

# THEATRICAL RESPONSES TO WALL BUILDING: DAVID HARE, ROBERT SCHENKKAN, STACEY GREGG<sup>1</sup>

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Abstract: This article examines how the issue of building walls in conflict zones has been addressed in the work of contemporary dramatists, focusing on three plays that differ both as regards the depicted geographical and political circumstances as well as the formal and aesthetic choices made by their authors. David Hare's *Wall* (2009) discusses the separation barrier erected by Israel in the West Bank, and was performed by its author as a stage reading. Robert Schenkkan's *Building the Wall* (2017) is a dystopian two-hander envisaging the impact of Donald Trump's anti-immigration policies exemplified by the development of the "wall" along the U.S. – Mexico border. Finally, Stacey Gregg's neo-expressionist drama *Shibboleth* (2015) centres around the building of yet another "peace wall" in post-Troubles Belfast. Analysing the plays in their respective socio-political contexts, the article considers theatre as a platform on which imaginative scenarios dealing with the impact of conflict on human interaction may be created and tested. It argues that like Chantal Mouffe in her plea for agonistic pluralism, the plays emphasise the crucial role of passions in supporting aggressive oppositional views, and ultimately assert the need to rejuvenate democracy by including extreme political positions in an agonistic debate. Within this framework, the article turns to the concept of performativity and its uses in discussions of theatre. It acknowledges the productivity of the concept as regards matters of form, convention and innovation; yet, it points out that similar affective impact may be achieved and an analogous political impulse communicated regardless of the kind of theatrical performativity that is at play. What is truly vital as regards contemporary political theatre, however, is its juxtaposition with what Jacques Derrida has termed "the originary performativity" which is inherent in "an injunction that comes from the wholly other" and bears potentially radical implications for future democracy.

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Keywords: separation barriers, wall building, David Hare, Robert Schenkkan, Stacey Gregg, agonistic pluralism, performativity

Before I built a wall I'd ask to know  
What I was walling in or walling out [...]  
Robert Frost, "Mending Wall" (1914)

## Introduction

The tendency to build walls and fences along territorial borders goes back deep into history, with the Great Wall of China or the walls built along the fringes of the Roman Empire being only some prominent examples. However since the early 1960s, physical separation of communities in places of conflict has become an increasingly popular solution also in numerous urban contexts (such as Nicosia or Belfast), and in more recent years, several states have proceeded to fortify their borders with fences and military measures reminiscent and often superseding the Iron Curtain during the Cold War.<sup>2</sup> Restricting the movement of people, these more recent territorial separations have occurred in a wide variety of contexts. Many arose as a security measure in places of violent ethno-political conflict, increased terrorist activity, or threatening large-scale immigration – including the fences erected or proposed around European Union borders during the 2015 migration crisis – sometimes combined with issues of organised crime, such as the U.S. – Mexico border.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, barriers erected in urban areas have often been designed to enclose socially disadvantaged neighbourhoods in order to protect the more affluent inhabitants from the poor, not only around the slums of Rio de Janeiro or Buenos Aires but also in a number of European cities.<sup>4</sup> While the declared concerns about security have mostly been legitimate, what has increasingly become part of the picture over the last decade or so are domestic agendas associated with populist rhetoric, whereby political leaders have been scoring points through divisive nationalist, anti-immigrant and socially conservative agendas.

It has been generally recognised that whatever the specific reason for their construction, walls and fences entrench divisions rather than providing a viable long-term solution. Tracing the idea of partitioning territories “as an answer to

<sup>2</sup> See Cathy Gormley-Heenan, Jonny Byrne and Gillian Robinson, “The Berlin Walls of Belfast,” *British Politics* 8 (2013): 359-61.

<sup>3</sup> Some further examples are listed in Gormley-Heenan, Byrne and Robinson, “The Berlin Walls of Belfast,” 361.

<sup>4</sup> See Gormley-Heenan, Byrne and Robinson, “The Berlin Walls of Belfast,” 360.

ethnic, national, and sectarian conflict” back to the discussions of ethnicity, nationality and citizenship during and after the First World War, and positioning it against “a backdrop of European imperial politics,”<sup>5</sup> Arie M. Dubnov and Laura Robson have argued that partition as a political practice has never resolved the problem, and that past attempts at enforcing “homogeneity as a condition of viable statehood [...] now stand as some of the greatest tragedies of the twentieth century.”<sup>6</sup> This is certainly true, and some of Dubnov and Robson’s conclusions may be extended to include most areas where segregation has been introduced due to social rather than political friction. However, relatively little attention has been paid to the practical issues concerning the immediate future following the removal of physical barriers in areas where separation has existed for an extended period of time. Even places where a long-term conflict officially ended a decade or two earlier present considerable challenges in this respect; as Jonny Byrne and Cathy Gormley-Heenan have pointed out about contemporary Northern Ireland, “For the post-ceasefire generation the ‘abnormal has become normal’ and their understanding of what constitutes peace is viewed very much through a lens that is defined by physical division and permanent segregation.”<sup>7</sup> While liberal political and community leaders insist on a speedy removal of fences and walls, they often ignore the impact that has already accrued and importantly, fail to investigate the views and conditions of the people who have been living in close proximity to the barriers.<sup>8</sup> It should be acknowledged that in such contexts, even the old saying that “good fences make good neighbours” might have its validity.

