

Voices from the Balcony: Power and Resistance in Charabanc Theatre Company's *Somewhere over the Balcony*

Vozes da sacada: poder e resistência na peça *Somewhere over the Balcony* da companhia de teatro Charabanc

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ABSTRACT: This article offers an interdisciplinary analysis of the Irish play *Somewhere over the Balcony*, by Charabanc Theatre Company, based on the concepts of territory, power and resistance. The play depicts experiences of Catholic women residing in a marginalized housing complex of Belfast, amid the political and social conflicts of the period known as the Troubles. Based on close reading methodology, the paper seeks to examine the role of the balconies in the play as territories where the characters exercise (micro) power and resistance in a male-dominated society, as well as to interpret how some of the songs embedded in the plot contribute to this dynamic. The study concludes that the play *Somewhere over the Balcony* offers insights into the complexity of the power relations experienced by the characters, depicting how ordinary people, especially women, can resist and exercise power under the social conditions in which they live.

KEYWORDS: Northern Irish play; women; territory; power; resistance.

RESUMO: Este artigo oferece uma análise interdisciplinar da peça irlandesa *Somewhere over the Balcony*, da companhia de teatro Charabanc, baseada nos conceitos de território, poder e resistência. A peça retrata experiências de mulheres católicas que residem em um complexo habitacional marginalizado de Belfast, em meio aos conflitos políticos e sociais do período conhecido como *the Troubles*. Com base na metodologia *close reading*, o artigo busca examinar o papel das sacadas como territórios onde as personagens exercem (micro) poder e resistência em uma sociedade dominada por homens, além de interpretar como algumas das canções contidas na trama contribuem para essa dinâmica. O estudo conclui

que a peça *Somewhere over the Balcony* oferece percepções sobre a complexidade das relações de poder vividas pelos personagens e retrata de que modo pessoas comuns, especialmente mulheres, podem resistir e exercer poder nas condições sociais em que vivem.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: peça norte-irlandesa; mulheres; território; poder; resistência.

Setting the Scene

“Somewhere: Something Spectacular” was the headline of William Lach’s March 21, 1988, review of Charabanc’s play *Somewhere over the Balcony*, performed during Boston College’s Irish Drama Week. The all-female Irish theatre company took to the North American stage a play featuring three talented actresses who played the roles of working-class Catholic women living in a marginalized area of Belfast. From the balconies of their flats, they observe and interact with a series of daily events and conflicts that take place on August 7th and 8th, 1987, during the anniversary of internment.¹ In a male-dominated society amid the tensions of the conflict that came to be euphemistically known as the Troubles, these female characters attempt to exercise power in and from their balconies: this liminal space from where they express their viewpoints, defy hierarchies and intervene in social events by speaking up, singing and trying to make their voices heard.

Written by Mary Jones in 1987, as part of a collaborative method developed by the Charabanc Theatre Company,² *Somewhere over the Balcony* is regarded as the high point of the company in terms of quality and artistic achievement, combining extensive research, creativity, improvisation, music, a frenetic speed and witty humour. Produced after a series of interviews with the community of the Divis Flats — a housing complex designed for economically disadvantaged people of Belfast — the play offers a reflection on the experiences of Belfast Catholic women who lived in this chaotic environment. There, their ordinary lives mingled with political conflicts and violence while under the surveillance of the omniscient presence of the British army post on a high-rise tower. It is from the characters’ voices that the audience becomes aware of the “bizarre kind of existence that passes from normality when people are trying to live in a crazy, incomprehensible, uncontrollable situation”, as stated by Claudia Harris (2006, p. xiii).

¹ Internment refers to the Operation Demetrius (internment without trial), introduced in Northern Ireland by a unionist government on August 9th, 1971, during the Troubles. The internment involved arrests of Catholics and nationalists (Moriarty, 2019).

² According to Claudia Harris (2006), the groups’ method consisted of i) identifying social or political issues; ii) conducting research involving interviews and document and record analysis; iii) crafting the play; iv) writing and rewriting; v) rehearsing on stage.

