Arden, made in 1971 to Corrandulla, County Galway and the decisive impact this had on their collaboration as radical dramatists in Ireland:

> We were free to develop our craft in our own way. In the village where we lived, the Irish traditions of rich language and music were still strong. We were able to put on a play that lasted for 24 hours. Our vows that we had made so many years before had now come to fruition. We made theatre that satisfied and excited us. We were part of it on stage: and the audience were also part of it. (1988, 134)

The play referred to here is *The Non-Stop Connolly Show*, subtitled "A Dramatic Cycle of Continuous Struggle in Six Parts," based on the life and times of James Connolly, Ireland's greatest revolutionary and one of the leaders shot for his involvement in the Easter Rising of 1916. As the extraordinary length of the work

suggests — 24 hours — this was not only an epic piece of radical drama, but also a unique event in the tradition of Irish theatre. Staged only once in its continual entirety, at Liberty Hall in Dublin on Easter weekend, Saturday to Sunday 29/30 March 1975, D'Arcy's and Arden's play represented the fulfilment of their ideas about transforming the stage into a forum for revolutionary debate through the dramatic depiction of Irish history. As Arden later said himself about the play, it "is precisely this kind of 'elucidatory exposition' which we believe to be the main contribution of politico-historical theatre to contemporary public affairs" (1977, 137). Although some critics, like Benedict Nightingale in the *New Statesman*, complained about the "combination of didacticism, bad rhymes, folksiness, and revivalist bounce" in the performance (qtd. in Page 1985, 56), the lasting significance of this attempt to turn radical politics into dramatic art was not lost on others. In her comprehensive study of political theatre in Britain since 1968, Catherine Itzin singled out the play as a "masterpiece" (1980, 34), while Albert Hunt described it in *New Society* as "the major theatrical development in Britain in the 1970s" (1979). Another critic, Christopher Murray, summed up the vibrant, experimental mixture of this groundbreaking event: "Song, dance, carnival, puppets, music and an epic tale of class struggle leading to Connolly's execution after the 1916 Rising were all blended into a recreation of folk and street theatre" (1997, 181). In retrospect, Arden has himself also admitted that "it is still probably the work I am most proud and happiest with" (qtd. in Wroe 2004, 8).

The whole epic cycle of plays is of course dominated by the character of James Connolly, who, throughout his life on stage, is shown to wrestle both politically and organisationally with the question of promoting either peaceful reform or violent revolution. In the Preface to the play, D'Arcy and Arden refer to this recurring dilemma as "an ideological dichotomy that still plagues all who have ever had anything to do with left-wing political affairs" (1977, v). Within the context of Irish history, the clash of reformist and revolutionary politics is the driving force behind Connolly's untiring, although not always successful, attempts to negotiate the ideological transition from nationalism to socialism. In myriad scenes, Connolly is depicted personally confronting some of the most prominent political leaders in 20th century Irish, European and American history — Padraic Pearse, James Larkin, Joseph Plunkett, Tom Clarke, John MacLean, Daniel De Leon, Eugene Debs, William

Haywood and Kier Hardie. The dramatic set pieces between these men revolve around their constant political wrangling, each scene an emblematic illustration of the divisive ideological struggle within the Labour Movement itself, which, according to the authors, "coils in and out of the story, like the serpents' bodies in an old Celtic manuscript-ornament" (1977, v).

Despite this complex intertwining of political conflict, there is, I would claim, no real dialectic development in the dramatic examination of Connolly's arguments with his opponents. In each case, his own political course appears already clear-cut — that of maintaining a consistent revolutionary stance in the face of reformist or nationalist deviation. A typical example of the kind of programmatic polemic that is repeated throughout the cycle occurs between Connolly and Padraic Pearse just before the Easter Rising:

