Interview with Christina Reid

Mária Kurdi

MK: In the interview you gave to Imelda Foley, who recently published a book under the title *The Girls in the Big Picture:Gender in Contemporary Ulster Theatre*, you speak about the conspicuously gendered environment in which you grew up in Belfast, as member of a Protestant family. Could you now recollect your early experiences of sectarianism, the Protestant-Catholic divide ?

CR: I was born in The Ardoyne in North Belfast in 1942. My maternal grandparents lived on the other side of the city and their house was the focal point of family gatherings and parties, so I spent a lot of my childhood there too. Both areas were mixed but there were Catholic streets and Protestant streets. Everybody was working-class, but I was brought up to believe that there were two types of poverty – Protestant, which was respectable, and Catholic, which was not. As a child, I didn't know the word "sectarianism," the Protestant/Catholic divide was referred to as "them" and "us." My family were staunch Unionists, "more British than the British," yet they were also "proud to be Irish." All the men were members of the Orange Order and the annual parade on the Twelfth of July was a big family day out. The men marched and the women took the children to watch and cheer the parade. I remember what a show-off I was when my father was the Grand Master of his Orange Lodge and the Orangemen came to our house accompanied by a flute band, before going to the parade. I didn't question what the divisions were really about then. Children don't. The questions came gradually and more insistent the more I grew up. Later I began to write about it. I'm from that background and I love my family and I'm proud to be Irish. But I have never voted Unionist. I remember casting my first vote and wandering if anyone else in my family had secretly voted for a candidate who wasn't "one of us." My family were very gregarious. At family gatherings the women were great storytellers. I think my early experiences of listening to and watching them brought out the writer in me.

MK: This female talent for storytelling and preserving the traditions through that is well reflected in your plays. However, the plays have received some criticism for creating rather one-dimensional male characters who are less interesting than the women.

CR: On the other hand, nobody criticizes plays because they are more about men than about women. This criticism of my plays is not even true. *Joyriders* (1986) has got two

strong male characters in it. In *The Belle of the Belfast City* (1989) Jack is one of the most powerful roles in the play, actors liked to do it. Yet so many Irish plays are about men, and women are there only because they are somebody's mother, wife, sister, daughter or girlfriend, in other words, their part in the play is only to do with what is happening to the men that they are connected to. I have been criticized for my plays, being labelled feminist by some people, and I have been criticized by feminists who found that my plays are too gentle. My reply to that is always that I hope I write about women as they are, not as feminism would want them to be, which would not be truthful. I find women easier to write about because the women in my background were entertaining, very funny, and very strong. While the men made the big decisions about the country, the world and whatever, women were the ones who made families work, made life work.

MK: How did you become acquainted with the world of drama and theatre, and Irish drama in particular? Which authors and plays did you take an interest in, and which were most inspiring for you?

CR: When my granny had parties in my childhood all the family were there, and everybody did a turn, sang a song, or told a story. The parties were very theatrical. The storytellers in the family didn't just sit down to tell stories, they dressed up to tell them, they enacted them. They were a wonderful mixture of local gossip, Irish folklore, and the Holywood movies because they all went to the cinema. Also, we went to see shows in the Group Theatre in Belfast, and we went to the Opera House to see shows. My mother loved ballet – I do not know where that came from since we were a working class family. She took me to the ballet and I loved it, so that was an influence as well. It did not occur to me when I was very young that I would write, my earliest memory of writing is when I was about eleven, I think. I was given one of those five-year diaries with a little lock and key, and I kept the diary for about a week and it was really boring, so I made up exciting stories about myself to put into the diary. That is my earliest memory of writing. But I did not start writing plays until I was nearly forty, and a lot of that was to do with my mother dying – when she was only fifty-eight. One of the things she told me at that time was: "Don't forget the old stories, tell them to your children." And I began to write the play which became *Tea in a China Cup* (1983). The first draft was awful, filled with my feeling very sorry for myself, angry that my mother had died. Then I just sat down and wrote it all over again. It is very much based on my family history, but cannot be called a straight autobiographical play. On the other hand, I wrote *Joyriders* because I was saddened and angry about the lives of some young teenagers on a training scheme in Belfast.