Somewhere over the Balcony was first performed by the Charabanc Theatre Company at the Drill Hall in London in September 1987, while the Irish premiere took place at the Arts Theatre in Belfast in November of the same year (Irish Playography). It was published in the collection *The Charabanc Theatre Company: Four Plays*, edited by Claudia Harris (2006), alongside three other plays: *Now You're Talking*; *Gold in the Streets*; and *The Girls in the Big Picture*.

Since its premiere, the play has received limited attention from critics. Maria DiCenzo's early article, "Charabanc Theatre Company: Placing Women Center-Stage in Northern Ireland" (1993), for example, reclaims centre-stage for Charabanc's work, including *Somewhere over the Balcony*, marking the company's tenth anniversary while it was still active at the time. The article presents "an overview of the company's origins, aims, working methods, and productions, with a specific focus on the strategies the group has employed in trying to reach and communicate with audiences (DiCenzo, 1993, p. 177).

The study by Katarzyna Ojrzynska, "Defying Maintenance Mimesis: The Case of *Somewhere over the Balcony* by Charabanc Theatre Company" (2018), more theoretically grounded, investigates how the Troubles are represented in *Somewhere over the Balcony*, "making reference to Luce Irigaray's definitions of mimesis and mimicry, and the ways in which these concepts respectively reinforce and challenge the phallogocentric order" (Ojrzynska, 2018, p. 137). Imelda Foley, in turn, published an interview with Marie Jones in *The Girls in the Big Picture: Gender in Contemporary Ulster* (2003), commenting on Jones's work with Charabanc and briefly discussing *Somewhere over the Balcony* as a significant textual legacy by Jones.

Fiona Coleman Foley also mentions the play in the chapter dedicated to Charabanc in *Political Acts: Women in Northern Irish Theatre, 1921-2012* (2016), describing it as "one of the most significant examples of cross community acceptance", given "the group's ability to interview Catholic women from the nationalist Divis flats for their play" (Foley, 2016, p. 85). She further explains that members of Charabanc "came from both Protestant and Catholic backgrounds, creating a unique model for an integrated, non-sectarian theatre group" (Foley, 2016, p. 85). Interestingly, Foley acted as producer in the revival of the play in with Balcony Productions in Belfast in 2007. "To my mind it is Marie's best play, in terms of subtext and imagery, where complete mayhem, posing as normality, is a metaphor for the extremes which become acceptable within unacceptable situations", she affirmed at the time (apud Falvey, 2007, n. p.).

There are other texts that mention the play, but it remains relatively unexplored in the history of Irish theatre while being mostly addressed by female critics. In Brazil, for instance, Bastos and O'Shea (2010) included Brenda Winter's article "Charabanc, Cultural Capital and the Men of Recognised Credit" in the volume of the periodical *Ilha do Desterro* dedicated to contemporary Irish theatre. Winter, a founding member of Charabanc, compares "the cultural legacy of the all-female Charabanc with that of Field Day, its fellow counterpart in the Irish Theatre touring movement in the 1980s" (Winter, 2010, p. 439), the board of which was entirely male. The piece, although not directly concerned with *Somewhere over the Balcony*, comments on the neglect of Charabanc by critics and publishers alike.

The plot of *Somewhere over the Balcony*, composed of two acts, does not revolve around a single conflict. Instead, it offers the audience a multifaceted view of what women from this community witnessed and experienced in their ordinary lives: (i) structural problems, such as poor housing conditions and inadequate infrastructure; (ii) domestic and ordinary personal matters, including husband-wife relationships, weddings, and children upbringing; and (iii) political tensions such as the constant surveillance from the British army, 'choppers'³ flying over their flats, arrests, violence, and siege. As Maria DiCenzo argues:

All of the bizarre events that take place are described in vivid detail from the perspective of the main characters who watch and direct from their balcony. Sound effects of traffic, helicopters, and television sets contribute to the chaotic world of the play (DiCenzo, 1993, p. 181).