This article examines how the issue of building walls in conflict zones has been addressed in the work of contemporary dramatists, focusing on three plays that significantly differ both as regards the geographical and political circumstances that they depict as well as the formal and aesthetic choices made by their authors. David Hare’s *Wall* (2009) discusses the separation barrier erected by Israel in the

<sup>5</sup> Arie M. Dubnov and Laura Robson, “Introduction: Drawing the Line, Writing Beyond It – Toward a Transnational History of Partitions,” in Arie M. Dubnov and Laura Robson, eds, *Partitions: A Transnational History of Twentieth-Century Territorial Separatism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019), 1.

<sup>6</sup> Dubnov and Robson, “Introduction,” 27.

<sup>7</sup> Jonny Byrne and Cathy Gormley-Heenan, “Beyond the Walls: Dismantling Belfast’s Conflict Architecture,” *City* 18, no. 4-5 (2014): 453.

<sup>8</sup> This has been the focus of much recent research on the divided city of Belfast. For a detailed study of contemporary attitudes to the removal of physical barriers, see John Dixon et al., “‘When the walls come tumbling down’: The Role of Intergroup Proximity, Threat, and Contact in Shaping Attitudes Towards the Removal of Northern Ireland’s Peace Walls,” *British Journal of Social Psychology* 59 (2020): 922-44.

West Bank, and was performed by its author as a stage reading. Robert Schenkkan's *Building the Wall* (2017) is an intimate, dystopian two-hander envisaging the impact of Donald Trump's anti-immigration policies exemplified by the development of the "wall" along the U.S. – Mexico border. Finally, Stacey Gregg's neo-expressionist drama *Shibboleth* (2015) centres around the building of yet another "peace wall" in post-Troubles Belfast. Analysing the plays in their particular socio-political contexts, the essay considers theatre as a platform on which causes of separation may be examined, as well as a space in which imaginative scenarios dealing with the impact of conflict on human interaction may be created and tested. The scenarios presented in the plays under discussion are ultimately related to Chantal Mouffe's concept of agonistic pluralism: the essay argues that by making their audiences understand and empathise with individuals holding divisive views, these plays assert the need for the inclusion of such opinions in an agonistic debate in the hope of reinvigorating democracy. With this framework in mind, the argument turns to the concept of performativity and its uses in discussions of theatre. It acknowledges that the concept is productive when related to matters of form, convention and innovation; yet, as the present comparative study indicates, similar affective impact may be achieved and an analogous political impulse communicated regardless of the kind of theatrical performativity that is at play. What is truly vital as regards contemporary political theatre, however, is its juxtaposition with what Jacques Derrida has termed "the originary performativity"<sup>9</sup> which is not only inherent in "an injunction that comes from the wholly other,"<sup>10</sup> but also cautions as regards the nature of future democracy.

### **David Hare, *Wall***

David Hare's short monologue, *Wall*, in many ways builds on his earlier play about the Israeli – Arab conflict, *Via Dolorosa* (1998). In that play, Hare strived to give an account of the roots of the conflict as well as the debates current in Israel and Palestine several years after the signing of the Oslo Accords, opting for the format of a self-performed documentary drama which he regarded as the most honest. *Wall*, a play that focuses specifically on the construction of a wall separating Israelis and Palestinians in the West Bank during the Second Intifada (2000-2005) and the years following, uses the same style of narration involving

<sup>9</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994), 30.

<sup>10</sup> J. Hillis Miller, "Derrida's Special Theory of Performativity," in *For Derrida* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009), 155.

frequent direct address to the audience, and organises actual experience and research results into a clearly devised narrative arc like *Via Dolorosa* did. However, this time Hare decided against acting and merely read the monologue from the stage of the Royal Court Theatre.

Hare's view on the separation barrier – originally proposed by Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin in 1992 with significant construction work beginning in 2002 – is made clear right at the onset: citing the fact that 84% of the population are in favour of building the wall as a sign of “the depth of despair,” Hare summarises that “four-fifths” of the population have ended up “saying something completely bizarre.”<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, he also acknowledges that as a security measure, the wall seems to have worked, at least initially: “Eighty per cent of terrorist attacks against Israel have stopped.” (30) He proceeds to outline the history of the separation barrier and its trajectory, and discusses its impact on Palestinian residents as well as its frequent protective role for Israeli settlements. Then he returns to the issue of efficacy as a security measure, arguing that in this sense the wall has now become essentially useless, as Palestinian militants have shifted their tactics from suicide bombings to firing cheap rockets across the barrier. The playwright gives the final words of the monologue to the Israeli novelist David Grossman who emphasises the crucial role of imagination if the grim situation is to be altered: “Now we have terrible trouble imagining any other reality than the one we live in. [...] We are living in order to survive, not in order to live. / I want to begin to live. I want some gates in the wall.” (47)