MK: In two of your major plays, *Tea in a China Cup* and *The Belle of the Belfast City*, the action involves generations. Why did you find it important to extend the scope of the conventions of the "family play" in this way?

CR: Because generations, certainly in Ireland, affect and influence the next generation. Again I go back to the tradition of storytelling. There are stories in my family, for example, that I can see and hear as if I was there, though some of them happened when I was too young to remember and some of them before I was even born. Stories passed on by word of mouth, change and shift. Basically they tell the same tale, but every storyteller adds a little bit and takes out a little bit. Sometimes I think this is very much what a lot of problems in Ireland are about. In the North, generations pass on stories, for example stories about Catholics and stories about Protestants, stories about both sides, so children grow up with thoughts in their head which are those of the generations behind them, or of even two or three generations behind them. And it perpetuates this situation in the North, expressed by notions like "never trust a Protestant" or "never trust a Catholic." So many people, instead of really looking at things and making their own mind up, just take on board what generations behind them have told them.

MK: There is an intertextual framing in *Joyriders*; it deploys a scene from Sean O'Casey's *The Shadow of a Gunman* (1923) at the beginning, which has its echo at the end with Maureen dying as a victim similar to O'Casey's young female character, Minnie. For me this device highlights that Irish history is repeating itself, the Troubles of the early 1920s having their parallel in the Toubles of the 1980s.

CR: Yes, it is how innocent people die, and Maureen is really innocent. The borrowing from O'Casey is actually based on fact. When I was writer-in-residence at the Lyric Theatre in Belfast a group of young teenagers on a training scheme were brought in to see *The Shadow of a Gunman*, which Patrick Sanford directed there. There was an electric atmosphere in the theatre because most of the teenagers had never been to the theatre in their life. They reacted wonderfully, they cheered and laughed and booed, it was great. I talked to them after the play and I asked a boy why he laughed when Minnie gets shot. It didn't shock him because it happened offstage. He lived in West Belfast and had seen people being shot. He looked very fearsome, but he was a trainee cook, which is very unusual for a man. And he became the basis for Arthur, a character in *Joyriders* which, again, is not an autobiographical play, but there were people I met that night and later when I visited a number of youth training schemes who were the basis for all the characters in *Joyriders*.

MK: Not a few critics define a type of drama in Northern Ireland that they call the "Troubles play," which your work may fit in with. How do you respond to the usefulness of this as a category?

CR: I think a good play must be about people and not just about a situation. But I am not one of those writers who say "Oh, I never write about the Troubles," as if it were a badge of honour because, I think, how can you write about Belfast as if the Troubles

don't exist? I am a storyteller and all my plays tell a story. "The Troubles" may be a part of that story or affect the story of the people in the play, but I have never written a play that is just about "The Troubles", and I wouldn't want my writing to be categorized like that.

MK: Do you consider it to be important to write plays about teenagers, like the ones in *Joyriders*?

CR: I think it is terribly important to write about this age-group as they are. Too often they are written about as if they are all foul-mouthed, drug-addicted, gun-toting teenagers. I hope in *Joyriders* I portrayed the teenagers with more accuracy and compassion than that. In my experience, teenagers are much more complex and (most importantly) very funny about the world they live in.

MK: Some years after *Joyriders* you wrote a sequel to it, entitled *Clowns* (1996). Why did you feel challenged to write about those characters again?

CR: A lot of teenage groups had done the play *Joyriders* because they liked it and also because it is difficult to find plays where teenagers can play their own age-group. A number of them asked me, what happened to the characters, what happened afterwards, what happened to Arthur, did he get his restaurant? Then a terrible thing happened. The actor Fabian Cartwright, who played Tommy in the first production, was drowned while on holiday. The actors and I had kept in touch since the first production, and after Fabian's death we got together and talked about him and the play. I was thinking of writing a sequel to it, but it was bizarre that the actor who played Tommy was dead whereas Maureen (the character Clare Cathcart, very much living, had played) was dead. Clare actually said to me that she would like to be a ghost in the sequel. It was quite some time after that before I actually wrote the play, but the idea stayed in my head. The idea of someone who is forever sixteen, as her peer group grew older. The idea of the ghost telling jokes just happened after I started to write. The play has a very chequered history and it has only had one production. I hope someone will do it again.