Furthermore, DiCenzo (1993, p. 181-182) draws attention to the fact that spectators of *Balconies*⁴ "[...] are never allowed to lose sight of the violence (psychological and physical) done to the lives of women daily". Regarding women's experiences, Harris (2006, p. x) states that "*Women's power* [emphasis added] and resilience, regardless of the circumstances are consistent in Charabanc's work". In her turn, Ojrzyńska (2018, p. 137) states that the characters "[...] transform the balconies of their flats into an area of creativity and *empowerment* [emphasis added], which challenges binary thinking about the division into private and public space". With that in mind, we pose the following guiding question for this

³ Informal word the characters use for British helicopters.

⁴ The play is also referred to as *Balcony* in Harris (2006).

paper: How do these Irish working-class women who live in a marginalized area of Belfast endeavour to exercise power and resistance?

In the book *History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault (1988) presents a series of propositions to explain the nature of power. The philosopher claims that no one possesses power; rather, power is something that is exercised in any relation, and it is embedded in the context of other social, political, economic relations. With regard to resistance, Foucault claimed that it is intertwined with power and should be understood as defence for freedom, given that power relations only exist among free individuals. In this paper, we aim at examining the role of the balconies as territories of the character's (micro)power and resistance within the social and political context they live, and to interpret how some songs contained in Mary Jones's play contribute to understand it.

Ane Ohrvik (2024, p. 247) explains that "We read to make sense of something. While decoding the system of signs to enable the readability of a text, posing questions gives further purpose and direction to our reading. Searching for answers to our questions helps to clarify the text and gives it meaning". Therefore, regarding the specific objectives and the methodology implied, we seek to close read the play from an interdisciplinary perspective, especially, but not exclusively, through the lens of the concepts of territory (Raffestin, 1993), power and resistance (Foucault, 1988), and analyse some of the songs contained within the plot — more precisely, the songs "Why do you watch me?", "Hear, see and speak no evil", "They were just newly wed" and "Out there somewhere".⁵ To follow this intent, we first present some key aspects of the Charabanc Theatre Company in order to situate *Somewhere over the Balcony* in their canon.⁶ We, then, provide a brief contextualization of the Divis Flats during the Troubles to set the scene in which the plot is unfolded.

***Somewhere over the Balcony* Background: Charabanc, the Divis Flats and the Troubles**

Charabanc was founded in 1983⁷ by five Belfast-based actresses (Eleanor Methven, Carol Scanlan, Marie Jones, Brenda Winter, and Maureen Macauley), who decided to create their own company as a response to the lack of meaningful and satisfying opportunities for women acting in Irish theatres in Belfast. Bastos (2007, p. 79)

⁵ The songs in the play were written by Mary Jones and the musician Rod McVey. Not every song has an explicit title in the plot.

⁶ We deliberately use the word canon to highlight Charabanc's legacy to Irish Theatre.

⁷ The company disbanded in 1995.

states that the founding of the Charabanc company “was a landmark in the history of female contribution to theatre in Ireland after 1950, considering that the first half of the twentieth century can be regarded as a period when there was a relative lack of contribution by women to the Irish theatrical scene”. In a similar vein, Brenda Winter, reflects that their “[...] indignation at not being able to work as actresses in their own place” (Winter, 2010, p. 450) was the driving force behind their decision to embark on this new enterprise. At that time, women were largely confined to supporting or minor roles in a male-dominated theatrical industry.

Facing unemployment in the theatrical field, the members of Charabanc decided to produce and stage their own plays by adopting a collaborative methodology grounded in research and reflection about experiences of Belfast women. As Bastos notes (2007, p. 82), most of their plays “depicted the lives of women as characters, either in Belfast or in rural settings, who invariably occupied the centre of the stage”. This way, in DiCenzo’s words, “Their interest in doing a history of the women of Belfast led them to interview women of their mothers’ and grandmothers’ generations and to local libraries” (DiCenzo, 1993, p. 177). Thus, both the company’s name, derived from the holiday motor coaches traditionally used by working-class women for excursions out of Belfast and the plays they created, which consistently placed women at the centre of narratives, reveal Charabanc itself as a territory where women would be heard and represented (Ojrzyska, 2018). The group, however, did not label the company as “feminist”, partly to avoid polarizing reactions to its productions and encourage broader community engagement. Women’s empowerment remained central to its productions and reflected the actresses’ own social condition, though (Ojrzyska, 2018). Moreover as Fiona Coffey observes, “given the history of plays and performance venues associated with Protestant or government rule, Charabanc was decidedly cross-community and purposefully performed in loyalist and republican neighbourhoods as well as more neutral performance spaces” (Coffey, 2016, p. 85), an aspect that she considers to be extremely important in the company’s identity.