> **Connolly** Except this. In what name do we raise our flag on Easter Sunday?
> **Pearse** What else but the name of the Republic of Ireland? To be defined in a proclamation.
> **Connolly** May I ask you your collective views upon the issue of private property?
> **Pearse** I fancy I know yours . . . ?
> **Connolly** We want and we must have economic conscription in Ireland. Socialism. Common ownership of the resources of the land. Under one, common, direction; that Ireland may live and bear upon her fruitful bosom the greatest number of the freest people she has ever known.
> **Pearse** This could cause difficulties.
> **Connolly** Aye . . . Now, your turn.
> **Pearse** I base my views upon James Fintan Lalor.
> **Connolly** Very good. So do I. But interpreted how?
> **Pearse** Four propositions. One: the end and purpose of freedom is human happiness. Two: the end and purpose of national freedom is individual freedom. Therefore individual happiness. Three: national freedom implies national sovereignty. Four: national sovereignty implies control of all the moral and material resources of the nation. Not really so very different from what you said.
> **Connolly** Yes it is. Your word 'nation' includes all, excludes none. 'We can support ourselves,' said Wolf Tone, 'by the aid of that numerous and respectable class of the community, the men of no property.' 'Merchants,' said Wolf Tone,

> 'make bad revolutionaries.' Company directors, says James Connolly, turn government into mass murder, religion into a confidence trick, and nationality into an increased margin of profit upon their books. Don't you see, if you once permit their way of life its very existence, it will continue to amass power, and there will be nothing for anyone else except the servitude of that power?
>
> (1978, Part Six, 74-5)

The message here is made unequivocal: the fight for revolutionary socialism is the only alternative for the Irish working class, in particular when it comes to the liberation of Ireland from England. This focus on Connolly's battle with his political rivals is also reflected in the way the play has been discussed by critics, not surprisingly perhaps, given the predominant role that Connolly's public career takes on in the dramatic unravelling of Irish history on stage. Robert Leach for example is typical of reviewers who perceived the play in these ideologically concentric terms: "Connolly fighting his way through the jungle of conflicting events, obsessive yet detached, quarrelsome with De Leon, pedantic with Larkin, new struggle coming out of defeat as surely as it comes out of victory" (qtd. in Page 1985, 57).

There is, however, another aspect of the cycle of Connolly's life that has been almost completely ignored and that is the issue of gender, which is linked to the impact of the female characters in the play, not least Connolly's wife, Lillie. To explore more deeply this gender aspect is not an attempt on my part to shift the focus away from the central trope of reform and revolution in order to make a case for a more psychological reading of Connolly's evolvement as a character. What I want to argue instead is that it is through Connolly's contact with a number of women on stage that the real political dynamic of his life unfolds. Moreover, this underscores the radical import of the play as a complex dramatisation of the troubled relationship between the personal and the political. It is here, I would argue, that the portrayal of Connolly really comes alive and where, through the influence of the women in his life, his ideas about revolution are tried and tested in everyday practice.

In their detailed discussion of the play — "A Socialist Hero On Stage" (1976) — D'Arcy and Arden make no direct mention of the gender implications of the story. Nor is there is any indication of their desire to stress the particular influence that the female characters — Lillie Connolly, Maude Gonne, Mother Jones, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, Winifred Carney or the Countess Markievicz — have on Connolly. This

seems rather surprising, given the fact that not only did Connolly become, according to P. Berresford Ellis, "an avowed feminist and supporter of women's rights" (1973, 44), the play itself also deals directly with the issue of the emancipation of women. Moreover, Margaretta D'Arcy, has herself expressed elsewhere a strong commitment to a radical feminist reorientation of the theatre towards promoting the power of women:

> Am I now implying that it is our turn, now, as women, to be the vanguard of the exploration? I say yes: because it is the old male-dominated culture which has said that we broke the rules, bit the apple, and so got the knowledge that caused misery to the man. So why not use the old legends to our own advantage? (1988, 137)

It seems therefore strange that the gender politics are not brought out in their discussion of the play since, according to Arden, the whole conception of the cycle was from the very beginning D'Arcy's: "As an Englishman he felt nervous about handling Irish material without an Irish partner — in any case it had been D'Arcy who originally conceived the Connolly idea" (1977, 110). One explanation for this authorial omission is the emphasis they seek to place instead on the collective struggle for Irish liberation in the play in which the plot is viewed primarily in terms of the conflict of class interests. The sex of the characters appears only incidental to their political significance. This is most certainly the case in relation to Connolly himself, whose feelings and sympathies as a man were not the prime focus of the *Show*, as the authors themselves make clear:

