



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Inquiry into Inclusion in the Arts of Working-
class Communities:
Etcetera Theatre Company

3 July 2014

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Miss Michelle McIlveen (Chairperson)
Mr William Irwin (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Dominic Bradley
Mr David Hilditch
Mr William Humphrey
Ms Rosaleen McCorley
Mr Basil McCrea
Mr Oliver McMullan
Mr Cathal Ó hOisín

Witnesses:

Mr Chris Hudson	Etcetera Theatre Company
Mr William Mitchell	Etcetera Theatre Company
Dr Connal Parr	Etcetera Theatre Company

The Chairperson: I welcome Chris Hudson, the chairperson of Etcetera Theatre Company; Connal Parr, who is a board member; and William Mitchell, who is the artistic director of Etcetera. William is here instead of Robert Niblock. I apologise for the delay. Our conversation with the previous witnesses went on much longer than we had anticipated. I ask you to make an opening statement, and then members will follow up with some questions.

Mr William Mitchell (Etcetera Theatre Company): Michelle, I thank you on behalf of Etcetera Theatre Company. We welcome the opportunity to brief the Committee, given that we were recently the recipients of some funding from the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure for our first major production.

Etcetera Theatre Company was founded by four former loyalist political prisoners. The rationale behind setting up the theatre company was to introduce arts to a particular category of people, and that is well represented in our briefing paper. That group has been described as the loyalist working class, and our experience was that, in attempting to engage in the arts and expression of culture and identity through the arts, there was a lack of participation from the so-called loyalist working class. Whilst there may not be any evidence for that, it is the perception of the four people who founded the company, because we have been working for the past 30 years in the areas of Belfast where the loyalist working class is very evident. Two of those four people have a bit of a history of engaging in the arts. Two were commissioned to write major pieces of theatre. One was in 1999 and, at the time, was categorised as the biggest community play ever in Ireland. It launched the Paint Hall studios, which is now the setting for 'Game of Thrones'. It was called 'Playing for Time' and was an exposé of

the sectarianism of football supporters in Belfast. More recently, five years ago, the other individual who helped to found Etcetera, Robert Niblock — he apologises for not being here today as he had to go to Dublin at short notice on business — had a play that was well received and seen by over 1,000 people over four nights in 2007 and played at the West Belfast Festival — Féile an Phobail.

Historically, as two frustrated potential creative writers, opportunities have been limited. I will not offer any argument for that; it may just be that their writing skills are not particularly good or that they have not been as proactive as other companies in applying for funding. Historically, we have heard that, if you as a writer have a story to tell, tell it yourself. There is no one with a wheelbarrow full of money saying, "We will give you money to tell your story". What we did was to revisit our earlier attempt to set up a theatre company two years ago. This time, we got a number of like-minded people around us, two of whom are here today. We constituted a board and got interested members from the wider theatrical community to support us in trying to shape what the theatre company would look like.

Primarily, at its core, based on our experiences, it is about trying to engage people who have an artistic expression, be it through their culture or their identity, that is being portrayed either stereotypically or narrow-mindedly and to get them to come to the fore in some way. We thought that the best way to do that was to put on a production that would engage them, and that is why we went to the Department. We had a play that was set in the year prior to the worst year of the Troubles — 1971. It was about the gang phenomenon known as Tartan and about how those young men were subsequently drawn into paramilitarism during that period in our conflict. We played it in four venues. It opened at the Skainos Centre for two nights, it was in the Spectrum for two nights and the Cultúrlann for two nights, and we closed it in the MAC as part of the Cathedral Quarter Arts Festival. Approximately 1,600 people attended. It was funded by the Department, and we had a small grant from the Arts Council.

We do not have any evidence, but I know that the Department has done a household survey that demonstrates that more people from the Protestant community than the Catholic community are engaged in the arts. That may be true, but our experience is that people, particularly young people, who work in all areas of Belfast and are maybe drawn to express their culture in less legal or more discriminatory manners have a voice that is not being expressed in a more broad-minded way. Hence, we set up Etcetera to attempt to engage "those types of people".