William Lacht points out that “*Somewhere Over the Balcony*, Charabanc’s theatrical ‘presentation’, is as much a realistic drama about those caught amidst ‘the Troubles’ in Northern Ireland as it is a witty black comedy on the subject” (Lacht, 1988, p. 21). This way, the broader political and social context of the plot sheds light on power relations during the Troubles.

The Troubles refer to sectarian conflicts in and around Northern Ireland that lasted from about 1968 to the late 20th century and early 2000. They ended after

a series of political and diplomatic efforts known as Peace Process, aiming at reducing violence and fostering cooperation between opposing communities. In broad terms, the conflict was grounded on issues regarding identity, as well as disputes on who should rule over Northern Ireland: on one side, Unionists loyal to the British Crown (loyalists), who were mostly Protestant, and, on the other, nationalists who wanted an independent and United Ireland (republicans), who were largely, but not exclusively, Catholic. The conflicts were also grounded on social inequalities, given that Catholics living in Northern Ireland did not have the same civil rights that Protestants did, particularly considering housing and voting.

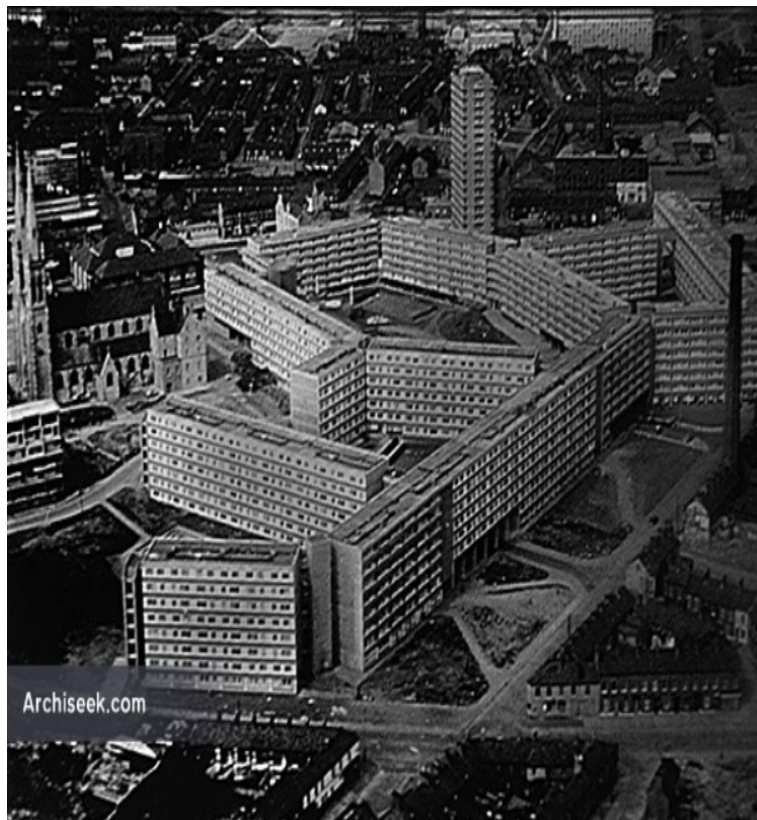
In this respect, Joe Lee explains that “In February 1967 the new Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA) [...] formulated a programme which included one man, one vote, in local elections; no gerrymandering of constituency boundaries; [and] fair distribution of local council houses [...]” (Lee, 1989, p. 420). The NICRA coalesced with other groups in the organisation of a civil rights march in that same year “to protest against specific cases of housing discrimination” (Lee, 1989, p. 420). The march achieved wide publicity and encouraged other marches in Belfast and Derry, which culminated in the famous Bloody Sunday in Derry on 30 January 1972, “when paratroopers killed 13 men” (Lee, 1989, p. 440). Moreover, “the quest for answers about Bloody Sunday”, argues Diarmaid Ferriter (2004, p. 689), “centred around questions of political motivation and responsibility for the killing of 13 unarmed civilians on a civil right march, a march that had been prompted by an anger at internment affecting the working-class”.