MK: Did you consciously set *Clowns* in the year of the 1994 ceasefire initiated by the IRA?

CR: Yes, I think so. The play is very much about the difficulty of coming to terms with peace, rather than war, and how hard the peace process is. And Sandra, who left Belfast after Maureen's death, filled with rage and despair, can't make her own personal peace process until she stops looking back and seeking revenge.

MK: Interestingly, Sandra plays the comedian's part in the play, using Maureen as a mask since she is performing under the other's name in England.

CR: Because she has never come to terms with Maureen's death, she brings her back to life by becoming two people: herself and the friend whose death she has never accepted. She turns the tragedy into just another Belfast joke. Belfast abounds with jokes about the Troubles.

MK: She seems to combine the memory of violent death with the comic attitude transcending grief. Comedians, humour and jokes are present in other works of yours as well, especially in *Did You Hear the One about the Irishman?* (1987), despite the grimness of the subject matter the plays address.

CR: When an Irish person tells Irish jokes it's funny. If someone else does it, it is offensive. So in *Did You Hear the One about the Irishman [...]?* I juxtaposed what the English comedian is saying with what is actually happening to Irish people. A lot of jokes are very interesting because they are the same as say, Jewish or French-Canadian jokes. You just substitute the group. They are basically the same jokes worldwide. In *Clowns* it was slightly different because the jokes there are more in the form of storytelling. Sandra weaves a series of Irish jokes around the Maureen she has resurrected, in the same way that the old Irish storytellers weave fact and fiction. There is an old saying "It's a true story that doesn't interfere with the telling". So the stories of the past change and merge with the stories of the present.

MK: Which leads us back to the plays that feature generations. There is a lot of tension in some of them between certain family members, for instance between Janet and Jack in *The Belle of the Belfast City*. What can this bring into focus within the represented Protestant community itself?

CR: In that play in particular, in *The Belle of the Belfast City*, which is set at the time of the Anglo-Irish Agreement in 1986, there were a lot of Protestant families who were split apart by that day, the demonstration against the Agreement. Some were eager to take to the streets and close their shops and refuse to work as a protest. Some considered that sort of behaviour as not how the Protestants behave. It was rebel behaviour, Catholic behaviour, IRA behaviour – "We don't behave like that." In *The Belle of the Belfast City*, I highlighted these tensions and others within one family.

MK: Their intrafamiliar conflict figures the larger one within the Protestant community in *The Belle of the Belfast City* very effectively. By contrast, Dolly, the oldest of the women characters and Belle, the youngest of them are very similar to each other in the same play. Are they variations on how female autonomy can be achieved in spite of all the tension in the background?

CR: I think sometimes people have characteristics that they inherit from generations before them. The granddaughter has the self-confidence that the grandmother has too.

Dolly and her granddaughter Belle, are both strong, sure of who they are. Even though they have led very different lives, they share a belief that life should be enjoyed not endured. They both have a wilful, stubborn and occasionally selfish streak, but all that is tempered by their wit and love of life.

MK: Matrilinear heritage is passed on as at the end it is Belle who sings when Dolly is not able to sing any more, appropriating the grandmother's one-time strength. In general, your plays abound in songs, especially this one, *The Belle of the Belfast City*. Are the songs supposed to offer some commentary on the action?

CR: It varies. While I am writing often a song will come into my head, connected with what someone has just said, or a scene will come from someone singing a song. When I was writing *The Belle of the Belfast City* and created Peter, the policeman husband of Janet, I wrote some scenes between him and Janet, but they didn't work. Then I was playing some music, and I heard the song "Green gravel," and I gave it to Peter instead of dialogue and it did work. The song said everything I was trying to say about this couple and their relationship. Peter needs a romantic notion. Janet wants the real thing.

MK: Introducing a dimension, I think, which functions to redefine the structure of emotions between Janet and the two men without the intervention of explicit dialogues. *My Name, Shall I Tell You My Name?* (1986), ends with the two protagonists' voices resounding parallel with each other and, finally, a vastly different kind of song, a military tune is heard. Do you take particular care about how you structure and conclude your plays?