> The joys and sorrows of his private life, though no less poignant than anyone else's, were not the motivating force for the deeds of his public life. . . . The conflict of his life was on the whole *impersonal* — it is only to be discovered in the conflict between his class (the working class) and the classes which oppressed it. Only in the last few days of his life did this conflict become *personal and visible* — he took up arms against the British Empire, fought a battle in the streets of Dublin, and died as a result.
>
> (1977, 96)

Despite this disavowal, I would suggest that the play itself nevertheless reveals a much more complex interdependence between the personal and the political, in particular through Connolly's relationship with his wife, Lillie. Not only is it here that Connolly's politics are transposed into tangibly existential terms — how to keep his marriage and family together in the face of brutal poverty and the semi-nomadic life of a professional revolutionary. As a wife, mother and revolutionary, Lillie Connolly emerges herself in the cycle as a serious political force in her husband's career. The dynamic interaction between them is what I want to examine in more detail in the next part of the essay.

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In his discussion of the play, Francis Gray writes that "Connolly's growing love for his wife Lillie is presented as a political as well as an emotional issue" (1982, 102). The particular problematic that Gray goes on to identify in this context is that of religion — Connolly was brought up a Protestant and Lillie a Catholic:

> [S]uddenly [Connolly] understands that the qualms he feels about marrying someone of a different religion are just another instance of the divide-and-rule policy at work; he gives a cry of 'at last today I know now who I am' as the political and personal conflicts in his life appear in clear focus, ready to be fought and beaten. (1982, 102-3)

This is indeed an important moment of epiphany for Connolly. Moreover, Gray is one of the few critics who have pointed to the personal connection between Connolly, Lillie and at least one of the overriding political tensions that runs through the play — the sectarian divisions among the Irish working class. However, Gray mentions this only in passing and then moves quickly on to other aspects of the play. Lillie is forgotten. This is a pity since there is much more to be extrapolated from Lillie's role, not least because, apart from Connolly himself, she is the only other protagonist to appear in all six parts of the play. Moreover, Lillie is present at several other turning points in Connolly's career, not only when he goes through dramatic changes in his personal life and but also when confronted by some of his most fundamental political challenges. In both contexts, Lillie functions as his most reliable counsellor,

someone who is there to remind him of the personal consequences of his political decisions. In many ways, Connolly is depicted as a social migrant, "The Little Tailor" in Irish folk tales, as Margaretta D'Arcy envisaged him, "whom no one takes seriously, but who waddles on through the forest of giants, resourceful and cunning, and eventually succeeds in winning the hand of the princess" (1977, 106-7). In all of his peregrinations, it is Lillie who remains his staunchest ally, rooted as she is in her experience as a working-class Irishwoman, whose own radical consciousness is born out of the day-to-day struggle to survive and keep her family together. As she herself muses at the close of Part One of the cycle, she and her new husband might seem an obscure couple, but one destined for greater things:

> So small, so young, so foolish and so blind:
> We are no smaller than are all mankind.
> Between the trees of this quiet Dublin street
> A pair of giants plant their seven-league feet . . .
> (1977, 30)

The scenes in which Lillie appears together with Connolly deal either with domestic problems, such as poverty and unemployment, or with the more wide-ranging debates within the movement. In both cases Lillie functions not only as a companion in her role as working-class wife and mother, but also as Connolly's most astute political confidante. Moreover, the link between the two spheres — private and public — informs the epic structure of the whole cycle in which the political conclusions of one scene are didactically repeated in another. There is also the dialectical element of the relationship between individual and collective, where Connolly's proletarian family circumstances are clearly meant to be representative of the problems facing working-class families in general at the turn of the 19th and 20th century. The radical politics that emerge from this personal experience of poverty, bad housing, unemployment and exploitation can also be seen to illustrate Marx's point that social existence determines class consciousness. As D'Arcy and Arden emphasise in their "Notes on the Staging of the Plays," the "approach should be 'emblematic' rather than 'naturalistic'" (1977, vi), a comment that underscores their view of the *Connolly Show* as a modern morality play, peopled by both historical and allegorical figures like "Grabitall," "Wild Woman," "War Demon," and "King Conaire." This is also

reflected in Arden's later comment about the exotic combination of dramatic sources that inspired them to stage a historical work of this magnitude. The plays he said