All that raised a deep resentment in the Catholic community, as well as lots of social problems and division, which fuelled clash and waves of violence. According to Megan Roy (2007), the Troubles should be examined not only in terms of identity, but on “inherent questions of socio-economic inequity that were established over 400 years ago, through the British plantation system” (Roy, 2007, p. 3), which, as she points out, favoured Protestant settlers coming mainly from Scotland back in the 17th century. Lily Petersen (2023, n. p.) argues that “[...] specific neighbourhoods and buildings have acquired a certain status in the public consciousness of the Troubles. One of the most notorious of these is Divis Flats”. Located in a marginalized area of Belfast (Lower Falls Road, West Belfast), The Divis Flats were a housing project constructed to solve problems regarding housing shortages after the World War II.⁸ They were designed as “[...] a complex of 12

⁸ The Divis Flats no longer exist. Demolition of the flats started by the end of the 1980s as a response to the frequent conflicts occurred in the area. Nowadays, only the Tower Block remains.

interconnected eight story deck access blocks and one 20 story tower, the top of which doubled as a base for the British Army” (Roy, 2007, p. 1). Concerning the housing conditions of the flats (Figure 1), their design contributed to the lack of privacy and feeling of insecurity among its residents, for, according to recent studies, most of the doors were oriented toward the top of the Divis Tower (Roy, 2007).

Figure 1 — Divis complex



Source: Archiseek.com.⁹

In the context of the political problems in Northern Ireland regarding the social inequalities between Catholics and Protestants, most of the residents from the flats were self-identified as Catholics (98%) and people depending on welfare assistance

⁹ Available from: <https://www.archiseek.com/1969-divis-flats-belfast-co-antrim>. Accessed on: 19 May 2025.

outnumbered 51 percent of its residents (Roy, 2007). Ojrzyńska (2018, p. 140) corroborates this, noting: “Divis Flats came to be known as a Catholic ghetto which provided very poor housing conditions”. The following excerpt from the play highlights both the condition of the characters’ flats — specifically the lack of privacy — and Kate Tidy’s devotion to saints, a practice commonly observed among Catholics:

KATE. Ceely, you know the state of my walls. Would you tell your ones to keep their ghetto blasters down a wee bit? I don’t mine one, but four going at the same time...

CEELY. Why don’t you tell them to keep their choppers down?

KATE. It’s terrible. Everytime I sneeze they tremble. I ’ve done four novenas, lit six candles, Mena Mackle is doing a daily vigil to St. Teresa, the two wee holy sisters from the Tower Block are doin’ ‘Our Lady of Perpetual Succour’, and wee Bridie is coming round the night to rub them down with Padre Pio’s mitt. (Jones, 2006, p. 186).

Although Mary Jones does not explicitly refer to the Divis Flats in the script of *Somewhere over the Balcony* — the setting is referred to as “Balconies in tower block council flats, Belfast” (Jones, 2006, p. 182) — it is from that reality that ideas for the events embedded in the plot were gathered. As Harris (2006, p. xiii) states, “The setting is reminiscent of but not exclusively to the run-down Divis Flats in Catholic Belfast; company members want the association to be broader than the Divis Tower blocks”.

Power and Resistance in *Somewhere over the Balcony*

According to Foucault, power should not be understood as something which belongs exclusively to the State or to authority figures, for it is not merely a dynamic between dominators in an opposition to the dominated ones. Instead, power is action and practice, it is the effect of a relation of forces that emerge from multiple points, from the micro to the macro levels. In his words, “It seems to me that we should understand power, firstly as the multiplicity of correlations of force immanent to the domain where they are exercised and which constitute its organization” (Foucault, 1988, p. 88, our translation).¹⁰ Crucially, he stated that whenever power is wielded, there is resistance.

¹⁰ From the version in Portuguese: “Parece-me que se deve compreender o poder, primeiro, como a multiplicidade de correlações de força imanentes ao domínio onde se exercem e constitutivas de sua organização”.