Hare's play fulfils a principal objective of contemporary documentary (“verbatim”) theatre, which is to serve as “an accurate source of information” involving as little “bias and inflection” as is required of good journalism, with the author being bound by “their own sense of honour and integrity.”<sup>12</sup> The affective efficacy of the play in performance was arguably enhanced by David Hare's status as a celebrated playwright and distinguished public intellectual, since it may be safely assumed that very few of those who disagree with his views, distrust him or cannot stand his personality have attended the performance. With that in mind, the affective impact of the play appears at its strongest when the author-performer communicates to the audience his first-hand experience of the arbitrary approach of Israeli soldiers at checkpoints (34), observing the gradual expansion of the

<sup>11</sup> David Hare, *Berlin/Wall* (London: Faber, 2009), 29. Further references to this edition are given in parentheses in the text.

<sup>12</sup> Will Hammond and Dan Steward, “Introduction,” in Will Hammond and Dan Steward, eds., *Verbatim, Verbatim: Contemporary Documentary Theatre* (London: Oberon Books, 2008), 10.

settlements on hilltops (and concluding that “They’re called settlements, but in fact they’re plantations” as well as “a network of control”; 39, 40), or seeing a poster of Saddam Hussein – a secular leader with “a matchless record for killing Arabs” (42) – in a café in the Hamas-dominated town of Nablus (“Well, Saddam stood up to the Americans,” his embarrassed local guide explains; 43). The closing passage concerning the normalisation of the abnormal in the place of intractable conflict, and the final underscoring of the importance of imagination for the removal of the wall, physical as well as figurative, are vital, although Hare refrains from more specific suggestions concerning the future. The format of a monologue delivered by a well-known public intellectual underscores the position of authority from which it is delivered regardless of the speaker’s level of expertise, but as argued above, its positioning within the genre conventions of verbatim theatre implies trust in the accuracy of information that is imparted as well as the honesty of the performer.

### **Robert Schenkkan, *Building the Wall***

Robert Schenkkan wrote his nightmarish play in October 2016, shortly before Donald Trump won the U.S. presidential election for the first time.<sup>13</sup> In his introductory note to the published play script, Schenkkan makes it clear that he intended the drama as a rallying call:

In *Building the Wall* I have imagined a near future in which President Trump’s incendiary rhetoric on immigration and border security has found its full, even logical, expression. [...] To those who insist this could never happen again, and certainly not here, I reply, maybe so, but that of course will depend entirely on what you do.<sup>14</sup>

The play premiered in Los Angeles in March 2017 as part of the National New Play Network Rolling World Premier, with simultaneous production in four other theatres across the USA, and within its first year received over 60 productions in the U.S. as well as being performed in Canada, Mexico, Sweden, Austria, Iran and the UK. Contrary to what the author’s note might imply, *Building the Wall* is not a simple agit-prop piece. It is a cleverly devised two-hander in which a historian, Gloria, comes to record the testimonial of a demoted prison governor, Rick, who

<sup>13</sup> Robert Schenkkan, “A Note from the Writer,” in Robert Schenkkan, *Building the Wall* (London: Oberon Books, 2018) n.p.

<sup>14</sup> Schenkkan, “A Note from the Writer,” n.p.

is awaiting sentence in a high-security prison in El Paso. The action takes place in 2019 and as the details of what Rick has committed are unravelled, the conversation about present-day America gradually swerves into a dystopian narrative. It turns out that shortly after Trump's election, the government launched the large-scale programme of deportation of illegal immigrants that Trump had promised. However, as the extent of the arrests was massive and Mexico and other countries refused to accept the deportees, the capacity of the detention facilities became insufficient, notwithstanding the establishment of private prisons like the one that Rick was in charge of. The overcrowding and lack of medical care led to the spread of cholera and other diseases, while the revenue of Rick's superiors continued to increase from contracts for construction work on detention facilities.<sup>15</sup> Shortly after, bodies were being illegally incinerated en masse, and ultimately, the improvised incineration facility near Rick's prison was turned into a gas chamber in which detainees were exterminated, implementing a final solution to the illegal immigration issue. Extreme as Schenkkan's multiple analogies with Nazism might sound, they in fact only prefigure the contested but prominent comparison of Trumpism to fascism that entered mainstream intellectual discourse in and about the U.S. shortly after the play was conceived.<sup>16</sup>

Gloria, an African American whose life was deeply influenced by an experience of racism as a child, explains to Rick that she has embarked on a quest to find out what exactly sets major changes in history in motion. Her belief is that "mostly it's just ordinary people in a moment of decision. Every landslide begins with a single rock suddenly in motion." (10) For her, the present moment constitutes precisely such a historical turning point and Rick represents that small rock that has triggered a landslide – this is why it is "critical" to understand him, and why he did what he did (10). Crucially, Rick is presented as intelligent and a fine match in this respect to Gloria the academic, dispelling the ever-present myth that only those with a limited mental capacity or insufficient education support demagogues and authoritarians and may be driven to violence.