CR: As regards *My Name, Shall I Tell You My Name?* – I just sat down and wrote it, it just flowed, the structure with the two voices just happened to come out like that. I wrote it for radio, which makes a difference because you are writing for voice, you are writing something that is going to be heard and not staged. I was really pleased when the play subsequently also worked on stage.

MK: Do you prefer writing for the much older, and perhaps more conservative medium of the theatre?

CR: Writing for the theatre is special. It evolves in a way that no other writing does, because it travels, it can be done again and again, which doesn't often happen in radio and screen. They tend to stay fixed in a time and / or a place. Stage plays can be and are more often transposed to other times and locations.

MK: Racial mixing is a trope which several of your characters demonstrate or are involved with, from *The Belle of the Belfast City* to *My Name, Shall I Tell You My Name?* In what ways do you think it contributes to the exploration of sectarian limitations in your work?

CR: I believe that bigotry is bigotry is bigotry, regardless of whether it's about colour, religion, class, the clothes you wear, the food you eat – whatever. I believe it's that simple. That sectarianism of any sort limits and damages us all, worldwide.

MK: This way racial mixture and the mixed reactions to it put greater emphasis on the die-hard nature of prejudices and preconceptions underlying and nurturing the sectarian conflict which still exists in your home country, not that it is the only such place in the world.

CR: Yes, I think it is the same kind of conflict everywhere. It has just different labels in different parts of the world.

MK: Another motif, that of the single mother, is used in some of your plays, embodied by Teresa in *Tea in a China Cup* and Rose in *The Belle of the Belfast City* most importantly. Does the state of single parenthood signify victimization or growing independence in their case, or maybe both at the same time?

CR: It depends on who they are in the play. In Maureen's case in *Joyriders* it is the tragedy of the innocent victim. She falls in love with a romantic foreign student. To impress him she steals nice clothes from a shop, and when she is accidentally shot, her unborn baby dies as well. Nobody knows about the baby except Sandra. In *The Belle of the Belfast City* Rose is a different character. She gets pregnant and chooses to be a single parent. She becomes an independent woman and she teaches her daughter to be independent too (but not to the extent that she thinks she can look after herself in Belfast). Teresa as a single parent is again different, her mother does not want anybody to know about the child, and her existence is hidden whereas Belle is known about but has never been brought to Belfast. It is one thing for a child to exist but it is quite another thing to show the neighbours that this is the child. So, the single mothers' situation is linked with a range of moral attitudes in their society and family.

MK: At the end of *Tea in a China Cup* Beth decides to sell the house she lived in as a well-to-do man's wife, and is ready to find another home. Is this the way she can sever herself from the restricting power of her family and past?

CR: Yes, she sells the house she was married into, and her mother's house, after her death, goes back to the owner it was rented from. Beth has brought the family pictures and other stuff with her into her husband's house, but eventually she takes only one china cup with her, which she values. Although the china cup did not belong to her, but to her husband's family, it reminds her of her mother's love of beautiful china which she could never afford. I have been criticized about the end of the play because Beth was not strong enough to resist keeping that one cup. I remember saying "what did you want her to do?" to a feminist critic. Beth is who she is. I cannot make her who she is not. In

fact one amateur production in Belfast, which I went to see, changed the end and it was all wrong. The director thought that taking one cup with her when she left was a weakness. But in the play she smiles and sings and that is her strength.

MK: Of course she does, she is going to have her life now, which is different from that of the former generation, though she takes something from her older life with her. The fragile and beautiful china cup may be the symbol of traditions and the past, that of continuity. In 1987 you also started a new life when you moved to London. Do you consider yourself a writer in exile like your favourite author, Sean O'Casey's situation was some decades ago?

CR: No, I do not feel an exile. I go to Belfast a lot, two of my children chose to go back there and my grandchildren live there. Actually, I am torn between the two places. Another writer said to me once "When I am in London I want to be in Belfast, and when I am in Belfast I want to be in London. Maybe the only time I am ever really content is when I am on the plane." If I had the money I would live in both places. In my head at least, I do live in both places. I am 61 now and still torn between the two. The older I get, the pull of Belfast and my grandchildren there, gets stronger than the reasons for being based in London.