For the geographer Jean-Claude Raffestin (1993), power constitutes an intrinsic dimension in every social relation, in line with the perspective of Foucault, for whom power permeates all the spaces, insofar as it emerges from every relation. Raffestin (1993) argues that power consists of a process of exchange and communication which is established when two points, actors or forces confront one another. The force mobilized through this interaction takes the form of what Raffestin defines as the *champ du pouvoir* (“field of power”), a concept influenced by the Foucauldian notion of relational power.

Territory, in Raffestin’s view, emerges as the result of the exercise performed by a given actor within a field of relations. In this sense, territories do not correspond solely to physical or material dimensions, but rather to a space upon which an action or energy is projected, thereby revealing relations which are permeated and structured by power (Raffestin, 1993). By explaining that territories are products and representations of power being exercised in relational spaces, he echoes Foucault’s propositions, since a territory “is a production derived from space. As such, this production, due to the multiple relations it involves, is inscribed within a field of power” (Raffestin, 1993, p. 144, our translation).¹¹ Hence, we argue that the balconies of Mary Jones’s play can be viewed as territories where the characters exercise their micro power, in other words, power wielded by social actors who do not hold authority in wider public spheres.

The opening lines of the character Kate Tidy in the first Act introduce the atmosphere of surveillance of the Divis Flats, which are watched by the Tower: “I remember when the British army moved into that Tower ... my Frank says ‘Them bastards are watching us’. ‘Says me, “they must have bloody good eyesight cos they are fifteen floors up”. ‘Cameras’, he says. ‘close up cameras’” (Jones, 2006, p. 183). This atmosphere is reinforced in the first song of the play, contributing to set the tone and portray their feeling in relation to this “panoptical character of the surveillance” (Ojrzynska, 2018, p. 147):

Why do you watch me? I won’t do no wrong.
Just mind my own business and wish you were gone.
You hear every whisper, each move that I make.
And when I am sleeping, you’re always awake.
You’re there every morning every hour of the day
I’ve nowhere to run to, I just gotta stay.

¹¹ From the version in Portuguese: “É uma produção, a partir do espaço. Ora, a produção, por causa de todas as relações que envolve, sé inscreve num campo de poder”.

I can't see your eyes, I can't look on your face,
But I feel your presence all over this place.
Why don't you leave me for my peace of mind?
You don't belong here, not one of my kind.
Go back where you came from, I 'm tired of your stare.
I can't have my freedom until you're not there. (Jones, 2006, p. 183).

The lines from the song explicit that the presence of the British in the tower creates a feeling of imprisonment for the characters who express their desire to be free not only from their stare, but also from all the violence and constraints they impose. Furthermore, they emphasize who should belong to that area (and to Ireland) and who should not. For the Catholic residents, the British Army was an enemy, which raised their feeling of insecurity. This is explicit in the lines: "Go back where you came from, I 'm tired of your stare. / I can 't have my freedom until you are not there." (Jones, 2006, p. 184). Power is here enacted by the authority of the British Army, as well as the feelings it evoked among the residents of the flats, represented by the characters. Following Petersen (2023),

The flats quickly gained a reputation for violence, with a British Army base built on the roof of Divis Tower in 1972. This observation post was used for surveillance of the flats themselves, as well as the greater Lower Falls Road (Page 13-14). Soldiers lived on the top two floors of Divis Tower, and supplies were transported by helicopter (Alfaro & Roulston 28) (Petersen, 2023, n. p.).

Likewise, in Act I, when characters are talking about the wedding of a pregnant neighbour (MacAldooney), Ceely, the ironic widow, recalls some memories of the day she got married, back in 1969. The British army was already imposing constraints on them: "Then we couldn't get home here cos the Brits had this place cordoned off while they were raidin'" (Jones, 2006, p. 198). According to Roy, "[w]hether or not military still monitors the community to such an extent is certainly debatable, but the Panopticon-like paranoia that has become engrained in the minds of the Falls residents is undeniable" (Roy, 2007, p. 2).