The principal achievement of Schenkkan's play is its affective efficacy in making the audience perceive a racist and ultimately perpetrator of atrocities as human. This is achieved by Gloria and Rick establishing, after initial hesitation, mutual rapport and having an open conversation characterised by respect for one another. However, Schenkkan skilfully maintains psychological credibility by not

<sup>15</sup> Robert Schenkkan, *Building the Wall* (London: Oberon Books, 2018), 39. Further references to this edition are given in parentheses in the text.

<sup>16</sup> See the popular work of Jason Stanley and Timothy Snyder and the critique by their opponents.

having Rick – who is white – entirely abandon his racial prejudice on the one hand, and on the other, by having Gloria ultimately disrupt their rapport in order to overtly demonstrate to Rick the extent to which supremacist views have had a dehumanising effect on him – she challenges Rick about the part of his story that he has failed to mention so far, which is that he had a decommissioned airliner, nicknamed “Air America,” placed behind the gas chamber in order to give the detainees the impression that after they had been “processed” inside, they would be put on the plane home (50-51).

Despite the play’s title, the actual wall between the U.S. and Mexico that Donald Trump promised to build in order to stop illegal immigration is barely mentioned in the play. Thus, it is implicitly regarded as a mere symptom of the real issue, which is antagonistic, populist rhetoric being used to access power and revenue. Even a cursory glance at the history of physical separation on the U.S. – Mexico border confirms the accuracy of this assessment. While the first fences erected along parts of the border were introduced already in the 1910s to regulate the movement of people between the two countries, it was the Nixon administration in 1969 that heavily militarised the border in an attempt to curb drug-trafficking. Measures against organised crime continued to be stepped up at the border but it was only after 9/11 that the Bush administration began focusing the rhetoric around the border increasingly on illegal immigration, arguing that the border represented an entry point for terrorists. Ever since, the issue of building the wall has been predominantly a matter of U.S. domestic politics, with Republican Presidents emphasising the need for the wall and Democratic Presidents arguing against it at least in principle.<sup>17</sup> All through that time, the border has remained heavily militarised and the erection of further segments of the barrier has essentially never stopped. As Dennis Soden and Alejandro Palma have pointed out, however, the level of illegal immigration into the USA has really been tied to the state of the economy rather than to the exact shape of the physical barrier on the border, displaying a significant drop after the 2008 fiscal crisis for instance.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, the degree to which a fence or a wall can deter terrorist threat to the USA is questionable; as Soden and Palma conclude, “The fence as a surrogate for protection against these forces is failed policy at best[,]” which is true also for “narco-terrorism and transnational gangs.”<sup>19</sup> In a monologue that Rick

<sup>17</sup> See, for instance, Dennis Soden and Alejandro Palma, “Are Walls a National Security Issue? A View from the United States – Mexico Border,” in Alberto Gasparini, ed., *The Walls between Conflict and Peace* (Leiden and Boston, MA: Brill, 2017), 147-52.

<sup>18</sup> Soden and Palma, “Are Walls a National Security Issue?” 150-52.

<sup>19</sup> Soden and Palma, “Are Walls a National Security Issue?” 153, 155.

delivers at the end of Schenkkan's drama, the inefficacy of the expanded wall proposed by Trump is confirmed in simple terms: "You can't really build a wall that big and that high to keep people out if they really want to get in." (52)

### Stacey Gregg, *Shibboleth*

Stacey Gregg's *Shibboleth* was originally commissioned by the Goethe Institute and the Dublin Abbey Theatre in 2008 for the upcoming twentieth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall but remained unproduced until October 2015, apparently due to projected high production costs.<sup>20</sup> The eleven-hander finally opened at the Peacock stage of the Abbey Theatre in an updated version, directed by Hamish Pirie. Unlike Hare's *Wall* or Schenkkan's *Building the Wall*, Gregg's play is stylistically quite complex. It is a full-length drama to be performed at a fast pace, featuring overlapping scenes, frequently heightened language, choral passages, and music. Its style is perhaps best described as expressionist, with the proviso that Gregg replaces the typical central conflict between an individual and society with one involving a multiplicity of characters colliding with and questioning the values of the world they live in.<sup>21</sup>

Set in the present, *Shibboleth* depicts the building of yet another extension of a peace wall in Belfast by a group of local workers, well over a decade after the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 officially terminated the violent conflict in Northern Ireland. By using this central motif, Gregg highlights the paradox that the number of separation barriers has continued to grow rather than decrease in peace time. Initially introduced by local Republican and Loyalist communities in the form of improvised barricades when the violence erupted in 1969, peace walls and fences were constructed by the British Army in Belfast under an official security policy from the early 1970s.<sup>22</sup> Although the exact numbers are often contested, the British

<sup>20</sup> See Alexander Coupe, "Defiantly Mercurial: An Interview with Stacey Gregg," *Honest Ulsterman*, 22 February 2021, <https://humag.co/features/defiantly-mercurial>.

