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Perspectives on Practice: A female journey in theatre- an interview with Brenda Winter-Palmer by Ali FitzGibbon

Shonagh Hill

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Corresponding author(s):

Shonagh Hill	*Queen's University Belfast*	S.Hill@qub.ac.uk	https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4753-9065

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Abstract

In this Perspectives on Practice interview edited by Shonagh Hill, Ali FitzGibbon speaks to Brenda Winter-Palmer about her work as a founding member of Charabanc, an all female theatre company. They discuss her later work in supporting young people and young people with disabilities in Northern Ireland theatre. It explores the challenges of being a mother and a care-giver in the arts sector and the ways this has impacted on Winter-Palmer's career choices.

Keywords: carer and theatremaker; theatre-in-education; young people and disability; feminism.

Biographical statement:

Dr Shonagh Hill is a Research Fellow (AHRC funded) in the School of Arts, English and Languages at Queen's University Belfast. Shonagh's current study entitled 'Generations and Feminist Temporalities in Contemporary Northern Irish Performance' encompasses theatre, performance art and dance that have taken place in Northern Ireland in the last five years. Shonagh previously was a Marie Curie Fellow at Queen's.

Dr Ali FitzGibbon, who interviewed Dr Brenda Winter-Palmer for this event, is a Senior Lecturer at Queen's University Belfast and former theatre producer and festival programmer. From 1997 until 2004, she was General Manager of Replay Theatre Company, joining the company 18 months after Brenda's departure as founding Artistic Director.

Perspectives on Practice: A female journey in theatre - an interview with Brenda Winter-Palmer by Ali FitzGibbon

Shonagh Hill

Introduction

In this interview, Dr Ali FitzGibbon talks to Dr Brenda Winter-Palmer, one of the founding members of Charabanc Theatre Company along with Carol Moore, Marie Jones, Eleanor Methven and Maureen McAuley. The interview took place as part of the 'Lay Up Your Ends at 40' events to celebrate the 40th anniversary of Charabanc's first production, *Lay Up Your Ends,* which played to packed houses of cross-community audiences in 1983. Charabanc were one of the most significant and successful theatre companies to emerge in the 1980s: in their twelve-year history, they produced

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eighteen new plays and toured to Germany, Canada, London and the USA. They were an all-women theatre company who produced new writing and were defined by collaborative working practices. They drew on political and popular theatre traditions to address issues of gender and class. After leaving the company, Brenda went on to found Replay Theatre Company [formerly Replay Productions] in 1988, who make theatre for younger audiences.

The topics addressed in the following interview include: Charabanc's legacy; the demands of being a parent, carer and theatremaker; educational theatre; young people and disability; and feminism.

The interview took place at Queen's University Belfast in the Brian Friel Theatre on 25th October 2023.

This edited interview can also be heard as a podcast as part of a series titled 'Women Theatremakers in Northern Ireland'. This series celebrates, and examines the challenges for, women making theatre in Northern Ireland from the 1980s to the present day. You can access the series here

FitzGibbon:

I would like to touch on your time with Charabanc Theatre Company but I'm really keen to talk about what happened after, and how that connects to discussions about legacy and what constitutes a feminist agenda in different kinds of theatre. What prompted your move from Charabanc to the establishment of Replay [1] in 1988?

Winter-Palmer:

