Performing Northern Ireland: Stephen Rea in *Cyprus Avenue* and *Hard Border*

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**Content warning: this article quotes derogatory sectarian language and references sectarian and domestic violence.**

Although the worst violence of the Troubles has ended, the Northern Irish national identity remains a profoundly contested entity. As Lisa Fitzpatrick observes, “Post-ceasefire, Northern Ireland is emerging as a self-governing entity with a web of links connecting it politically, socially, and culturally both to the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland” – but the nation also has a vested interest in affirming its own distinct cultural identity. The resident of Northern Ireland might consider themselves British, Irish, Northern Irish, or from Ulster; this identity might be inflected with Unionist or Nationalist political feeling, or may stem from a purely personal sense of self. This is, then, a space of markedly equivocal identity formation, and yet the shifting boundaries of claimed national community are often of critical cultural, political, legal, or personal significance.

Unsurprisingly, within this precarious field of meaning, ethno-national identity is often assiduously ‘performed’, in Judith Butler’s sense of the performative: an unstable phenomenon that is produced only by continued ‘doing’, a self-sustaining practice that must be constantly reiterated in order to remain in existence. Sports, commemorative parades, respective national holidays – hockey or hurling? St Patrick’s Day or the Twelfth? – all act as fields of implicit self-identification. Linguistic choices are loaded: do you refer to Ulster, the province, the six counties, the North, the Free State, the mainland? Do you say Derry, Londonderry – or Derry-slash-Londonderry? David Ireland’s *Cyprus Avenue* (2016) and Clare Dwyer Hogg’s *Hard Border* (2018) bring these lingering post-Troubles concerns to the fore, most particularly through the casting of Northern Irish actor Stephen Rea in their respective central roles. Rea’s own personal and professional history, as a figure inflected in the public mind with a particularly extreme range of potential ‘Northern Irish identities’, encapsulates the shifting boundaries of an unstable, performative spectrum of ethno-national selfhood.

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1 Lisa Fitzpatrick, “Performing Gender, Performing Violence on the Northern Irish Stage”, *Contemporary Theatre Review* 23.3, 2003, 302-313, 305. The recent success of a number of specifically ‘Northern Irish’ cultural productions, such as television series *Derry Girls* (2018-) and *The Fall* (2013-2016), and the expanding Born and Bred artistry company ([https://wearebornandbred.com/](https://wearebornandbred.com/)), testifies to a public appetite for self-proclaimed Northern Irish cultural production.

Cyprus Avenue sees Belfast Loyalist Eric Miller undergo a profound identity crisis when he comes to believe that “Gerry Adams has disguised himself as a new-born baby and successfully infiltrated my family home” in the guise of his granddaughter. The apparently psychotic hallucination tips an already unstable Eric, long paranoid that the Ulster Loyalist identity is disintegrating in a post-Good Friday Agreement Belfast, into violent and eventual fatal defensive hysteria: “I cannot have Fenians in our house, Bernie. And I will not tolerate them in our family. We are... as a family and as a people, as a nation, we are under siege. You know that too, Bern. We must protect what we have”.

The play was first performed at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin before transferring to the Royal Court Theatre in London, the MAC in Belfast, and the Public Theater in New York, eventually returning to the Royal Court in 2019. During each of these production runs, broader political events amplified the play’s probing of the stability – indeed, the very legal existence – of the Northern Irish identity.