> are written in an epic style that to some extent derives from Brecht, and to some extent from the lengthy dramas in the Indian theatre, which are in great part narrated. And of course the whole thing in the Indian theatre is costumed in the most highly stylized emblematic way, and we tried to do the same with the Connolly play. (qtd. in Page 1985, 56)

Thus, the adoption of an emblematic rather than naturalistic style of performance is meant to subvert the illusion that what the audience sees on stage is merely a costume drama, something that offers a tantalizing insight into the private lives of famous people. Instead, the *Connolly Show*, as the authors' comments indicate, is less about revealing inner psychological conflicts and more about exposing the machinations of class society. The discussions between Lillie and Connolly invite therefore the audience to reflect themselves upon the political dilemmas that are being presented to them. Lillie's role in this process of learning, of which both Connolly and the audience are on the receiving end, is established early on in the play, when she gives her husband a lesson in basic writing that is not only about language. When Connolly asks, "So teach me the way they taught you. What's wrong with that sentence?" he finds himself for the first time transformed from political preacher into pupil:

> **Lillie** James, it's at least two sentences — I don't know though, it may be three . . .
>
> **Connolly** Eh . . . ?
>
> **Lillie** You see, you have to break it up and separate it. After each new idea you have to put a full stop. You said you wanted to *analyse*: isn't analyse each different thing to be put in its own choice place? Ye've seen me clear the table when I've begun to start baking: I have flour here, the butter here, the salt there, and the bowl in front of me, so. And then I know where I am. So: the population of Edinburgh, its snobs and flunkeys and all that. At the end of the list a full stop. Now, the next sentence. 'Forbye the working classes. . . .' Are the working classes not included in the population of Edinburgh?

> **Connolly** Of course they are — but don't you see there's so many of the other crowd —
>
> **Lillie** That it seems to swamp us out. So we say so. In the first sentence then: 'The population of Edinburgh is *largely* composed of snobs, flunkeys, mashers —' and that's it. It makes that clear. 'Forbye the working classes —' *Forbye* is not good grammar. It's dialect.
>
> **Connolly** Now we don't have to be la-di-dah — *forbye* is what folk here say.
>
> **Lillie** Aye, if they're Scots. But this paper's read by English and Irish as well. There are Jews down Leith Walk. . . .
>
> (1977, Part Two, 46-7)

There is a vital point made here, not only about the need to be precise in one's use of words, but also that clear political thinking grows from a concern about the real meaning of language. It is a lesson worthy of Orwell and it is Lillie who makes it.

Despite the fact that Lillie is shown throughout the cycle to be the one who always looks after the home and the children, she remains a vital political force throughout the play. Her comments on the debates that Connolly constantly gets embroiled in are perhaps few, but nevertheless show that she is very much aware of what is going on and often sees further than her revolutionary icon of a husband. For instance, after a particularly frustrating bout of polemical in-fighting at a meeting of the Irish Socialist Republic Party, Connolly is given the following small but salutary piece of advice by Lillie: "James, I think you will have to let them make their own mistakes for a while" (1978, Part Three, 75).

Another significant gender aspect of the play's radical dramaturgy is its shift away from the traditional focus on the emotional and sexual tensions between men and women. Lillie is for example not drawn into the role of neglected housewife, jealous of her husband's career, not least during his close co-operation with other, more flamboyant female figures like Maud Gonne and the Countess Markievicz. Unlike these two women, Lillie never appears herself in any public context, but her interventions on stage are no less politically incisive. The most sacrificial point in Connolly's life comes with the Easter Rising, a tragic moment that is given even greater poignancy by Lillie's own understanding of what it really means, both for herself, their daughter Nora and for Ireland:

Lillie Lillie Connolly has known, twenty-six years, that it would come. He
doesn't think I'll stay in Belfast, washing blankets, in this small home?
I would stand with him and his guns in Liberty Hall, if I could.
But someone must survive and tell his children what he did.
Nonetheless I will be in Dublin. Before I go there I will burn
Every paper in this house that incriminates a single one.
Light the fire: and the flames will rise.
Flames everywhere before the eyes
Of Ireland — dark smoke over the low roof.

She and Nora *burn letters and other documents.*

Nora Countess Markievicz says you stay in her house in Dublin.
Lillie Ah the beautiful Countess . . . Yes, I will: and is not that proof
That James Connolly and myself are one flesh in death and life.