I was the only one, when Charabanc was formed, with children. My son Christopher was two whenever I got involved with Charabanc, and I suppose the difficulties of being a parent with a company that was blossoming created a kind of tension with me. What was happening with Charabanc was what I wanted but also it created a lot of problems. Part of me wanted to get out there and do what everybody else was doing, the other part of me longed, when we were on tour, to be back home with my child. So, I suppose it came to a crux when my second son Owen was on the way and, at that time, Charabanc was really taking off. We'd had a session in London at the Drill Hall, and then the prospect of going off to Russia on a fabulous tour came up and I didn't want to miss that so I went. But then my son was born with cerebral palsy, a condition called hemiplegia. And that kind of knocked any prospect of going out of Ireland to tour for a long time because it's hard enough when you're a mother or a parent and you're touring and leaving your small children. It's ten times harder when you know that your child needs you to be there and to do the physical things that need to be done so that they can have a life. So that was it. That was the end of Charabanc for me. It was a wrench. I particularly remember going down to the Peacock Theatre [Dublin] to watch what I thought was one of the most wonderful Charabanc production's, *Somewhere Over The Balcony*,[2] and feeling so torn between wanting to be where they were and knowing I couldn't be. So, I think then I decided I was going to do something about that. All I knew was I had longed all my life to be on a stage creating work. And I had that chance with Charabanc, and it was taken away from me so what could I do? And I believed wholeheartedly in the sort of work that Charabanc was doing. It led me places that I didn't know I was going when we started and we went and looked at the mill girls strike and all of that, and I discovered a world that I didn't know about. So when I found myself in Belfast with everybody else going off to Germany and Canada, I thought, well, okay, I can do the

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same sort of work here with young people. And because I had been a teacher, I taught for three years at St Louise's and my husband was also a teacher, and there was no proper theatre and education service in Northern Ireland, I decided I was going to found one and I chased poor Dennis Smith, the drama director of the Arts Council, round the Ulster Bank! I was very fortunate in that we had decided to do a play about the history of Belfast and that just happened to be the centenary of Belfast as a city. And after I knocked on a few doors, the City Council, for the first time, decided that they were going to put money into the arts and they gave us the money to do a production researched by the late, great Jonathan Bardon, and it turned into a play which Marie Jones scripted. And that was Replay.

FitzGibbon:

Yes. That was Under Napoleon's Nose[3]*.*

Winter-Palmer:

Under Napoleon's Nose. A very simple, probably naive presentation, but it was in the Charabanc tradition in that it spoke in a language that - I wanted our young people to have their own language. I wanted to talk to them in their own language, to show them that our heritage here in the North, which has always been subservient to Anglo-Irish literature and even to the Irish Literary Revival texts. It was always felt that what came from here was too raw, too truthful in a way and not clever enough. So that was one of the motivations: to get the language that I was born and bred into, and that I didn't even know that I wanted to be part of or feel special about, to get that out into schools.

FitzGibbon:

You talked about Charabanc opening up areas that you didn't even know about - did you have a similar trajectory as Replay evolved? What was the driving force? What were the kinds of stories you wanted to tell?

Winter-Palmer:

I was a child of the 1940s Education Act[4], I was a working-class kid from Andersonstown. There was a certain sense of inferiority, I think, always in terms of religion but also in terms of class. I got my 11-plus[5] and went off to Rathmore Grammar [School] but that perception that my background, the way my parents talked was somehow second-rate, was always with me. And I think Charabanc was the catalyst for me to actually embrace the worth of my own heritage and I actually became passionate about passing that on. So it was that direct experience in Charabanc of discovering that my own grandmother had been a mill girl. I didn't know that before we started to research and, I suppose, a certain pride and a sense of place and a sense of worth came with that experience, and I wanted kids to have that experience. I wanted my own kids to have it, but I was never taught any Irish history at school. You know, comedians like James Young were put down, in the same kind of way that I think nowadays *Give My Head Peace*[6] is, not regarded as being worthwhile. Well, a long time later when I went to do my Ph.D., I discovered a language and a rationale for why that had happened. I didn't understand about popular theatre, and Charabanc put the essence of that into me, and I continued that with Replay. But it wasn't until I actually came here [Queen’s University Belfast] and people like Mark [Phelan] and Anna [McMullan] began to open my mind as to what I had actually been doing and why I was doing it and where I was placed politically.

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FitzGibbon:

So was there a political attention that you had which you weren't necessarily able to express?