The 2016 UK-EU membership ‘Brexit’ referendum raised contentious questions over the citizenship status of Northern Irish residents and the existing claims of the Good Friday Agreement – questions which also arose during the five-year legal battle of Derry resident Emma DeSouza, who applied in 2015 as an Irish citizen for residency for her US-born husband. Under the terms of the Good Friday Agreement, Northern Irish residents can automatically hold British, Irish, or dual citizenship; DeSouza has lived in Northern Ireland under an Irish passport for her entire life. The Home Office rejected the couple’s application, stating that they considered DeSouza to be British, and asking that she apply again as a British citizen, or formally renounce her British citizenship and pay to reapply as an Irish citizen. DeSouza countered that she could not renounce a citizenship she had never held, and began a lengthy battle to have the citizenship rights of Northern Irish residents formally recognised in British law. These sudden legal uncertainties of claimed national identity replicates Eric’s own confession that he’s “worried that he might be Irish”, despite his loyalist history: “And then I thought the most terrifying thought of all. Maybe I am Irish. But I can’t be! I can’t suddenly be Irish any more than I can suddenly be French! And then I thought – maybe I’ve always been Irish.” In a political landscape in which even a government-issued passport does not guarantee national identity, Eric’s

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3 David Ireland, Cyprus Avenue (London: Methuen, 2019), 52.
4 Ireland, 27.
5 Ireland, 46, 38.
anxiety about his determinedly performed Unionist identity finds multiple parallels outside the auditorium.

In both the 2016 and 2019 production runs of *Cyprus Avenue*, Eric Miller was played by Stephen Rea. A theatre and film actor of considerable standing, Rea is an East Belfast Protestant by birth and, along with playwright Brian Friel, a founding member of the Derry-based Field Day Theatre Company, which strove to create a cultural meeting place that would transcend political factions in Northern Irish theatre. Yet one of Rea’s most widely broadcast public ‘performances’ was in a markedly more politically divisive context: as the television dub voice of Sinn Féin president Gerry Adams, during the 1988-94 BBC broadcasting ban on the voices of several political groups involved in the Northern Irish Troubles. As historian Patrick Radden Keefe explains, by the late 1980s, “Adams had become a hate figure in England. With his unnerving calm and his baritone erudition, he was a deeply polarising and palpably dangerous figure: a righteous, charismatic, eloquent apologist for terrorism” and, fearful of “his powers of ideological seduction”, the British government censored his voice: “The face was recognisably Adams, and the words were his words, but the voice saying them would belong to someone else”. In many cases, that voice was Rea’s — that same voice that, in *Cyprus Avenue*, will vocalise Eric Miller’s accusing his baby granddaughter of being “that dirty aul’ Fenian fucker Gerry Adams”.

Rea is also widely associated in the public mind with another particularly extremist iteration of the contested Northern Irish identity: as the husband of Provisional IRA bomber Dolours Price. Price worked with Gerry Adams in the early 1970s on plans to firebomb England; eventually, she would participate in the Old Bailey car bombing in March 1973, which led to over 200 casualties and Price being sentenced to life imprisonment in HMP Brixton. In a bizarre aligning of life and art, Price visited the Royal Court Theatre itself on the evening before the bombing, to watch Brian Friel’s new work *The Freedom of the City* which, loosely inspired by the Bloody Sunday massacre, sees three unarmed citizen protestors shot by British forces: on the night that Price visited the Royal Court, Stephen Rea was playing one of the protestors. Having known each other previously at Queen’s University Belfast, Price and Rea would reconnect after her eventual release from prison following the Old Bailey bombing, and were married from 1983 to 2003, with Price often touring with Rea during his work with the Field Day theatre company, and eventually moving to Maida Vale in London to live with him.

Price and her sister younger Marian had attracted intense media attention during the aftermath of the Old Bailey bombing. As the first known female members of the Provisional IRA, and also as young, attractive women, they were presented in the media as “deadly, dangerous, but also seductive”, his sister-in-law explains. “Apparently he sounds like a West Belfast Bond. As far as the English are concerned, a voice like that? Well... It’s dangerous.” “Just so I’m clear”, the father responds, “Are you saying that the British government dub the voice of Gerry Adams because it’s too sexy?” “It’s like a fine whiskey”, his father-in-law concurs.