<sup>21</sup> Clare Wallace has described the style as "self-consciously neo-Brechtian." Clare Wallace, "Set Piece, Set Peace? Negative Emotions and the Possibility of Change in Recent Stage Images of the North," in Paul Fagan, Dieter Fuchs and Tamara Radak, eds., *Stage Irish: Performance, Identity, Cultural Circulation* (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2021), 236.

<sup>22</sup> Gormley-Heenan, Byrne and Robinson, "The Berlin Walls of Belfast," 361-63. As David Coyles, Brandon Hamber and Adrian Grant have documented, this policy was accompanied by a confidential process of military security planning as part of which other forms of spatial segregation were introduced in 1977-1985 using "retail, office and industrial buildings, as well as infrastructure such as footpaths, roads, and landscaping, to control vehicular and pedestrian movement and to physically separate residential

Army and Northern Ireland Office constructed 39 barriers by the end of the 1990s, with a further 3 peace walls erected and 16 extended or rebuilt in the next decade; moreover, separation barriers were constructed also by other bodies such as the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, Belfast City Council and the Police Service of Northern Ireland, bringing the general total close to 100 and comprising over 21 miles of walls and fences by the early 2010s.<sup>23</sup> In 2013, Northern Ireland Executive announced a government strategy whereby all peace walls were to be removed by 2023. This top-down decision officially responded to the well-attested divisive impact of spatial segregation on communities;<sup>24</sup> however, it clearly reacted also to international perspectives and pressures, as voiced prominently during President Barack Obama's visit to Northern Ireland in 2013.

Gregg opens *Shibboleth* by having an extract of Obama's speech in Belfast play over the foundations of the peace wall that is in construction; Obama is heard declaiming: "We need you to get this right. And what's more, you set an example for those who seek peace of their own. [...] People living in the grip of conflict – ethnic conflict, religious conflict, tribal conflicts – and they know something better is out there. You're their blueprint to follow."<sup>25</sup> The irony of the situation couldn't be more palpable; moreover, when the local government strategy to remove all peace walls by 2023 comes up in a discussion among the construction workers some moments later, they all are profoundly sceptical (16).<sup>26</sup> They represent local citizens living in the proximity of the walls, whose perspective the decision makers rarely bother to take into account, and who are actually much less convinced about the removal of the barriers; in a survey conducted in 2012, most

areas." David Coyles, Brandon Hamber and Adrian Grant, "Hidden Barriers and Divisive Architecture: The Role of 'Everyday Space' in Conflict and Peacebuilding in Belfast," *Journal of Urban Affairs* 45, no. 6 (2023): 1058.

<sup>23</sup> Gormley-Heenan, Byrne and Robinson, "The Berlin Walls of Belfast," 364. A 2017 review conducted by Belfast Interface Project – an NGO – put the overall total still at 97 separation barriers. See Dixon et al., "When the walls come tumbling down," 923.

<sup>24</sup> See Northern Ireland Executive Office, *Together: Building a United Community Strategy*, The Executive Office (Northern Ireland), 2013, <https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/publications/together-building-unitedcommunity-strategy>, 1-2 and passim.

<sup>25</sup> Stacey Gregg, *Shibboleth* (London: Nick Hern, 2015), 6. Further references to Gregg's play are to this edition and are given in parentheses in the text.

<sup>26</sup> Indeed, very few barriers disappeared by 2023; a recent estimate has put the number of those dismantled "over the last decade" at 18, with some others "reduced or modified" – see Rory Carroll, "Belfast's Peace Walls: Potent Symbols of Division Are Dwindling – But Slowly," *Guardian*, 7 April 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/apr/07/belfasts-peace-walls-potent-symbols-of-division-are-dwindling-but-slowly>.

local residents did not want the barriers to “come down now,” with only 44% supporting the idea of their removal “in the future.”<sup>27</sup>

Taking into account that some audience members may not be familiar with the details of spatial segregation in Northern Ireland, Gregg has one of the brickies explain to his child in Scene One what a peace wall is: “It’s a big twelve-foot-high wall between Themens and Usens, to keep the peace.” (7) When confronted with his young son’s logical question as to why he is building a wall when there has been peace for over two decades, the father shrugs: “I dunno, suppose people like the idea of them. They paint them up dead nice, with murals about all the peace we’re havin. They bring the tourists in.” (8) This statement is meant to be matter-of-fact rather than cynical although the irony involved is again apparent, particularly as Gregg references the notorious local form of dark tourism that has become increasingly more widespread since the 1998 peace agreement, with visitors being driven around interface zones in Belfast to take pictures of sites of violence, peace walls and political murals.