Winter-Palmer:

Absolutely. None of us in Charabanc were in the remotest bit political to begin with. We just wanted to work. All we could see was that the Lyric Theatre, which was one of the very few places at that time, wasn't employing the likes of us. I just wanted a job. But it opened doors talking to people whose lived experience had a direct effect on me. Sadie Patterson, who was a trade unionist and one of the founders of the Peace People[7], we were put in touch with her and we went to see her one night in her house at the top of the Shankill [Road]. And she talked to us about how lives for the textile workers had actually been. And we came out of there different, we came out of that wee house different. Politicised. And suddenly it wasn't just about getting the job. She said to us, 'there's a story that has to be told, girls, and yous are the ones that can tell it.' That was a challenge but also a weight and it felt just huge. And the more we talked to mill girls and the more we discovered our own backgrounds, the more intense that desire became. I wasn't politicized at all. None of us were until we met people like Sadie and Paddy Devlin[8], as well, who was very helpful to us at the time. I can't overemphasise the effect that Charabanc had on my life, on my being, on my whole sense of who I was.

FitzGibbon:

So you said something about that weight and that sense of telling the stories and being required to tell these stories that hadn't been told. Did you feel that there was a responsibility or duty?

Winter-Palmer:

I still feel it. I felt it for personal reasons. When I went into working with Mixed Peppers Theatre Company,[9] which was a training program for young people with motor disabilities like my son had, that was a funny sort of experience because sometimes you can get too close to the work and it's not always in everybody's interest, but it did a lot of good in its time. I wish I could have continued it, but it was such a draining type of work because of my own personal feelings about it. I found it very, very difficult. But I was working with a brilliant team of actors, some of whom I still work with. I think, as well as history, social justice is what has motivated a lot of what I've wanted to do in my life. When I came here [Queen's University] after Mixed Peppers, I was drawn immediately, thanks to Dr. Paul Murphy who was an expert in the subject, to the life of George Shiels[10], a playwright who was disabled himself, more horribly disabled than I knew before I went into it. I did a practice-as-research Ph.D. about him, which took me to America to talk to his long-lost love. So that impetus was there as well, to actually show [pauses] George couldn't do that whole Abbey [Theatre] thing, you know, first nights. George could not leave his home because he was incontinent and so therefore, he could not go to the Abbey to do what he did. He was not there to dismiss the people who, because he was a writer of popular theatre, would do him down. So yeah, there was a weight. I seem to be drawn to that. And that is a direct connection with Charabanc and also a direct connection to the things that have made me what I am.

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FitzGibbon:

I'm going to roll you back a little bit as I can see there's a thread, which is that the direction and the trajectory of Mixed Peppers and your work on George Shiels has an earlier phase which starts in Replay and the attention to work in Special Schools. Could you tell me a little bit about the origins of the first work that you did?

Winter-Palmer:

It was a very straightforward impetus. I think a lot of people forget this, that Replay, next to the Lyric Theatre in the 1990s, was the biggest employer of actors, writers, designers. So huge work went into that, aided and abetted by my dear friend Jan Branch who is missing tonight but must be paid tribute to. So yeah, it was really, really hard work. We built it up from one production a year, which was secondary school. Then we drew in the primary schools and then we started to work in museums. And then I thought to myself, you know, this isn't fair. This is not fair. What is happening with the Special Schools?[11] And we began work in Special Schools. We developed a team that went out into the Special Schools, stayed there for a week's residency and worked with the kids and they had far too good a time, as far as I can hear, when they were out on the road!

FitzGibbon:

So at the time, with the two tours you did a year, you were probably touring for about 18 weeks a year?

Winter-Palmer:

Oh, more than that. The secondary school was usually about 8 to 10. Same with primary. And then there was so much living history work as well. So probably slightly more than 36. And all over Northern Ireland. We also went to Glasgow. We went down to your mum [Emelie FitzGibbon at Graffiti Theatre Company] in Cork and went to Dublin. Yeah, we got about a bit.

FitzGibbon:

And I remember, when I first met you, it was in Cork and at the time I was working with Graffiti Theatre Company, which was another theatre-for-young audiences company. And you carried a full van full of lights, sound equipment, full sound desk into every school and it was fit up every single day in every venue. And I remember being astonished by this but you had a reasoning for it.

Winter-Palmer:

It wasn't traditional theatre-in-education we did as per the movement in the '60s, '70s, which usually didn't do that. I just, I spoke theatre and theatre is not only words, it's also image and design and light. I wanted that whole experience. My stage management team probably stuck pins into a wax image of myself! It was hard, hard work. But the nature of what we did, very often it was younger actors. And sure, it toughened them!