You will see from the briefing we sent that this is not exclusively about us gazing at our navel. So, we extended the invitation to contribute to Etcetera to other people, two of whom are here today. I will invite them to speak now.

Mr Chris Hudson (Etcetera Theatre Company): Michelle, a Chathaoirligh, I was delighted to be invited onto the board of Etcetera Theatre Company, because I think that the values and principles of what it is trying to express through the company are highly significant to theatre and the arts in Northern Ireland and further afield.

As William rightly pointed out, there is a story to be told from what is generically called the Protestant working class, and that story has not been told in any great part. It has been skimmed over or, in many cases, stereotyped in a way that creates a perception of a people but does not tell the true story. In the arts and in theatre in particular, the dramatic word is a great way to express a community's feelings and identity.

There is this aspect that the Protestant working class is being left out of the equation. William's point is valid: whilst more people from what we can generically call the Protestant/unionist community may be involved in the arts, this particular section of the community is not involved to any great extent. Etcetera Theatre Company hopes and aspires to create a platform to allow that to come forward, not in a narrow sense but in an inclusive sense; to create a vehicle, which it has done, with one production already under its belt; and to create a platform for people from that community to express themselves in the dramatic word and then to allow that to interact with other communities.

As you can hear from my accent, I hail from Dublin. I was down there yesterday, and it always surprises me that people in the South have an absolute lack of knowledge about people from the loyalist working-class community. I hope that Etcetera will travel to Dublin at some stage with this production. We are talking to a few theatre people in Dublin about it so that we can allow them to have a view into the thinking of that group or an aspect of it, because one play does not tell the story completely about community, and, like any community, it is a diverse one.

Etcetera Theatre Company is a significant part of the development of the arts in Northern Ireland. We very much thank the Department for its support, and I am honoured to be the chair of the board of trustees because of what it is trying to achieve.

Dr Connal Parr (Etcetera Theatre Company): I completed my PhD last December and was awarded it at Queen's University on the subject of Protestant working-class politics and culture in Northern Ireland since 1960. My particular academic background is the reason why Bobby Niblock and William asked me to join the Etcetera board, which has been a fascinating experience. Like Chris and William, I echo my thanks to the Department for its support.

One of the important and good things about the people involved in the company — the people who set it up and brought it into being — is that they are acting in a way in which loyalists do not normally act, which is to do something constructive and to engage with the arts rather than the other channels that loyalists are associated with.

It is very important to be careful about definitions. My view is that it is wrong to say, as members of this Committee have said publicly, that the Protestant working class has no lineage or relationship with the arts or the theatre. That is an extremely ignorant thing to say. You are saying that nobody has emerged from that background before. It flatly ignores the truth, which is that a large number of dramatists have emerged from a Protestant working-class background in the past, be that Sam Thompson, Stewart Parker, John Boyd, right up to Gary Mitchell recently and a writer who is also involved with the board, Marie Jones.

Etcetera is something more specific than the Protestant working-class appellation. It is a particular loyalist story in the sense that these groups have in the past considered that theatre and the arts are off limits to them. It is important to make those distinctions. There is a broader problem of how that constituency interacts with elements of unionism, rather than it being something to do with the lack of anything that has existed in the past from a Protestant working-class perspective. I mentioned dramatists, but I did not mention the poets and novelists who have emerged from that very background, but it has become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Tapping into what William and Chris said, this has led to a syndrome whereby the Protestant working class believes this mythology that it has no relationship with the arts and that it has one culture. It is important to make those distinctions between loyalists and the Protestant working class in that way. In considering some of the difficulties that have arisen within loyalism, I firmly believe and echo Chris in saying that the energies and the dynamic that goes into creation and the arts is part of the same kind of dynamic. Look at the way in which culture is tapping into the same slipstream. You see it in the way that the republican movement moved towards something like the West Belfast Festival — the Féile — and was moving away from violence at the same time. Etcetera provides the valve for getting violent or disruptive protest off the streets and giving it an outlet.