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6 Patrick Radden Keefe, *Say Nothing: A True Story of Murder and Memory in Northern Ireland*, London: Williams Collins, 2018, 240. Smash-hit television show *Derry Girls* revived the memory of the broadcasting ban in its second season in 2019, with a brief clip of a UTV newsreader explaining, “Because of government restrictions, we cannot broadcast the voice of Mr Adams. His words are spoken by an actor.” “I will never understand the point of that”, the family’s father comments. “It’s because his natural voice is actually very seductive”, his sister-in-law explains. “Apparently he sounds like a West Belfast Bond. As far as the English are concerned, a voice like that? Well... It’s dangerous.” “Just so I’m clear”, the father responds, “Are you saying that the British government dub the voice of Gerry Adams because it’s too sexy?” “It’s like a fine whiskey”, his father-in-law concurs. (*Derry Girls* season 2, episode 1, “Across the Barricades”, 2019, 1.45.)

7 Ireland, 21.

8 Keefe, 134-6. Keefe’s biography of Price offers a wealth of further information on her place in Republican political terror activity, including her role as one of the IRA’s ‘Unknowns’ in the abduction and murder of the ‘Disappeared’, including that of Jean McConville.

9 O’Keeffe, 215.
alluring spectacles”. Such was their celebrity status that actor Vanessa Redgrave was among those who offered to stand bail for the pair. Following their imprisonment, the sisters’ 208-day hunger strike and Price’s eventual compassionate release in April 1981 furthered their public notoriety, as would Price’s campaigning for Gerry Adams when he entered parliamentary politics in 1983. Price continued to attract media attention throughout the rest of her life, photographed for the prominent Italian magazine L’Europeo (see fig. 1), and snapped by Sunday Times paparazzi sipping champagne with Rea at the National Theatre; when she died in 2013, the New York Times ran her obituary. In consequence, Rea was inevitably connected in the public mind with his infamous wife, even after their divorce. Indeed, when Price died, most mainstream English media outlets led reports of Price’s funeral with images of Rea carrying her coffin. As a recognisable public figure, Rea was increasingly connected with a notorious brand of IRA terrorism, alongside his persona as an East Belfast Protestant actor with professional affiliations to both the Field Day Theatre Company and West End London theatre.

Casting Rea in the role of Eric Miller played on this unsettling fluidity of Rea’s public and professional identity. Already uncannily aligned with Gerry Adams in the public imagination by dint of his voiceover dubbing work and marriage to the paramilitary Price – and indeed a career spent playing IRA men in films like *The Crying Game* (1992) and *Michael Collins* (1996) – in his old age Rea has achieved precisely the status of “eminence grise, aging philosopher-king” that *Cyprus Avenue* assigns to Adams himself.\(^\text{14}\) Rea’s appearance in Clare Dwyer Hogg’s 2018 performance-poem *Hard Border* draws directly on his recognisability as a prominent ‘Northern Irish’ voice.\(^\text{15}\) Here, grizzled, bitterly dignified, “knee-deep in philosophy” (see fig. 2), Rea performs a defence of the peace-seeking Northern Irish public, haranguing British political figures Jacob Rees-Mogg, Boris Johnson, and Toby Young over their cavalier treatment of the Irish border and disregard for the Good Friday Agreement in Brexit negotiation: “And because you do not like to think it’s a problem / does not mean it vanishes.”

The gravity of Rea’s immediately recognisable onscreen presence is crucial to the performance-poem’s impact. He sneers the names of English political figures, and looks pointedly, complicitly to camera to underline moments of particular political ignorance; the poem performed by a non-Northern Irish figure would lose much of its meaning. Rea is thus framed onscreen as at once recognisably ‘himself’ and simultaneously a representative for a broader Northern Irish populace, the common-sense voice of an imagined common “we”, “here”, repeatedly articulated throughout the poem in defence against “the people in power and the people that write about us”, and the frightening force of “the documents that will determine what and when”. Hogg’s poem is deeply engaged in the fragility of a cross-border peace that relies upon imaginative coalescence, the joint agreement of thought that will make a border (and associated ethno-national affiliations) appear, disappear, and reappear according to collective will. “Isn’t identity something to do with magic?” Rea intones. “We live here / and we’re holding our breath again. / Because we know that chance and hope / come in

