

Charabanc: Digging for gold on the Nazareth stage

By Emily Morrison

Charabanc Theatre Company's current Nazareth Arts Center production of *Gold in the Streets* prospects for more than precious metal or even the windfall of public acclaim the facetious Northern Irish might term "money from America." Direct from Belfast, the play's four female principals work an alchemy on contemplative audience members that leads us to confront the depths of our own latent prejudices and cultural conditioning.

For my own part, I found myself fascinated by the irony of watching these astute performers "explode the myths" inherent in my own situation. A Protestant writing for a Catholic paper often feels like something of a stranger in a strange land. In America, a fair degree of religious tolerance makes acceptable such apparent contradictions in terms.

Not only did I find myself setting out after the July 3 opening night performance to interview the members of a Northern Irish theater company that admits both Catholic and Protestant actors into its ranks and plays in its native land to mixed audiences. As Charabanc member Eleanor Methven, herself a Protestant, explained to me the historic background of what the Northern Irish have termed "the troubles" these last 20 years or so, I also realized that we shared a common heritage. Descended from the same emigrant Scottish farmers who forcibly populated the countryside surrounding Londonderry at the behest of the English Queen Elizabeth I, I concluded with a start that I, too, must own up to the collective guilt of Northern Ireland's colonial oppressors, even some four centuries after the fact.

My forefathers left Northern Ireland for the American South during the 18th century, among the successive waves of economic exiles who, as the Charabanc Theatre Company's 1986 North American Tour booklet points out, are Ireland's "most constant export." Just as the British had subjugated the native Irish population in their perennial quest for empire and natural resources, so the new American settlers displaced the native Indian population and employed African slave labor to further their own colonial aims.

Now, of course, I'm more American than Scotch-Irish. In the land of opportunity, we tend to base our prejudices on more visible differences than allegiance to pope or crown — and my racially bigoted Southern forebears were, sadly, no exception.

As in our own country, Irish schoolchildren learn history from books that present a distorted view of the past. "The Irish are taught the British version of history," says Methven, a founding member of Charabanc Theatre Company. "The British view is that if you can divide a population, you can rule them better. Irish Protestants were led to believe that Catholics are lazy and dirty, and that the Catholic religion was magic, sorcery. One of our goals is to explode a few of the myths."

The diaspora of Irish Catholics is the subject of the trilogy of playlets that comprises *Gold in the Streets*. The play tells the stories of Agnes Mullan (1912), Mary Connor (1950) and Sharon McAllister (1985), forced to leave their homes for a combination of economic and sectarian reasons. "Ireland is largely a rural country," says Methven, who portrays both Agnes Mullan and Sharon McAllister's husband. "Most of the poverty was on the Catholic side, because they weren't given jobs and had large families to support. One son might get into the priesthood, if he could get a scholarship; otherwise, a Catholic family couldn't afford his education. That left perhaps three other sons, and there'd be nothing for them. So the reason for the exodus is poverty, yes, but it's sectarianism underneath."

A sentiment repeated frequently in the play echoes the sense of resignation that actress and playwright Marie Jones expresses through the voices of her Protestant characters. "Don't blame me. It's just the way things are," she quotes her Belfast cab driver in the second part of the trilogy. Even though the British have attempted to institute some degree of reform, and civil service jobs are now given primarily to Catholics through an affirmative action program Jones says is known as "positive discrimination," sectarian strife still persists. Violence is particularly rampant among a new generation of young Protestants who, as Jones points out, "don't understand the reasons why the hatred exists." The play is an attempt to show audiences that everybody is responsible in some way for the country's troubles, Jones adds.

In theaters all over Northern Ireland, says Methven, the company has been very well



Charabanc Theatre Company members participating in the group's current North American Tour are, from left, Rosena Brown, Eleanor Methven, Carol Scanlan and Marie Jones, who wrote *Gold in the Streets*. The play runs through July 20 at Nazareth Arts Center.

received by members of both factions. "In Belfast and Derry, the two main cities, we have a lot of public housing community centers, either solidly Catholic or Protestant," she explains. "They're central meeting places for social activities. When we play at the housing estates, we play to one side or the other. In the small towns, it's always a mixed audience. The population there is not as widely divided as Belfast is, geographically."