The Chairperson: I saw 'Tartan' at the MAC, along with the Committee Clerk. I found it a very emotive piece. I congratulate you on your work in getting it to that stage.

Comments have been made that there is a perception and a feeling, particularly in Protestant working-class communities, of being culturally marginalised and disillusioned as audiences, participants and creative artists. What specifically do you think can be done to try to overcome those barriers, and what do you think the barriers are? Are they physical barriers, or is it about trying to change mindsets?

Mr Mitchell: I think that there is most certainly a class distinction and barrier. I speak from my own experience. I had never engaged with the theatre at all because, given the type of background that I come from, it was somewhere you did not go to. People thought that going to a play was for schoolteachers and the like. There is a distinct barrier. That gets played out because there may be a perception that the theatre is harboured or owned by another section of the community, and the feeling is that it is in some way subversive and about portraying a particular story that undermines the fact that there is also a different story. Although Connal points out a number of historical writers who emerged from that community, in my experience, young people collectively — I speak particularly about young people because they are the future of our communities — do not aspire to go to the theatre, for those reasons. From Etcetera's perspective, putting on a play in the MAC will not draw them in. We symbolically closed it out in the MAC because we wanted to take the story that we were portraying to regular theatregoers. We felt that the best place to do that was in the city centre. It was part of the Cathedral Quarter Arts Festival, so that was in its catchment area. To try to address and to

overcome some of the barriers that you asked me about, we took theatre to the people. Here at Skainos, for example, 520 people came over two nights. We did not conduct a straw poll, but we engaged with the audience in the foyer to get their opinion and hear their experiences. For a significant number, it was the first time they had ever gone to a drama. Likewise, we did that in the Spectrum, where we also had over 500 people over two evenings. Our rationale was that, irrespective of the story we are telling, if we cannot bring people from that section of the community to the theatre, why not take the theatre to them? That is where we see the future of Etcetera in overcoming some of those barriers.

It is not necessarily about putting on a major production. By the way, Etcetera is a voluntary organisation and was set up not for profit. No one is employed by Etcetera; I have a day job, as does everyone else who is committed to it. There is no remuneration for anybody linked to it. We are trying to build something that we can bring to those working-class communities that will engage them in the theatre. It is not just about drama productions but may also be, as we presented to the Department when we originally got funding for 'Tartan', about using the medium of characterisation or storytelling to engage people in other things that go beyond theatre, like peace building and community development. That is the next challenge for us, which we have been talking about since 'Tartan'. What do we do next, given Etcetera's relative success in putting on its first production within six months of its origin and having it seen by 1,600 people, the majority of whom had never been to a theatre?

The Chairperson: Do you have a project in place based on 'Tartan' and moving on with post-production conversations?

Mr Mitchell: What we have, Michelle, is a three-year development plan, and 'Tartan' is the first kernel of that. Our development plan, which we worked with people to design, is that, if we put on a production within the first year, that might open people's eyes to another way of doing things — in other words, engaging with theatre. If so, given that we will be a year old in July, how do we build on that? The way that we are attempting to build on it, whether or not we have another major production, is to get into those areas where we know the arts are absent and to try to engage people in them in some fashion.

For that very reason, we are partnering with another organisation to open an arts space in the Spectrum. As the briefing states, we see arts in their totality, going beyond performance and theatre. We are opening a creative arts space. We have identified six groups. The partner organisation has some small funding from the Arts Council. We are going to portray visual art with those people who are not engaging in it. Some graduates from the University of Ulster are willing to conduct workshops with a number of groups, leading towards visually demonstrating their art in whatever form it is — cultural identity, personally, historically or whatever they want. We are opening that space for nine months. We are trying to extend those experiences, which are collectively known as the arts, in bite-size chunks.