\(^{14}\) Ireland, 17.  
\(^{15}\) Clare Dwyer Hogg, *Hard Border*, 20 September 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8cZe2ihEZ08
forms like steam and smoke”. The potent onscreen combination of Rea’s publicly recognisable identity as a Northern Irish citizen, held in tension with the various competing iterations of ethno-national identity that his professional career and personal life evoke – and the fact that his appearance here is, however lightly sketched, still a performance, a scripted rendition of Hogg’s words – mirrors and magnifies the precarious fluidity of Northern Irish selfhood of which *Hard Border* speaks.

*Figure 2: Stephen Rea in Clare Dwyer Hogg’s *Hard Border* (2018)*

_Cyprus Avenue_ likewise – although more fatalistically – interrogates Northern Irish national identity as alarmingly performative and consequently precarious. Even Slim, the violent loyalist paramilitary who threatens to kill Eric for wondering aloud in public about the stability of his British Protestant identity, comically acknowledges the scope for the selective performance of apparently competing ethno-national identifications:

*For what it’s worth, I myself think that there is an Irish dimension to loyalist identity. It’s inescapable but it’s certainly not predominant, if you know what I mean. I consider myself to a certain extent Irish but that doesn’t necessarily mean I’m gonna stick a Guinness hat on and march about the streets on St Patrick’s Day.*

There is a frightening dynamic at work here: the paramilitary, ready to shoot Eric for “beginning to question the validity of loyalist cultural identity” acknowledges that the distinction between ethno-national identities might be so fine a line as to be merely the choice of various modes of national performativity: does one don a Guinness hat on St Patrick’s Day or not? Eric’s anxiety about his national identity is triggered in part by his trip to London, where he encounters an easy celebration and appropriation of the Irish identity: “All these men are English! All these Irishmen walking in and out of this pub! Every single one of them is English! They go to England for a hundred years and call

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16 Edwin Coomasaru’s 2019 *Irish Times* article “Magical Thinking: Is Brexit an occult phenomenon?” offers further consideration of the invocation of magical or occult terminology in relation to Brexit: [https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/magical-thinking-is-brexit-an-occult-phenomenon-1.3795483](https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/magical-thinking-is-brexit-an-occult-phenomenon-1.3795483)
17 Ireland, 46.
18 Ireland, 47.
themselves Irish and we go to Ireland for four hundred years and call ourselves British!” In Eric’s anxiety, the certainty of “is” shifts to the fluidity of “call ourselves” as he comes to recognise the self-produced instability of ethno-national identification.

Eric’s own determined Unionist sense of being British depends on a series of dogged assertions based on a similarly fixed state of essentialised ‘being’: “I am anything but Irish. I am British. I am exclusively and non-negotiably British. I am not nor never have been nor never will be Irish”, he declares in the first scene. The Northern Irish identity is here forged by dint of careful exclusion, the “is” or “am” determined by the negation of that which it is not, “nor have been nor never will be”. Over the course of the play, this quality of exclusionary negation loses its stabilising force for Eric, “is” and “am” no longer a mark of essentialised, self-evident certainty: “It also occurred to me that perhaps I wasn’t a Protestant. I mean, of course I am. I am a Protestant. In the sense of not being Catholic. But what is a Protestant? What does any of it even mean?” An identity determined by what it is ‘not’, as Eric articulates his own brand of Unionist loyalism, quickly dissipates into ‘nothing’ when hermetic sectarian boundaries begin to disintegrate. Eric’s daughter Julie offers an alternative reading of an identity based on “nothing” that to her offers a space of progressive, welcoming social liberty, but to Eric represents only a vacuum, a cultural and political death:

ERIC: Is she a Unionist or a Republican?