The principal reason why Alan – the father – takes part in building the wall, however, is revealed in the simplest terms in Scene Two: “[I]t’s a JOB.” (18) The precarity of employment, further aggravated by the impact of the global fiscal crisis in 2008, is indeed emphasised many times in the play: the construction workers do not participate in building the separation barrier primarily for sectarian reasons – they often debate the need for the walls, sounding reasons for and against it – but ultimately keep on building since they need the income. One of Gregg’s targets clearly is the widely held belief that material well-being will naturally result in social harmony, or in Clare Wallace’s words, “the narrative of peace as prosperity.”<sup>28</sup> This belief is represented in the play by the Councillor, a local woman who has successfully moved up the social ladder and now supervises the extension of the peace wall in her area. She argues that “We’re transitioning to a post-conflict economy. And economic growth means stability.” (60) However, the manifestations of economic growth that she quotes as an example are quite telling: “Few years ago ya couldn’t get yourself a latte in Belfast City.” (60) Moreover, she argues that further walls need to be built because “security drives up the value of the land” (61). While the argument that real estate value is going to increase in interface areas if security is guaranteed might sound plausible, early-stage research in the issue seems to contradict the assertion, showing that house

<sup>27</sup> The figure went down from 44% to 35% by 2015, with an increased number of respondents preferring “things left the way they are now” (22% in 2012 as opposed to 30% in 2015). See Dixon et al., “When the walls come tumbling down,” 926.

<sup>28</sup> Wallace, “Set Piece, Set Peace?” 237.

prices still mostly decrease with the proximity to the separation barriers.<sup>29</sup> Most importantly, the construction workers are right in challenging the Councillor's assertion that "everyone'll feel the trickle-down benefits" (61) – while the living standards of the more affluent inhabitants of Belfast have undoubtedly improved since the peace agreement, "considerable socio-economic disadvantage" has continued to characterise the residential areas inhabited by the less-well-off near the peace walls.<sup>30</sup>

As the title of Gregg's play indicates, it is concerned with markers of entrenched collective identity. Rather than querying the identity narratives of militant Loyalists or Republicans, however, Gregg focuses on beliefs that are mostly determined by social status, from those of middle-class decision makers like the Councillor to the views of working-class male labourers. The latter are characterised by an antagonistic mindset (for instance, an integrated school means "Themens"; 29), homophobia (the integrated school is associated with "gay stuff"; 30), xenophobia (manifest in the aversion to the new Polish worker on the site) and toxic masculinity that endorses violence as well as superior attitudes to women. Yet, Gregg shows that such attitudes have resulted from ingrained behavioural patterns, nationalist and populist rhetoric (a brickie greets the Polish worker Yuri as follows: "Look what the European Union brought in." 32) as well as precarious employment. Indeed, one of the feats achieved by Gregg's play is making the audience empathise with Mo, an outstandingly prejudiced and violent young man, whose views are first contextualised by showing his dire domestic circumstances and ultimately by making him a victim of a brutal attack, as a consequence of which he commits suicide. Moreover, the verbal and physical violence does not happen between "Usens" and "Themens" – in fact, the only member of the other community behind the wall that the audience ever see, briefly, is a child that Alan's son Darren talks to through a gap in the wall towards the end of the play. Like in Hare's and Schenkkan's dramas, the wall is ultimately shown to be symbolic of the entrenched attitudes that are the real issue, a point that is powerfully signalled in Mo – a man victimised by members of his own community – being physically devoured by the wall onstage (80), with his feet left protruding from the wall as a memento (82).

Ending as it does with brutal assault on an immigrant woman, a savage beating of a young man followed by his suicide, and the wall completed, *Shibboleth*

<sup>29</sup> See John McCord et al., "Belfast's Iron(ic) Curtain: 'Peace Walls' and Their Impact on House Prices in the Belfast Housing Market," *Journal of European Real Estate Research* 6, no. 3 (2013): 333-58.

<sup>30</sup> See, e.g., Coyles, Hamber and Grant, "Hidden Barriers and Divisive Architecture," 1058.

may not seem overly optimistic about the future. Nevertheless, the play tentatively signals some hope as well. Alan responds to the violent incidents by agreeing to his son being sent to the integrated school and deciding to quit his job on the construction site (73-74). Despite the harrowing experience of the violent attack, Yuri's daughter Agnieszka intends to stay in Belfast and continues to cherish her dreams of becoming a graphic designer, and is asked by Alan to give Darren dancing lessons (75, 85). Finally, Darren's openness to friendship across the dividing line has already been noted, and his opposition to the accepted ideas about masculinity is shown multiple times in the play, including his tentative explorations of queer sexuality as early as Scene Two. These hopeful moments are carefully qualified by Gregg though, particularly by having the wall that has just been completed symbolically cut through the grounds of the integrated school. Vitaly, Gregg in fact "offers the dilemma of transformation" to spectators in a central moment of "fourth-wall rupture," to use Wallace's words<sup>31</sup> – when the Councillor suggests that "change is possible," Stuary, the brickies' foreman, responds: "No love. Things don't change[,]” and the stage directions indicate a break in stage action: "A breath. Somewhere a rook caws. A car passes. [...] Has someone forgotten their lines? They glance about, out at the audience, uncertain." (59)