The Chairperson: How have you been able to tell your story in communities about the concept of your theatre company — not necessarily the production as such but just as a concept?

Mr Mitchell: Etcetera feels that the best way to tell that story is through being active. It is not enough for me to engage with a group and talk about what could happen and what should be the next phase. We need to do something that engages people. That was our rationale for putting on a production first. I will give you a typical example of what has emerged from that. A group of young men from Rathcoole went to the MAC as part of a programme with their youth worker and engaged with the theatre for the first time ever. They are now engaging in workshops with the director of 'Tartan', who is a guy from the New Lodge called Paddy McCoey. They approached me in the interval to find out how they could get involved in theatre, and I introduced them to Paddy. He is now convening workshops in the centre of Rathcoole.

The proof of the pudding is in the eating. What would draw people in? Just talking to people about how the arts could be used as a vehicle for something else is often not enough. It is about being proactive, which is why we put on a production first. We launched the theatre company without a penny in the pot, but we were hoping that it would realise some financial support, given that we had a production ready to go. We see putting a production on as a vehicle for engaging people, rather than doing things like this, and telling them what it could be like. Show them and see what happens. That is an example of what has happened as a result of the final evening in the MAC.

The Chairperson: You have experience of working with the MAC and with three community-based venues. Will you tell us about the challenges and the positives?

Mr Mitchell: The first major challenge was that we had to pay the MAC significantly more than we had to pay the others, which took a chunk out of the budget. It is purely business. The main distinction I would make is that the MAC had a business approach to the arts, and we believe that Skainos and Spectrum, albeit that they have businesses to run, had less of a business approach, if that makes sense. They were a bit more flexible about what we could do and how they could support it, extending beyond giving us a contract and telling us what it would cost.

Given that we were opening here at Skainos, we needed a longer lead-in time than anywhere else. We had not factored that in, but we negotiated a cost reduction with Skainos. The MAC gave us a community rate, but it was based on its programme; it had to fit into its programme or it was a non-goer. That is OK; it is a major theatrical establishment. However, we had a bit more flexibility in those other venues for the reasons that I outlined. In fact, the Cultúrlann gave us it free of charge, so we did not have to pay anything.

Mr Ó hOisín: Thanks, gentlemen, for your presentation. I am interested in the idea of engaging with otherwise difficult-to-reach groupings, because that initial move is probably the important one to give people the confidence to come out. That goes across all working-class sectors regardless of where they are from. The way in which they are portrayed and deal with the issues that come forward is also important. I have not seen 'Tartan', but I would like to. A lot of the theatre and film that came out of here in the last 30 or 40 years was Troubles-based. Everything that was produced was Troubles-based. How far do you think we have moved on from that? I am thinking about a number of fairly recent productions that I was at such as 'Man in the Moon' and 'The Sweetie Bottle'. The first one's main theme was suicide and the other was the shebeen in west Belfast. So, while the Troubles were a backdrop, it was not central to it all. How far do you think we have moved on from that so that people are being portrayed as they are now?

Mr Hudson: Cathal, that is an excellent question, because the first play to be put on was 'Tartan', which was related to the Troubles. I sit on the board of trustees and our job, as trustees, is to protect the ethos, values and principles of the theatre company and see that it lives up to them. William said earlier that we need to look beyond the immediacy of what we have been through here and trying to narrate that through theatre and look at other issues that affect the community — you mentioned some of them — and reflect on major personalities or characters that might have existed in that culture and tradition. That is why theatre and narrative is a great way to do that. The aspiration of the theatre company is to connect not just with the immediate past but further back and to connect with values and principles in that community that we have not seen come through.