She sings:

Can I say that I had rather
Have married for your father
A draper's clerk, a minister,
Or a sober quiet schoolmaster,
Who would come home and live at home
With his regular weekly pay?
While the wild women of Dublin
Would be left alone to play?

James Connolly is my man
I had rather let him roam
With the wildest in the world
Be they women or be they men
Than lie beside me night by night
With broken heart and frozen brain —
For the life of his wife he must go to sleep again?
For the life of his wife all our liberty fell to ruin

> Now that all is secure here, towards Dublin we take the train. . . .
>
> (1978, Part Six, 93)

If Lillie represents Connolly's working-class consciousness, her presence by his side on stage also functions as a moral yardstick for the audience. In this guiding role she personifies the plight of people whose lives are continually being imposed upon by history, yet who kick back at fate whenever they can. At one point, a poorly improvised Christmas tree reveals the real level of destitution in the Connolly family. It provides a sobering insight, but one that also allows Lillie to reflect upon the hard-won connection between existence and consciousness:

> **Lillie** For ourselves to have nothing, there must be others who have far less.
> **Connolly** And is that a consolation . . . ? Lillie, what's less than nothing?
> **Lillie** Now, James, in front of the children. . . .
> **Connolly** All right: let them answer. Nora, what's less than nothing?
> **Nora** Less than nothing would be if Daddy had forgotten to pick up a branch from the gutter.
> **Lillie** Less than nothing is to have nothing and no way of knowing why, and no comprehension as to how things might be changed. You gave me that comprehension. You have given it to many others.
>
> (1978, Part Three, 57)

Once again, we can see that it is Lillie who takes on a didactic function, putting their individual poverty into political perspective. The fact that it is a woman that turns the ideological tables on Connolly, who has himself to listen and learn, forms part of the gendered subtext of the play. There are other politically instructive encounters in the *Connolly Show* where female characters fulfil this dissenting role. Two such women are Maud Gonne and Winifred Carney, who work together with Connolly both on a private and public level. Their impact is perhaps even more overtly political than that of Lillie Connolly, their efforts more directly linked to the overriding theme of struggle to "turn the whole world upside-down," as Lillie expresses it (1978, Part Four, 85). In the case of these two prominent Irishwomen, they are also shown to influence Connolly's development as a radical thinker, in

particular in his efforts to amalgamate the ideas of nationalism, republicanism and feminism in Ireland. Thus, once again in the company of women, Connolly is not depicted defending an already defined political standpoint, as he does with the other male figures he meets. Instead, as with Lillie, these two women help to deepen his understanding of what is fundamentally at stake in the cause of Irish liberation. It is to this particular aspect of gender power in the play that I now want to turn.

* * *

In the history of Irish nationalism there is perhaps no-one more romantically iconic than Maude Gonne, both through her association with Yeats and the Irish Literary Revival and her memorable performances as an actress, not least in the leading role of Yeats' play *Cathleen ni Houlihan.* When discussing the theatrical antecedents of the *Connolly Show*, D'Arcy and Arden make special reference to this earlier play as "the first of a series of politically-motivated pieces of nationalist agit-prop" that anticipated their own work (1977, 116). Their characterisation of Maude Gonne herself is also revealing, projecting her as "a militant nationalist" whose "political attitude contrasted with that of most of the other people involved in the new theatre movement, who tended to support some form of non-violent devolution" (Ibid). Maud Gonne is thus seen to bridge the historical gap, not only between past and present, but also between aesthetics and politics. Her character in the *Connolly Show* plays a similarly transitional role, helping Connolly to redefine his relationship with Irish nationalism and republicanism. In their first encounter on stage, Connolly's own, somewhat abstract perception of the Irish is contrasted with Gonne's more tangible understanding of the needs of ordinary people in their confrontation with the local authorities. Moreover, she also shows how the semi-mystical grip that traditional folklore has on the Irish imagination can be more of a point of support for and less of an ideological distraction from the struggle for freedom. The ensuing dialogue between Maud Gonne and Connolly is one of the most remarkable in the whole play for its mixture of poetry, politics, myth, history and social drama:

> **Maud Gonne** . . . Did you know famine-fever has broken out at Crossmolina? I have been there, I have seen it. I have myself, alone, confronted the Board of Guardians in the town of Belmullet and demanded that they issue some relief to the poor people — of whom at least ten thousand stood behind me in the street — I was wearing, *par chance*, *par bonne chance*, my robe and cloak of green.