Despite this surveillance and living under the 'threat' of having their walls demolished, Kate, Ceely and Rose Mary offer their perspectives from the events they witness, and they use the 'weapons' they have. Ceely, the ironic widow, for instance, spies on the British soldier with her binocular and runs a bingo with her pirate radio station. She is a defiant and outspoken woman who seems to have awareness of her strengths:

CEELY. I could have been somebody if it hadn't been for looking after him... Not even my friggin' da... could be calling out numbers in the Silver Star Bingo, makin' somethin' of myself. Oh, but I know what he wants... me to shut up too so that nobody says nothin' to nobody ever again, but I am a communicator, that's me, that's my way. My Big Tucker used to say that to me when he had a few drinks on him. 'Ceely, you are a 'Mouth' (Jones, 2006, p. 207).

As DiCenzo (1998, p. 181) observes about Ceely,

[...] the most active and resourceful of the three, communicates with and announces the bingo for her neighbours by means of a pirate radio, tries to billet sixteen visitors who have come for the internment anniversary events, runs a souvenir shop of British army paraphernalia, and uses holy water to shave Granda Tucker when the plumbing fails".

As the plot unfolds, it is also Ceely who comments on a neighbour called Mena Mackle, a woman who deserved respect for being an example of resistance, for she would rattle her bin to warn men that the British were approaching and would refuse to please or comply with their presence: "She never gave in. She stood all alone and rattled her bin. When biscuits and cream buns were passed all around, she warned us beware of that vile English crown... She is famous. That's the only woman on the Falls Road never to make a cup of tea for a Brit" (Jones, 2006, p. 185).

In this passage, the women's resistance relies on their speaking up, daring to raise their voices against the British from their balconies and using their 'domestic' weapons to defy the power imposed on them. In Ojrzyńska's words (2018, p. 143), "During the Troubles, one of the roles given to women consisted in keeping a look-out and warning men against the approaching British forces by banging bin lids". Petersen corroborates this argument: "This is only one of many examples of resistance against the security forces. When soldiers tried to carry out raids, women would rattle pot lids off the balconies to alert the surrounding area, and children would throw trash" (Petersen, 2023, n. p.).

Moving forward to the final song of Act I, the characters defy the British power amid the 'jungle law' of the Divis Flats. There is a wedding taking place in the community while they see, from their balconies, the British army approaching to arrest someone. They sing along: "Hear, see, and speak no evil / Don't think we *monkeys* are scared. We're too busy gathering berries / To see what we never saw / or hear what we never heard" (Jones, 2006, p. 200, emphasis added). There is a musical break and the character Ceely cries out Marty to run away over the chapel and borrow the priests' vestments to scape. In this passage they sing the

second section of the song, from which I highlight the following excerpt: “Hear, see, and speak no evil / *We eat bananas* instead. / The *lion’s* never gonna catch us” (Jones, 2006, p. 200, emphasis added). The characters refer to the British as the lions that they must resist. These verses, thus, invoke a discourse of the colonial period, during which the Irish people and ‘others’ were represented as inferior to the British (the lions) and compared to monkeys. This can be seen in a satirical cartoon “The British Lion and the Irish Monkey” (Punch Magazine, n. d.) printed in the English illustrated periodical *Punch*, which was published from 1841 to 1992 and 1996 to 2002 (Britannica Editors, 2004).

In Act II music also becomes a tool for defiance, when Ceely deliberately sings a song to distract the British Army while siege is taking place at the chapel. The stage directions indicate that the character has come to the idea of singing a song as a strategy to summon them to take action:

Ceely (*as she sings she looks up at the army post as if the song is a code*)
 They are just newly wed.
 They went upstairs to be.
 He turned the lights down low.
 Cos she was rather shy.
 He said come here my dear
 She said no fuckin’ fear.
 I’d rather stay down here
 Among my souvenirs.
 (*the word souvenirs prompts them into action. Kate runs behind the screen and appears with a C.S. gas gun.*) (Jones, 2006, p. 212).