Michelle asked a very good question regarding the nature of theatre. I was fortunate enough, Cathal, to grow up in Dublin in a family that had a genuine love for theatre. We were shipped off every now and again to the Abbey Theatre to watch plays whether we liked it or not; it was compulsory. It was a good thing because we grew up on people such as Sean O'Casey, and many of those writers created a better image of where you came from and who you were than all the history books that you could read. That might be a prejudice that I have in that I think that the spoken word and the written word in theatre and drama sometimes gives people a better understanding of who they are. In that sense, as well as reflecting on the immediacy, as the theatre company did through 'Tartan', it is an aspiration to look at a broader, more generic approach to the community that we refer to as the Protestant working class and look at its roots and even its aspirations as a community. Hopefully, theatre will help. We have to be modest as well; we are not going to change the world. We might change a couple of streets in east Belfast, but we should aspire, at least modestly and humbly, to allow people to see and understand themselves in a different context.

Mr Ó hOisín: Surely the aim and objective — the "mission statement", if you want to use that term — would be to normalise going to the theatre — it is not normal now — so that going to a play would be the same as going to a soccer game or a hurling match, so that it would be a normal activity for a lot more people than it is currently.

Dr Parr: One of the reasons why the Troubles are explored in the theatre and plays by contemporary dramatists is because of the failure of the political culture in Northern Ireland to deal with the past. It is almost a failure to resolve something that is completely contested by all political cultures. It is going on through the stage because it is not being played out in any way, either importantly or profoundly, at Stormont. That is why it has gone into the channel of drama and why so many people still need to

write plays about the Troubles. However, I completely agree with you about normalising the process itself.

Mr Ó hOisín: That is an interesting observation, Connal.

Mr Hudson: With regard to the normalisation or acceptance of theatre in a community, William said that people would not have seen themselves as a theatregoing community. There was a perception that theatre was subversive, or that it belonged to another side; it was not part of their culture. I think that we can help to overcome that by recognising that, as Connal pointed out, numerous writers have come from what we call "the Protestant working class" in this community and in the island of Ireland. Sean O'Casey was a working-class Dublin Protestant, and that is often forgotten. It is to make people realise that theatre is not the property of any one group, culture or the middle classes: it is their property as well. The best way to do that is to initiate people into theatre so that they can tell their story.

Mr Ó hOisín: That perception extends to accessing funding as well. That is a story that we often hear.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a Chathaoirigh, agus go raibh maith agaibh féin. Thank you very much for the presentation. I have to apologise in advance because we need to leave the meeting shortly.

You said in your presentation that your organisation came about as a means of bringing the arts to the loyalist community. Is it just in east Belfast, or is it wider than that?

Mr Mitchell: It is not east Belfast at all, but it is. The reason that we launched it here is that the writer of the first piece was an east Belfast man. We thought that there was a greater likelihood of getting people to come to see it if we advertised that the playwright was a local man, so that is exactly what we did. However, the four people who founded our company are from four areas of Belfast. I am from north Belfast; that writer is from the east; another was from Sandy Row; and another was from the Shankill. It is not exclusive to one community. In fact, we are registered for legal reasons in north Belfast, so the address with the bank and so on is an establishment in north Belfast.

Ms McCorley: No bother. I was just curious about that. I am glad that it is more widespread. I am not sure, Connal, that I accept your narrative. It is your opinion that the failure of politics to deal with the past is why people write about the conflict, but I think that people write about what they know, and they tell their story. Who knows? I think that people will continue writing stories about the conflict because it is a story that needs to be told. People have their perspectives, and they have a need and desire to have their version of events put out. We all know that there are different narratives. I believe that that is important, and it is important that there are vehicles for doing that.