> An old man at the back cried out in Irish — 'She is the Queen of the Shee come to Mayo to save the people!' — the Shee, you know who I mean, live their secretly under the hills —
>
> **Connolly** You mean they thought you were a *fairy* — ? Oh, come now —
>
> **Maud Gonne** It was convenient for them to tell each other they thought I was a fairy. For how else would they have found the courage to defy the armed police? At all events they did so. They got what they cried out for. Six shillings per week. Seed potatoes from Scotland at the government expense. I told them: 'You have won these things by your numbers, your united strength. By your strength and your courage you must win the freedom of Ireland.' But I am not sure they followed me quite so far as that. . . .
>
> (1978, Part Three, 17-8)

Apart from the haunting quality of a scene like the above, which projects a vivid and moving tableau of people's struggle, there is also the image of yet another empowered woman that reverberates through the play. As I mentioned earlier, the *Connolly Show* is dominated by men who put their own particular stamp on history. The discourse on power is therefore very much a male one and the figure of Connolly himself moves naturally within it. However, women like Maud Gonne, who play such an iconographic role in Irish history, represent the profoundest challenge to this male order on stage. It is here, I believe, one can discern most directly the feminist influence of Margaretta D'Arcy herself, since Arden's own earlier work before their collaboration was not known for its gender awareness. D'Arcy hints at this when she recalls her own first impressions of Arden: "His language and sense of history excited me in his work: his provincial conservatism did not attract me" (1988, 132). In contrast, D'Arcy was at this stage much more in touch with the emerging radicalism of the women's movement as part of her efforts to create an alternative theatre: "So Arden wrote on his own, and I pursued the most dynamic and explosive ideas that were then taking place — those surrounding the position of women: and I began working with women" (Ibid, 135).

D'Arcy's feminist consciousness is expressed in the *Connolly Show* through the context of women confronting the key figure in the play with emancipatory ideas of their own. In reality, Connolly was conscious of the oppression of women, proof of which one finds in his article on "Woman" from 1915: "The worker is the slave of

capitalist society, the female worker is the slave of that slave" (1973, 191). This quote is also partly reproduced in the *Connolly Show*. He was, however, not born with that gender awareness. In fact, throughout most of the cycle, we see him putting his wife and family very much in second place, subservient to the needs of the struggle for Irish independence and socialism. Nevertheless, the debate about women's rights included in the play is not just a token one. Once again, the crucial link is between the personal and the political, revolving around the question of where does social revolution really start. If there is no theory without practice, that revolutionary praxis clearly has to begin at home. One of the most significant figures in this respect is Winifred Carney, who was Connolly's secretary and who stood by his side throughout the Easter Rising. Carney was a working-class suffragette who was dedicated to Connolly, as Thomas M. Coffey recalls in his book, *Agony at Easter*: "The only woman among the men in the Post Office during these first moments of the uprising was an austere lady of indeterminate age named Winifred Carney. She was Connolly's secretary and was so devoted to him she wouldn't even let him fight a revolution without her" (1971, 17). The scene where Connolly and Carney discuss the programme of the Irish Labour Party is another one of these pivotal moments in the play when a woman manages to pin Connolly down on a political issue, forcing him rethink his own position, this time on women's rights:

> **Winifred Carney** That the trade unions being male-dominated, any Labour Party they are likely to produce will not make any difference to the rights of women.
> **Connolly** It goes without saying, Miss Carney, that complete equality between the sexes must of course be in the programme.
> **Winifred Carney** No it doesn't, Mr Connolly. They'll all think you mean no more than to give women the vote.
> **Connolly** Isn't that what you want?
> **Winifred Carney** To begin with, yes it is; but have you thought what would happen if all the women were to use their vote as instructed by their husbands? Support for our labour policies is small enough as it is — it would actually be decreased by that sort of reform.
> **Connolly** Women will most certainly vote as instructed by their husbands, unless we can make it clear that *social* as well as *political* equality is what we demand.