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FitzGibbon:

There was an interesting sense that it was a theatrical production coming to the school. The one I remember was Anahorish Primary School in Toomebridge, which was so small that the ceiling was only four meters high.

Winter-Palmer:

We just did it everywhere we could. Just adapted. And the craic was great.

FitzGibbon:

And that sense of taking it out into those schools, did that have a similar connection to social justice or was it just the way that you earned your crust? In the sense that it was how the company worked?

Winter-Palmer:

Well, you know, you always have to do the sums and try to work out what you can afford to do. But again, it's just wanting kids to have that experience of theatre.

FitzGibbon:

So all of this period with Replay, you were principally the artistic director, you were driving forward living history programs, there was work in Special Schools, and there were touring programs. And you were writing. You were directing. You weren't performing in the projects at this point?

Winter-Palmer:

I did in the first one. It takes its toll. It's taken its toll on me in terms of my health. I know that for certain. But it was a great craic.

FitzGibbon:

Can I ask you, one of the other things that I noticed from reviewing the early days of Replay, was one of the foundational cornerstones of the company's artistic identity from quite an early stage was that you were also commissioning plays. Gary Mitchell, Damien Gorman, Marie Jones[12]*… What was the driving force?*

Winter-Palmer:

Yeah, it was the same thing. Give them the best that you can give them. I feel so sad that it isn't happening as much now as it used to happen. And we were so spoiled rotten at the time because there was money swimming about left, right and centre, in terms of the Education for Mutual Understanding programme[13]; where the government, desperate for some way of culturally reconciling, for once noted that the theatre and the arts had a huge role to play. I mean, we were getting really healthy sums of money because we … caught the moment.

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FitzGibbon:

So David Grant[14] is here today who also directed productions for Replay and there are other people in that history, people like Richard Croxford.[15] If it was the biggest employer and if the origins of Charabanc are about finding work for women, were there motivations around who you were working with as a company and who you were giving work to, that you were attentive to during that period?

Winter-Palmer:

I suppose we did. I mean, for example, you quoted *Permanent Deadweight*[16] which was for a company of four women but I think probably at that stage my perception was moving beyond feminism and towards disability.

FitzGibbon:

I have a question about how feminist theatre, young people, disability - how are these things connected? Is there a common thread?

Winter-Palmer

Well, it's been well quoted in the literature that Charabanc in the early days sought to distance itself from feminism. We never started out as feminists. Because it was during the Troubles and because Northern Ireland was always so far behind what was happening socially in Britain, we were worried that women in working class areas wouldn't identify with us. So, we were sort of wary of that until we caught ourselves on and said, well, yes, that's who we are.

FitzGibbon:

So would you describe your work since then as having some connection to a feminist agenda?

Winter-Palmer:

Of course, absolutely. I mean, my play *Keep Telling Me Lies*[17] was about the wives of the Showband members and presented a very different interpretation of what women whose husbands are out on the road have to put up with. *Typhoid Mary* as well is also central to feminist ideals in that, Mary Mallon who was Typhoid Mary, unlike other carriers of typhoid, was imprisoned while a lot of men weren't. There's Typhoid Joe as well, but he was never imprisoned. And it had to do with her being a woman, a servant, Irish, unmarried, and damn mouthy. She was wonderful. She did do terrible things, but she was wonderful.

FitzGibbon:

You've worked as an actor, you've worked as a writer, you've worked as a director, you've worked as a teacher of future practitioners and as a researcher so in terms of where you sit now and the different perspectives you have: what do you think has changed for theatre makers in the last couple of decades, since the 1980s and since the formation of Charabanc?

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Winter-Palmer:

That's a big, big question, Ali. I think we are in a better place, but I don't think we're in the best place that we could possibly be. I think the direct influence of Charabanc is that now women form their own companies. I don't think it's by chance that people like Emma Jordan and Paula McFetridge[18] and a lot of the other women, including myself, have formed their own companies. But I'm not sure whether that's not got to do with opportunities they provided for themselves, and whether women have that 'in' to what might be called mainstream theatre. Yeah, I don't think we're there yet.