These women are not merely attentive observers of the microcosmos of the Divis Flat, with all the contradictions embedded in that reality. They exercise power from their balconies, a territory which does not restrict them to the domestic sphere and, at the same time, does not belong to the public place controlled by men. As Ojrzyńska argues (2018, p. 144), “The balcony may be seen as a liminal space — a borderland between male-dominated, public and stereotypically female, private space”. The power of the women in the balconies resides in — and emerge from — the microsphere shaped by their knowledge of the ordinary life of the flats, entangled with the social and political problems during the Troubles.

Regarding the centrality of women in Charabanc’s plays, the company rejected the idea that women’s stories were secondary or that they should merely support male-roles. Harris (2006, p. xxix) notes that for the Charabanc “Women are allowed

to be weak, strong, angry, nurturing, superstitious, knowledgeable, naïve serious, funny, loving, and earthy. Charabanc plays place no limit on the role. In each [play], female characters seem fully aware of their power and are willing to use it”.

After a series of confusing events the characters watch and interact with, in this atmosphere of tension and conflict, as the ‘story’ unfolds, the characters seem to express their desire to be somewhere else. In the final scenes of the play, the characters sing along a song called “Out there somewhere”, which is an analogy to the ballad “Over the rainbow”, by Harold Arlen with lyrics by Yip Harburg, written for the 1939 film *The Wizard of Oz*. As they sing, Rose, Ceely and Kate voice their desire of a life elsewhere, far from all the turmoil and violence and social problems surrounding them, of place “where *Trouble* [emphasis added] melts like lemon drops”, and where they might find peace and comfort, “warm and cosy whatever the weather”, far from the Brits and from the Troubles:

ROSE. Out there somewhere, there’s gardens with fences and little oak benches.

CEELY. Women with husbands, loving and caring

KATE. Children in college, reading and learning

CHORUS: Out there on the ground

They are all sleeping sound tonight

Out there on the ground.

[...]

Over here in the air

The army are spyin’

Cameras are pryin’

Touts they are lying’

Choppers are flyin’

But we are defiant

Over here in the air (Jones, 2006, p. 218).

In this regard, *Somewhere over the Balcony* may as well be related to the film *The Wizard of Oz*, an adaptation of Lyman Frank Baum’s book *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, in which the young female protagonist, Dorothy Gale, struggles and somehow challenges powerful forces (of magician and witches) to find her way back home, after being transported to the strange Land of Oz (Lowne, 2025).

Thus, the contrast between the harsh realities these women face from their balconies and the life they long for elsewhere sets a melancholic tone throughout the play. As unprivileged women who persevere amid political tensions and the constant lack of privacy imposed by the British, they highlight their difficult

circumstances, and, yet, stand up and sing along “We are defiant over here in the air”, affirming their resistance against all odds.

Final Words

Charabanc’s *Somewhere over the Balcony* offers insights into the complexity of power relations and depicts how ordinary people, especially women, can resist and exercise power through strategies and mechanisms available to them within their social condition. As DiCenzo has put it (1993, p. 182), “By focusing on women, Charabanc’s plays foreground trench warfare in the domestic sphere and highlight the role played by working-class women in day-to-day survival”. This thought-provoking play, therefore, sheds light on the lived realities of social and political upheaval during the Troubles. The poignant words of the promotional booklet for the first production perhaps best express this:

When outsiders ask us what it is like to live in Northern Ireland we tend to say that it is quite normal really. We say that people just go about their business, live their lives, get on with it. We say this to dispel images of constant gun-battles, riots, explosions and the rest. And to some extent it’s true. But when violence becomes long-term, institutionalised and with no foreseeable end, when people have lived all or most of their lives in a ‘war-zone’ everything changes — especially the definitions of what is normal. The parameters of sanity shift and the idea arises that violence has reached an acceptable level. [...] Some people accept that they cannot change the big things and work on the things that they know and understand and feel they can influence. Some go for escapism — literally in emigration or with material distractions or seek the oblivion of drink, drugs or just pull down mental shutters. Some use the situation for glory or profit. These ways of coping are dramatised in a black comedy by Charabanc Theatre Company which examines that bizarre kind of existence that passes for normality when people are trying to live their lives in a crazy, incomprehensible uncontrollable situation (*Somewhere over the Balcony*, Programme, n. d., n. p.).

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