The sense of challenge such performances inspire in a mixed audience is almost palpable, according to Marie Jones. "You can feel it from the stage," she says. "The ordinary people from those working class areas love it. I'd say you get more flack from middle-class people."

"When we knock bigotry, we're knocking the power structure," Methven adds. "The middle class are more likely to be offended."

"Working-class people have nothing to lose," offers Carol Scanlan, who, like Jones and Methven, is a founding member of the company and has appeared in all of its productions. Ironically, the troupe was formed out of a common frustration among its future members over lack of employment. Much like black actors in America who decry the dearth of meaningful dramatic roles for minorities, Charabanc's actresses found that many of the roles available for women of their age group were stereotypical.

"There was no acting school in Belfast," says Scanlan. "We tried to start one, and found the five of us were the only ones who turned up." Charabanc was formed more out of a desire to find work and stave off boredom than from any intentional plan to found a theater company or produce their own material.

The company's five original members approached prominent Belfast playwright Martin Lynch, who suggested they write something themselves. The result was *Lay Up Your Ends*, the story of the Belfast mill strike of 1911. The play was co-written by company members in 1983 from taped interviews with male and female mill workers. Out of this research meth-

od came Charabanc's tradition of working from oral history and making it accessible through the medium of popular theater.

"Action for Community Employment, a government scheme to provide more jobs, provided a lot of the company's wages for the first year," says Methven. "Probably we've been successful because we didn't have any grandiose ideas." The play the group is now presenting at Nazareth has a refreshingly forthright quality that's almost anti-theatrical. Moral positions that might have deteriorated into sanctimonious posturing in a lesser production are made more palatable by a pervasive humor that sometimes seems quickly in cross-cultural translation, yet defuses potentially volatile audience reactions without robbing the play of its moral impact.

Carol Scanlan credits the company's uncontrived demeanor to the way Charabanc members conduct their research. "We interview people from all walks of life — women mill workers who are 80 or 90, who walk to the mill without any shoes because they don't have any shoes. The people on the stage are real people."

"There's no one character on stage who represents everything one woman said," adds Methven. "Each voice may be the essence of several women distilled."

"We present a conglomerate of people's ideas," says Scanlan.

Rosena Brown, who brilliantly portrays a disgruntled Catholic mother in *Gold in the Streets*, is the only Catholic among the four actresses I interviewed (although the company has a Catholic stage manager and two Catholic administrators, and will soon have a Catholic director). Brown says working with Protestants has broadened her perspective considerably and, as Jones agrees, has forced her to look into her own preconceptions. Brown also gives convincing performances in the current production as Agnes Mullan's Catholic husband and a Catholic child who taunts Mary Connor's half-English daughter on the play-

ground.

The transformation of these obviously female players into men, children, bawling babies, and even inanimate objects is amazing as well as heartening. Charabanc does indeed have male members, but this play was commissioned during the initial period when the company depended on government funding, and the actors who participated had to be out of work. "We couldn't find a male actor in Belfast who'd been unemployed for long enough," jokes Methven.

"We're people playing people," offers Jones. "Some women's companies alienate half their audience," adds Methven. "We play nasty women as well as decent women, nasty men as well as decent men."

The versatility of these remarkable performers perhaps best explains the overwhelming success of their endeavor. The troupers in Baltimore, Washington, New York City and Toronto have been consistently sold out during Charabanc's current tour. "You haven't been able to get a seat to see them in North America yet," says Nazareth Arts Center Youththeatre director David Palfrey — at least, not until the company arrived in Rochester July 3. Despite the production's almost universal appeal, audiences in Rochester haven't been as large as producer John Egan of the locally based Irish Theatre Connection had anticipated.

There's still time to favor this powerful piece of theater, however. *Gold in the Streets* will be presented four more times at Nazareth before the tour moves on. The play can be seen tonight, Friday and Saturday at 8 p.m., and for a final time Sunday, July 20, at 7 p.m. Tickets are \$10, and can be reserved by calling the Nazareth Box Office at 586-2420.

Those who make it to Nazareth to see Charabanc won't be disappointed. To quote Carol Scanlan's androgynous cabbie at the close of the second part of the play: "Did you not hear? They're digging for gold in the streets over there."

Charabanc Theatre Company is truly a mother lode.

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