In a previous presentation, Martin Lynch said that he had written a play. I cannot remember the title, but it dealt with issues relating to the Protestant working class. However, he had a difficulty. He wanted people specifically from the Protestant working class to be the actors, but he had difficulty finding them. Can you —

Mr Mitchell: Martin Lynch told us that face-to-face too; it was for 'Titanic Boys'. Again, it feeds into the question of how you do something about it. Martin's approach was to target known theatre groups and the like, but he was not getting the level of skills from that community to act out on the stage what he had written. We were mindful of that, so much so that in our presentation to the Minister we said that we would mix this and use five Equity card holders — five professional actors — but that, as an educational aspect, we would draw the remainder of the cast, which at the start was 10, from the community. That is specifically what we did. We were proactive in targeting the community to see whether it had young men to fit the part. We held an open casting; 22 young actors turned up, and we recruited five of them.

Ms McCorley: That is good to hear. I realise that you have challenges ahead of you, so how can you overcome those challenges to reach deeply into your community to engage with them?

Mr Mitchell: I am not sure if you heard Michelle ask the same question earlier. Were you here?

Ms McCorley: I might have been out of the room. I am sorry about that.

Mr Mitchell: We have attempted to bring the theatre to them; that was our rationale for starting it. Rather than do presentations, we wanted to take the theatre to the community to see what transpired. What has come out of that has been a further engagement with people who came to see the production. One way of overcoming those challenges was to go into a community where people at least want to engage further. That happened after one of the productions at the MAC, where a group of young men who had been for the first time wanted to engage in workshops through the theatre. The director Paddy McCoe is now working with those young men in Rathcoole. Our opportunities to do this would be maximised if we could employ an outreach worker, so to speak. That is written into our business plan, and it may be our next stage; however, the board will negotiate that. That is where we are now. We will have finished a year in July, and we are looking at what we are doing in year 2.

Dr Parr: I wanted to respond to your first question, which was very important, about the actors' background. That was not always the case. Famously, Ken Branagh was from a Protestant working-class background and made his debut in the trilogy of 'Billy' plays that were broadcast between 1982 and 1984. He has gone on to become a globally renowned actor and a superstar talent. Both my parents still work in the theatre in Northern Ireland, and they used to tell me that the theatre was always 50:50 Catholic/Protestant. It was, of course, not talked about in that way, but there did not use to be that problem with the Protestant working class. That evokes what I was saying earlier, which was that it has not always been the case that the Protestant working class lacks an interest in theatre. It is a new development, and Martin was describing something that is quite a recent phenomenon, which this group is, very importantly, trying to challenge.

Mr Hudson: The interesting thing about 'Titanic Boys', which Martin Lynch wrote and which was an excellent play, was that it was about the apprentices who travelled on the Titanic and, sadly, were lost along with it. They were all from what we understand to be the Protestant working-class community. Martin described them well, and the characters were well rounded. You do not have to be from a particular background to write characters from another background. People had to believe that George Eliot was a man because George Eliot was able to write so brilliantly about men, particularly clergymen, and nobody believed that a woman could write like that about men. The gap, if you like, as Martin pointed out, when there was a certain criticism of one character in the play, was that people needed to come up to the mark, be the arbitrators of telling their own story and be able to create their own narrative. That was the challenge that he rightly put up, and I think that that is why it is important that we cannot stress enough how a community needs to be brought forward to tell its own story, and theatre is one of the best ways of doing that.

The other important thing, and Connal mentioned Kenneth Branagh and how he is now a world-stage performer and noted actor throughout the world, is that I would be very concerned if, lurking in the communities of east Belfast, the Shankill or the Village there are potential actors or writers who have not had the opportunity or who will not have the opportunity to come forward because of the belief that they may wrongly have that they are excluded from theatre or the arts. I am thinking from my own experience of the people from working-class backgrounds whom I knew in Dublin who emerged through small theatre companies. I am thinking particularly of Peter Sheridan and Jim Sheridan and how they came through the Project Arts Centre, which gave them a platform that they would not otherwise have had. In a way, I hope that, as a trustee and as chair of Etcetera, that is what we would be addressing.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Hudson: Ná habair é.

Mr B McCrea: The key issue is to give an authentic voice to loyalism in the arts: do you think that you have succeeded in doing that?