MK: What is your connection with the theatre in London? Have you written plays which were commissioned by London theatres?

CR: I have written a play for the National Theatre Education Department called *The King of the Castle* (1999), which is published in an anthology of plays entitled *New Connections*. Though I set it in Belfast it was written so that it could be set anywhere in the country and hopefully in the world, because the play is about children playing on a derelict piece of land, bombed during a war. The play has been done by schoolchildren in other places here and abroad. They have swapped my street names and songs for those in their locality. Just recently I wrote another short play which was specifically for younger children. The National Theatre commissioned me to write a twenty minute play for 8-9 year-old inner London schoolchildren to perform at a school assembly. The school is multi-racial, multi-ethnic, forty-two languages are spoken in it. First I thought, "Can I do this?" But I did write it, and the children were fantastic. It is a play about saying "Hello!" in different languages, and is called *The Gift of the Gab*. *Joyriders* and *The Belle of the Belfast City* were commissioned for London.

MK: What about your connections with the contemporary Irish theatre?

CR: I have never had a major production of any of my plays in the South, though university students and fringe companies have produced them there in small venues.

Some of them have been staged in the Lyric Theatre Belfast. But so far, not in the Abbey or Gate Theatres in Dublin.

MK: What are you currently working on?

CR: I have been writing a novel. The Arts Council in Northern Ireland very generously gave me an award to do it. For the time being it is still in bits and pieces; it is not like writing a play, I have got to write some of it again and I have a responsibility to at least try to complete it. Writing a novel is very much like storytelling. A lot of it is coming out of the plays where there are stories which generate other stories. For the novel these need to be furnished with much more detail about who else was there, and what else was happening. I go backwards from the small, marginal stories in, for instance, *Tea in a China Cup*, which have much bigger stories behind them. In *My Name, Shall I Tell You My Name...?* the story of the painting which my grandfather took me to the city hall to see has a much bigger story behind it too. So I find that my real family history and the history of the characters in my plays are merging and extending into a bigger story.

MK: What you said about the material for your novel as it emerges has thrown some more light on the plays. Yes, there are many episodic figures and scenes in virtually all of them, which triggers the imagination of the audience.

CR: This is all very much tied up with storytelling and memory. I went to a Protestant school so I did not learn Irish but learnt some of it when I was older, and one of the first words I learnt was *seanchaí*, the word for the storyteller. Once I was sitting spellbound listening to a real Irish *seanchaí*, and I thought this was what my grandmother and her sisters were also doing. They were *seanchaí* but they did not know it because they did not know that Irish word.

MK: Your plays make it clear that the Catholic and Protestant traditions are not so different from each other in Ulster after all.

CR: They are not. My friends the playwrights Martin Lynch and Anne Devlin come from Catholic families who are just like my Protestant family. Despite the political/religious divisions, we have more in common than not. Our families are alike, despite being brought up in opposing religious and political aspirations about the country we live in. We're all working class and the families and people we write about have more in common with each other than the divisions that continue to be exploited by the politicians in our society.

MK: Do you think that there will ever be an end to the conflict in Northern Ireland?

CR: The majority of the people there are fed up with it, they just want it to stop. I think the biggest problem has always been with the hardline Protestants and Unionists who

cannot agree to power sharing. Because as soon as they do, they do away with the very reason for the existence of the state of Northern Ireland. Even if they say they want it, the so called moderate unionists are also afraid of it.

MK: But there are three hundred years behind the conflict, people have to turn their watches back when they visit there as it is noted in one of your plays. At the end of *The Belle of the Belfast City*, the mute Davy is beaten up not by Catholic paramilitaries but by his own, and he still remains a devoted unionist.

CR: At the time of writing it was in my head that Davy and the English character Tom Bailey should be played by the same actor, because they represent the extremes: the simple child-like boy who copies what he doesn't really understand and the grown-up man who knows exactly what he is doing.

MK: So new meanings can be created or added by manipulating the casting of characters. Did they finally produce *The Belle of the Belfast City* with that pairing?

CR: Yes, my husband played both roles, to respective audiences in Belfast and Manchester.