> **Winifred Carney** And it *is* what you demand?
>
> **Connolly** Oh yes.
>
> **Winifred Carney** Provided, Mr Connolly, it is also understood that social equality involves not only equal pay, but a recognition that working women require certain facilities. For example: temporary absence from work with full pay when they are having a baby — child-care for working mothers to be paid for by the employers —
>
> **Sheehy Skeffington** I know that patience is a virtue reserved *by* men *for* women: but we are getting here into some very long-term issues. I mean, the women workers' section of the Transport Workers' Union has only just been set up, and it may well be you don't want to hear about —
>
> **Connolly** Don't apologise — *Long-term issue* is a defeatist word for a *principle*: and to establish principles is our sole purpose — or should be — in setting out a party programme. We all agree that capitalism means masters and slaves. The majority of women are, therefore, the slaves of slaves. If they are not to be liberated, then slavery will continue: and it will still be very much slavery even though we call it socialism. Your principle is agreed and it is stated: with these others —
>
> (1978, Part Five, 37)

This is one of the most explicitly feminist scenes in the whole cycle. As usual, the dialogue involves a detailed ideological debate about principles and programmes. At the same time it is exciting and challenging drama that addresses a key gender issue in the Labour Movement: the predominance of a male point-of-view in the formulation of demands. Carney's criticism about not seeing the connections between party slogans and the real lives of women and men is as valid now as it was then. It is an example of the kind of radical dialectic that Brecht himself thought was essential to the new epic form of drama: "We need a type of theatre which not only releases the feelings, insights and impulses possible within the particular historical field of human relations in which the action takes place, but employs and encourages those thoughts and feelings which help transform the field itself" (1978, 190). Paraphrasing Brecht, Augusto Boal in his classic *Theatre of the Oppressed* (1974) elicits a similar mixture of popular entertainment and political polemic on stage, one that "clarifies concepts, reveals truths, exposes contradictions, and proposes transformations" (2000, 106).

The authors of the *Connolly Show* echo these same Brechtian sentiments in their own pedagogical perception of the play:

> It is not so much 'propagandist' as exploratory and educational. But it *is* propagandist in that it finally brings the authors, and consequently the audience, to some 'partisan' conclusion. All conclusions about the state of contemporary affairs must inevitably be partisan — as we have stated, consensus is not possible in a divided society — and the real issue here is 'can the point of view of the play be justified when the actions illustrating it are presented on stage in public, and held up to the judgement of the audience?' (1977, 137)

Their argument is as much an aesthetic as a political one, although the onus here is clearly on that of the play's consciousness-raising impact on the audience. *The Non-Stop Connolly Show* is without doubt one of the most intellectually and physically exacting works in the history of Irish theatre. Yet, despite its daunting all-day-and-night duration, the response of the original audience seems to have been an overwhelmingly positive one. According to Eamonn Smullen, who was there himself, "the plays were enthusiastically received by a large Dublin audience in the headquarters of Ireland's largest union" (qtd. in Itzin 1980, 34). The authors also recall a similarly appreciative reaction among critics to this first, historic performance: "The press response on the whole was good. The reviewers in the national newspapers were not uniformly favourable — though one or two of them were very enthusiastic — but they all recognised the unique nature of the experiment and wrote about it accordingly" (1977, 133).

Taken together, the cycle of six plays represent an enormously ambitious form of what Walter Benjamin called the "convenient public exhibition area" of educative epic theatre, one that seeks to close the ideological gap between audience and actors (qtd. in Gilloch 2002, 153). Thus, Connolly's developing consciousness as the socialist hero on stage is also refracted through the prism of personal experience of the audience themselves. The tension between the two levels of dramatisation of the personal and political is, as I have tried to show here, what continues to fascinate and provoke in the cycle of plays, even now as a reading experience. How much more would this have been the case in a live performance with the actors, costumes, music,

songs, picture backcloths and above all the poetic impact of the spoken words. Connolly comes alive as a character through his dynamic interaction with the powerful female figures in the play and the independent ideas which each of these women express. These encounters propel him along a trajectory that makes his political ideas relate more directly to the lives of ordinary people. *The Non-Stop Connolly Show* stands out as a huge artistic achievement in every respect. It is through its dynamic portrayal of men and women struggling together in the cause of human emancipation that it achieves its greatest transcendence.

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