Mr Mitchell: It is a bit early to say. We think that we have set up the structure, the vehicle, the medium and the potential for it. However, we cannot say "Yes, we have".

Mr B McCrea: There may be a feeling in certain communities that we do not welcome people who put themselves forward. There is this thing that, the minute anyone stands up, we try to pull them down again. Do you think that the theatre has an opportunity to give voice to people to let them become, not exactly community leaders, but certainly beacons in the community in a different way?

Mr Mitchell: Most certainly. In the briefing paper we drew attention to the fact that it is potentially easier or safer when you characterise something. However, we cannot ignore the fact that, if it comes from someone who is portraying a character or writing about a character, they usually bring something of themselves to it. Often, for example, if you are writing about an historical event that has significance for you, in some ways you are encouraging others either to challenge, agree or create dialogue around it. Personally, I see that as an element of leadership. However, you are right that we do this all the time in our Protestant unionist community: whenever people raise their head above the parapet, they usually get knocked back down. The mindset is almost, "Who do you think you are, putting yourself on a pedestal?".

Mr B McCrea: I think that that issue is really central, for reasons I do not understand, but it is central to the Protestant unionist community —

Mr Mitchell: I do not understand it either, because I characterise myself as one such person.

Mr B McCrea: Is there something that we could do by way of a play or something to tackle that, which I think is central to the identity of the Protestant unionist community? It is a thing that sets us apart from other communities.

Mr Mitchell: Would you make a representation through CAL to the Minister to commission a writer in Etcetera on that very topic? We most certainly would do it, and I am not being facetious.

Mr B McCrea: Neither am I; I see it as a real issue. I was down the road here the other day when the mini Twelfth was going on and I saw the community at large; it is a wonderful mix of people. However, it is interesting how you engage them and say that we need some form of acceptance, that, when people step forward, whether you agree with them or not, it is good that they step forward. Say I was interested in talking to you about how to do that on an individual basis. Loyalty does not always communicate terribly well outside loyalty. I wonder what opportunity there is to take your plays to, not the other side, as it were, but middle-class areas that need to be communicated with. Is that a possibility?

Dr Parr: Always remember that, when you put a play on and it is seen by an audience, there will be a diversity of responses. For instance, with 'Tartan', you see old-style sectarianism of a kind on stage. Some people look at that and say, "My God, that is what we were like", or, "There was an element of that in us, in the past". They see some resemblance to a former self, say. However, some people find it exalting or affirming. You cannot in any way anticipate or determine how an audience will respond. We know that theatre can create empathy for opposing groups, advance understanding and soften people. The late Seamus Heaney said that it can make feelings or new feelings happen in people. There is a societal effect that can flow from it. However, we have to be honest and say that, apart from those who do not go to the theatre and see the play in the first place, there are also people who, as is their right, will interpret it however they like.

Mr B McCrea: I want to pick up on the point you made about it not meeting with universal approval. I take the fact that there has been political failure — not entirely; I am not saying that everything did not work — and that the real dialogue that needs to take place maybe does not take place, for all sorts of reasons. Theatre, at its best, can be subversive and challenging and push the message that we need to have those conversations. Given where you are coming from, and the stereotypes that some people put on people, it is a way of communicating with people on other terms. There are two or three things that you might be able to do. I would not be afraid of people not liking it; if they do not like it, they do not like it. Some of the best theatre is really challenging. There are two points to my question. First, it is of course good that you can talk in your own community to your community. However, I think that you might take the message to other communities in a language that they —

Mr Mitchell: Which is why we put on two nights in the Cultúrlann.

Mr B McCrea: Yes, but it is not just about the Cultúrlann. What about Hillsborough?

Mr Mitchell: Yes. I know the point that you are making.