JULIE: She’s neither! She’s a little baby!

ERIC: Will you raise her as a Unionist or a Republican?

JULIE: I’ll raise her as nothing. I’ll raise her to respect all people and not judge a person on their religion or their race.

ERIC: You’ll raise her as nothing! She’ll be nothing?!

JULIE: She’ll not be prejudiced.

ERIC: Without prejudice we’re nothing! If we don’t discriminate, we don’t survive?

Eric’s own sense of ethno-national identity, dependent on performative reiteration and defined by what it is not, is constructed around a central nothingness. Ireland’s play traces the transmutation of this ‘nothingness’ into an orgy of destruction and self-destruction, as Eric strives desperately to shield himself from recognition of the negatory void at the heart of his national self-conception. Eric’s first word in the play is a tentative “Yes”, but his last word will be “no”, as he laughs in response to his therapist’s suggestion that he might reconsider the significance of his murder of his family. “I’d forgotten how much I enjoy saying no”, he tells her, echoing Ian Paisley’s notorious iteration, “Ulster says no”, slogan of Unionist protest against the inclusion of the Republic of Ireland in devolved Northern Irish government. “Ulster says no”, Slim tells Eric as he presses the gun to his mouth, moments before turning it on himself. “No no no no no no no no no no no no no no no no no no no no no no no no no no no no no no no no no no no”, Eric howls as he turns murderously on his daughter. Cyprus Avenue emphasises

19 Ireland, 39.
20 Ireland, 10.
21 Ireland, 36.
22 Ireland, 61.
23 Ireland, 7, 78, 69, 62.
the instability of national identity as a source of anxiety, of frightening and potentially lethal volatility, rather than revelling in any postmodern liberty of choice accorded by performative being.

Figure 3: Stephen Rea and Eric Miller and Chris Corrigan as Slim in the 2019 Royal Court production. Photo by Ros Kavanagh.

As a performance figure, Rea’s representational currency in the public eye is appropriately fluid, informed by competing understandings and iterations of what the Northern Irish identity might ‘be’: an East Belfast Protestant performing the voice of Gerry Adams; married to an IRA terrorist while leading a bohemian actor’s life in Maida Vale; itinerant resident of Ireland, Northern Ireland and England turn by turn, and professionally aligned with Dublin’s Abbey Theatre, Derry’s Field Day Theatre Company, and London’s Royal Court; playing victimised civilian, soulful IRA gunman, a voice of reason for peace, and psychotic Unionist across his career. Both Cyprus Avenue and Hard Border play directly on Rea’s own mutable ethno-national associations in wider public perception. Drama theorist Martin Puchner has highlighted how the theatre’s dependence of the actor’s own body can problematise the quest for untrammelled mimesis, when the spectator cannot readily distinguish between actor’s and character’s being – here, we might say, when the actor’s own public persona informs, blurs, or bleeds into their performance of another character.  

Cyprus Avenue and Hard Border, however, draw meaningfully on how Rea’s own public persona inflects his stage and screen performances, rather than trying to neutralise it. Indeed, Cyprus Avenue’s discussion of publicly recognised celebrity status applies to Rea almost as much as it does to Gerry Adams himself: “In the times we live in celebrity carries a great deal of symbolism”, Eric observes; the celebrity persona is “not just a person but the idea of a person”, Slim agrees.  

25 Ireland, 65.
“idea” of Rea, as a figure imaginatively inscribed with various competing renderings of ethno-national identity, neatly encapsulates the precarity of a collective existence dependent on repeated performative construction: “another imagination given credence by ritual”, as Rea intones in *Hard Border*. At a historical moment of resurgent anxiety regarding the relative legal and political stability of the Northern Irish identity, when ongoing Brexit negotiations and the British government’s apparent disregard for the terms of the Good Friday Agreement seem poised to topple hard-won ideas of Northern Irish selfhood, *Hard Border* and *Cyprus Avenue* use Rea to unsettling effect.

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