The reception of the Abbey production of *Shibboleth* was mixed, with commentators noting a lack of coherence in the play which, although perhaps an intended strategy, still inhibited the effect of the play. As Peter Crawley has put it, "It doesn't all work: some adventurous sequences are needlessly extended, while striking devices, such as a symbolically realised smoke break, are later discarded for the real thing. But a restless, playful approach that resists coherent identity seems to be the point here, perhaps even the antidote."<sup>32</sup> It may be argued though that the problem was perhaps the lack of a clear overall vision on the part of the director rather than the play itself. Gregg's stage directions are often speculative, offering mere suggestions. Hamish Pirie made some fine directorial decisions, such as having the brickies construct the wall of descending colour blocks in the course of the performance "as though engaged in a manual game of *Tetris*,"<sup>33</sup> placing a display on stage flashing information about separation barriers around the world, or having children run on stage in the final scene to bring out the tentative

<sup>31</sup> Wallace, "Set Piece, Set Peace?" 237.

<sup>32</sup> Peter Crawley, "DTF Review – *Shibboleth*: Examining the Walls That Run through Northern Irish Heads," *Irish Times*, 8 October 2015, <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/stage/dtf-review-shibboleth-examining-the-walls-that-run-through-northern-irish-heads-1.2383813>.

<sup>33</sup> Crawley.

hopeful note in the play. Yet as noted, stylistically the production seemed quite uneven, while the decision to have the wall – who is written as a character in the play – performed by the soul and blues singer Cara Robinson created some controversy. Robinson's singing and performance were generally praised; however, the problematic gendering eventually gave rise to an entire book chapter on the subject by Justine Nakase who has summarised: "By gendering the Wall as feminine the production displaced the source of violence from the men, undermining the idea that it is their own unexamined and internalised histories of violence that need to be confronted and interrogated [...] for real change to come."<sup>34</sup> Clearly, a more considered casting decision would have been appropriate, and perhaps even a more adventurous one than having the wall embodied by a single actor. Sadly, no theatre has reached for *Shibboleth* since the time of its first production, despite the fact that the play has lost little of its relevance.

### Conclusions: Walls, Agonistic Pluralism and Performativity

Stylistically different as they are, all three plays feature crucial points of intersection as regards separation barriers in places of conflict. All three figure the wall – in their different ways – as a metonymy, suggesting that the erection of physical barriers is merely indicative of larger issues arising mostly from divisive, antagonistic thinking. They also demonstrate that walls and fences in places of long-term intercommunity tension only entrench the already existing divisions and often aggravate them. Furthermore, they point out the inefficacy of walls as a security measure. Finally, *Shibboleth* in particular examines the consequences of ignoring the living conditions and perspectives of those residing in the proximity of the walls.

All three plays appeal to the spectators' imagination, inviting their considerations of whether and under what circumstances social equilibrium might be achieved in contexts ruptured by antagonistic attitudes. In thinking about the issue, Chantal Mouffe's notion of agonistic pluralism is quite germane: as Mouffe argues, "the aim of democratic politics is to transform potential antagonism into an agonism," perceiving those holding different views from one's own as adversaries in a debate rather than "enemies to be destroyed."<sup>35</sup> While the

<sup>34</sup> Justine Nakase, "Unconscious Casting: Stacey Gregg's *Shibboleth* (2015), Walls, and the (En)Gendering of Violence," in David Clare, Fiona McDonagh, and Justine Nakase, eds., *The Golden Thread: Irish Women Playwrights, 1716-2016, Volume 2 (1992-2016)* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2021), 206-7.

<sup>35</sup> Chantal Mouffe, "Democratic Politics and Conflict: An Agonistic Approach," *Política común* 9 (2016): n.p., <https://doi.org/10.3998/pc.12322227.0009.011>.

antagonisms around which Hare's, Schenkkan's and Gregg's dramas revolve are very real rather than merely potential, all three plays emphatically gesture towards the need to rejuvenate democracy – not exactly along the lines promoted by Mouffe (whose recent focus has been on the need for radical left-wing protesters to engage in instead of dismantle institutions of representative democracy) but rather vis-à-vis far-right populism. Like Mouffe, they emphasise the crucial role of passions – as well as inherited patterns of antagonistic thinking – in supporting aggressive oppositional views, and ultimately assert the need to reconstitute democracy by including extreme political positions in an agonistic debate. This they achieve by strategically making the audience empathise with individuals holding unacceptable views, recognising that these views are held by people, not monsters, and demonstrating why it is that they came to think this way; this is particularly true of Rick in *Building the Wall* and the xenophobic brickies in *Shibboleth*, but even Hare's *Wall* features such a moment, in having the audience consider the reasons for the display of the Saddam Hussein poster in the besieged city of Nablus (42-43).