FitzGibbon:

Do you think that there's a relationship? You've got all these companies set up by women that are not in the mainstream, all at a very similar period of time, for example, Dot Wood setting up M6 [Leeds], Emelie FitzGibbon setting up Graffiti in Cork, Mary Elizabeth Burke-Kennedy setting up Storytellers Theatre Company [Dublin], Gill Robertson setting up Catherine Wheels [Edinburgh] in the 1990s. Are these other forms of theatre that operate in non-mainstream spaces a signifier of what's not there for women? Or a desire to pursue something different?

Winter-Palmer:

No, it wasn't a desire to… It was stretch or starve. Basically, it was do it for yourself or you'll not do it. And I think, having taught so many young women here and watched them go out and have to do what we had to do, is in many ways disconcerting. It's better, it is better in that we now know that we can do those things, and I suppose Charabanc was inspirational in terms of showing that that could be done.

Endnotes

[1] Replay Theatre Company was established in 1988 and are still making theatre for younger audiences. The company develops and tailors its work to engage and inspire four key audiences under the age of 19: from tiny babies in its early years programme, to primary school age children of all abilities and backgrounds, to teenagers journeying into adulthood, and children and young people with diverse, complex, and often multiple disabilities. See https://www.replaytheatre.co.uk/about-us/

[2] First production: 9th September 1987. The play is set in Divis Flats in Belfast.

[3] A play for 14-18 year olds which explores the history of Belfast city. First production: 3rd October 1988, see https://irishplayography.com/play?playid=30069

[4] The 1947 Education Act was part of the post-War social reform programme and designed to increase educational opportunities across secondary and higher levels; notably, it was beneficial to the Catholic minority in Northern Ireland.

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[5] The ’11-plus’ was the state transfer exam undertaken at the end of primary education. This streamed students to secondary or grammar school education. At the time Dr Winter-Palmer took this exam it opened up the possibility of sitting A-levels and going to university, a route not ordinarily open to children who did not pass.

[6] This television series is a satirical sitcom set in Northern Ireland which aired from the late 1980s.

[7] The Peace People was established in 1976 by Mairead Corrigan and Betty Williams, who were joined by Ciaran McKeown. Corrigan and Williams were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1976 for their efforts in trying to encourage a peaceful resolution to the Troubles.

[8] Paddy Devlin (1925-1999) was a founding member of the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), and a socialist, labour and civil rights activist.

[9] Brenda was Creative Director and Script Editor of The Mixed Peppers Theatre Arts Training Programme for young people with disabilities in Northern Ireland (1999–2003).

[10] George Shiels (1881-1949) was a playwright from Ballymoney, County Antrim whose plays were staged at the Abbey Theatre, the National Theatre of Ireland. Shiels used a wheelchair following an accident in 1913.

[11] Special Schools is the name used schools specifically for children with special educational needs (SEN).

[12] They are all award-winning playwrights working in Northern Ireland: Gary Mitchell (1965 -), Damien Gorman (1961 -), Marie Jones (1951 -).

[13] The Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989 introduced Education for Mutual Understanding (EMU). Education for Mutual Understanding is about self-respect, and respect for others, and the improvement of relationships between people of differing cultural traditions (Northern Ireland Curriculum Council, 1990).

[14] David Grant has a long association with youth and community-based arts. He was is a former Managing Editor of Theatre Ireland magazine, Programme Director of the Dublin Theatre Festival, and Artistic Director of the Lyric Theatre, Belfast. He is now a Senior Lecturer in Drama in the School of Arts, English and Languages at Queen’s University, Belfast.

[15] Richard Croxford has acted, written, and directed for numerous theatre companies locally, nationally and internationally. He took over as artistic director of Replay Theatre Company in 2000, succeeding Janice Jarvis who was appointed following Brenda’s departure in 1996.

[16] First performed 16th September 1991 by Replay. See https://irishplayography.com/play?playid=30073

[17] First production: 9th May 2019.

[18] Emma Jordan is the Artistic Director of Prime Cut Productions (established 1992) and Paula McFetridge has been Artistic Director of Kabosh Theatre Company since 2006.

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