Mr B McCrea: Or up to Stormont. It is interesting. There is a second bit that I am interested in. You said that maybe 20 actors came forward and you selected five. That is good. What was your impression of the response of the 500-odd people in the audience who came to have a look at it? Did

they say, "You know what, this is relevant to us; this is our type of language"? What was their response to the show?

Mr Mitchell: Some people were reminded of that era, for example. 1971 was the year that preceded the worst year of our Troubles and the maelstrom that was the conflict. They were reminded of what was going on in working-class Protestant communities at that time that gave rise to the phenomenon known as "tartan". Some people were aghast; for others, it was new, and they knew nothing about it. Others agreed 100% with what they saw. For others, they had no idea that things were so extreme, but, when they saw what they saw, they realised, "That was me on the stage".

I agree with you. Some people will say that it is just a lot of nonsense, but Etcetera's *raison d'être* is whether we can at least invoke something in people, be it anger, sadness, emotion or empathy. What would that be? What do you do with it? That is our next stage: what do you do with it? Do you build peace with it? Do you challenge others with it? Do you dilute a single story? Do you create new stories? Do you widen people's horizons? What do you do with it? That is the challenge for Etcetera.

Mr B McCrea: I will leave it at that. I am interested in talking about it.

Mr Hudson: Basil, could I respond? You said a couple of things that were very pertinent. I think that I picked you up right when you said that people are sometimes not very good at telling their own story. Forgive me for saying this as somebody coming from Dublin — I know that I am a bit of an intruder here — but there is a sense that unionism and, to a greater extent, loyalist working-class people, are not great at telling their story. Their story is usually told by somebody else in a journalistic style in newspapers or books by people who give a very superficial view of that culture and particularly of working-class Protestants in Northern Ireland.

Growing up in Dublin, I would have had no perception of any great value of what is generically known as the unionist/loyalist culture in Northern Ireland other than Sam Thompson's play 'Over the Bridge', which deals with a specific issue. It did not tell us a huge amount about the people behind the play, the characters, where they came from, who they were, what sort of families they were or if they were lads who may be members of an Orange Order or who may or may not go to church. In that way, the characters — I do not mean any disrespect to Sam Thompson — could have been considered one- or two-dimensional because we did not see beyond that. I had no perception of that. You mentioned Hillsborough. I think that, to a greater extent, people in Hillsborough probably do not have a great insight into people from the Newtownards Road, the Village or the Shankill.

Etcetera is not going to change the world. Your first question was whether it has become a voice. That might be too much to claim at this stage; it might even be too much to claim at any stage. It can be part of the process of creating a platform for that voice so that people can tell their story.

Mr B McCrea: Forgive me, Chair. You see, I live in Hillsborough now. Part of the issue is that if I were to come down here and talk to people in these streets, they would go, "You are not from these parts". It could take 25 years and, even then, you are still a blow-in. There is an issue about how you explain your position to people.

I think that there is something. I actually think that there is a great opportunity to change because what I detect — you have to be careful how you say these things — is that there would certainly be certain cultural ideals that certain people do not talk a lot. You believe in a musket and a bible sort of thing. It is almost anti-educationalist because you believe in other things. The world moves on, and we need to find ways of communicating.

All I would say to you is that I think that there is purpose in what you are trying to do. I am not trying to tell you what your purpose should be. All I can say is that I see purpose in finding a way of letting people express themselves. I will finish with this one point. It is slightly abstract. I looked at early-years intervention in education. People develop at different times. Sometimes, you get a very strong child who does not learn to articulate terribly early. That strong child becomes frustrated and, if not looked after, could become physical or a bully because of frustration. He cannot communicate. There is a certain issue in that when people feel that they are not able to get their side of the story across, they become really frustrated and blow up. You may have a great release. I will just finish with this: without having any great insight, I would be really interested in what you have to say and in taking the message beyond your immediate locale. I am sorry for going on.

The Chairperson: On that point, we will conclude. Thank you very much for your time and participation in our inquiry; it has been very useful.