The stylistic diversity of the plays under discussion prompts a question about the uses of performativity as a concept in the context of theatre – beyond the obvious fact that all theatre is by nature performative, that is. By the 2020s, the term has suffered from considerable inflation in scholarly discourse, as evidenced, for instance, by Chris Salter's complex chart of "epistemes of performativity"; as Salter points out, performativity is a "slippery concept, operating across various epistemic and ontological registers and scales."<sup>36</sup> Moreover, addressing the frequency with which the term has been used over the last few decades across the humanities, Hillis Miller has quite persuasively challenged the frequent conflation of performativity as conceived in J.L. Austin's pioneering speech act theory with performativity in the performing arts, or, for that matter, Judith Butler's use of the term in relation to the social construction of gender.<sup>37</sup> While Austin's and Butler's concepts of performativity are of little relevance to the present argument, a consideration of the kinds of theatrical performativity that mark the three selected plays in terms of form, convention and innovation still appears productive, since in order to examine causes of separation, as well as presenting (Schenkkan), suggesting (Gregg) or at least hinting at (Hare) imaginative scenarios pertaining to areas of polarisation and conflict, each play features a distinct way of performing its central concerns.

<sup>36</sup> Chris Salter, "Epistemes of Performativity," *Performance Research* 25, no. 3 (2020): 8.

<sup>37</sup> Miller, "Derrida's Special Theory of Performativity," 133-73.

Robert Schenkkan uses a very basic theatrical form, staging an agonistic dialogue between a bigoted member of an oppressive state apparatus operated by white supremacists, and a black historian, utilising chiefly the power of language in order to chart the dystopian consequences that may result from the lack of individual responsibility.

When approaching the Israeli-Arab conflict in the late 1990s and considering what an adequate dramatic form might be, David Hare mused at length about the adequacy of art in the face of suffering, violence and atrocity. His dilemma was reflected in the performance of *Via Dolorosa*, where he exclaimed: "What is a painting, a painting of a starving man? What is a painting of a corpse? It's the facts we want. Give us the facts."<sup>38</sup> However, in that play as in his other works, he continued to work as a playwright rather than a historian or social scientist, structuring actual events into an artistic shape and taking liberties with some of the facts. As he explained in a later essay, his point was not about abandoning art and theatre but rather about constantly looking for new forms in order to make the work truly relevant and revelatory; as he asserted, "The enemy of art is not reality, but formula."<sup>39</sup> While verbatim theatre may have been a relatively fresh form when *Via Dolorosa* was written, questions may perhaps be asked in this respect about *Wall*, produced over a decade later and replacing theatricality with the public lecture format. Be that as it may, *Wall* also relies chiefly on language, even more so than Schenkkan's two-hander, although not so much in order to consider consequences of inaction but rather to facilitate an immediate experience of the increasing tensions in Israel – Palestine.

Stacey Gregg had to write her drama against a persistent tradition of the "Troubles play" which stretches back into the early 1970s and has been perceived as clichéd for quite some time.<sup>40</sup> Like Hare then, she tried to avoid formula, but she did it in a considerably more audacious manner, using expressionist techniques to create an innovative form that would be adequate to the task of performing the current state of segregation in Northern Ireland and charting possibilities for a more hopeful future. However, her aesthetic is heavily reliant on finding a director with a strong vision that would harmonise with her writing (as well as a theatre with an appropriate budget, one might add) which, regrettably, is yet to happen.

<sup>38</sup> David Hare, *Via Dolorosa & When Shall We Live?* (London: Faber, 1998), 38.

<sup>39</sup> David Hare, "Why Fabulate?" in David Hare, *Obedience, Struggle & Revolt: Lectures on Theatre* (London: Faber, 2005), 85.

<sup>40</sup> See Mark Phelan, "From Troubles to Post-Conflict Theatre in Northern Ireland," in Nicholas Grene and Chris Morash, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish Theatre* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 372-73.

What *Wall, Building the Wall* and *Shibboleth* share is a desire to impart information about extremely polarised social and political contexts while generating affective responses from spectators that would trigger serious engagement with views that most would dismiss as toxic, together with the individuals holding them. Their performative strategies notwithstanding, when these works are considered as artistic interventions at a time of fundamental political crisis, they should be juxtaposed with a notion of performativity that is truly significant for contemporary theatre aimed at a reconstitution of democracy, however: Jacques Derrida's "political performative as a response to an injunction that comes from the wholly other."<sup>41</sup> Derrida defines it specifically as "the pledge or the promise [...], the originary performativity" solicited when time is "out of joint."<sup>42</sup> The importance of this concept does not consist merely in highlighting the impulse for the performative that comes from the other and delineating it as a pledge. Vitaly, Derrida's argument is based on a deconstruction of eschatological thinking about the future predicated on a belief in a clear aim or end (in this case, an idealised notion of democracy functioning on agonistic principles). His concept of "originary performativity" thus features an apposite caveat: it inaugurates a future that is unpredictable, including an unforeseeable "democracy to come."<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Miller, "Derrida's Special Theory of Performativity," 155.

<sup>42</sup> Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 30-31.

<sup>43</sup> Miller, "Derrida's Special Theory of Performativity," 152-53.

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