

Peace and Beyond



Opening dialogue between
communities: arts in the
aftermath of conflict

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Founded in 1994, Kabosh is a Belfast-based theatre company which creates original work for performance in a range of spaces.

Each project is inspired by the people, spaces and places in the north of Ireland and most of the work addresses the legacy of our violent conflict. We aim to give voice to those who don't have a voice. We aim to humanise those we perceive to be 'other', thereby challenging preconceptions. We aim to create work of high quality that provokes informed discussions around sensitive themes of reconciliation. It is theatre for positive social change.

The Kabosh canon is commissioned from professional Irish playwrights, but the method of gathering source material varies. On each project, the company works with a community organisation to provide necessary introductions, assist with identifying source material, develop grassroots partners, co-facilitate post-show discussions, liaise with community gatekeepers to maximise engagement and provide long-term support to audiences.

Often a project is the result of a playwright creatively responding to an oral archive undertaken by a community agency. The archive then becomes the catalyst for a fictional drama. The gathered stories are not presented verbatim. This ensures both the original keeper of the story and those who have never heard the narrative before are challenged and encouraged to engage with it. If an oral archive isn't the source material, researching a site and/or subject highlights incidents or characters that provide motivation for a creative response. Basing a new play on a truth, a remembrance, gives it an authenticity that enhances impact and makes audience dismissal more difficult, particularly when dealing with subject matter that challenges deeply held beliefs. From this kernel of actuality, a playwright can imagine outcomes and create a fictional provocation that asks pertinent questions, challenges preconceptions and offers alternative thinking. Impact is heightened for an audience as occurrence of the narrative is a possibility.

Work that is created for a specific location is also inspired by anecdotal stories from site managers – experts with a knowledge of the history of a place. When these individuals are empowered to share their knowledge, they become ambassadors for the project and maximise community acceptance and engagement. They provide informed introduction to site-users and the neighbouring community.

The curation of post-show discussions provides an important opportunity for audiences to air their responses to the difficult subject matter in a facilitated environment. The make-up of the panel is determined by the project and the location of the performance, ensuring a balance of voices to serve as a catalyst for informed discussions. Panels often include a member of the creative team, an individual connected to the kernel of the story, and a member of the community hosting the production or a local expert. Discussions are always animated; they begin with an initial response to the production and quickly move onto issues of social importance: political representation, community development and overcoming the legacy of conflict. The audience collectively examine the micro and the macro, often sharing personal testimonies for the first time and giving voice to deeply held beliefs. On occasions these conversations are archived; this is dependent on audience agreement, if it is felt that dialogue will still flow freely, and company resources.

The project descriptions below illustrate the range and diversity of Kabosh's political work.

Green & Blue by Laurence McKeown (2016–)

Based on an oral archive of serving Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) and An Garda Síochána police officers, *Green & Blue* explores the realities faced by the individuals who patrolled the Irish border during the height of the conflict.

The title of the play reflects the colour of the two police uniforms: green was worn by the RUC in the north and blue was worn by the Garda in the south. It also reflects how we see the uniform and not the person, and how the policemen see themselves as uniforms, as this extract from the play indicates:

GARDA O'HALLORAN: At one point we took on a role that became an identity and that identity now defines us. I'm no longer Eddie nor you David. I'm a Guard, you're a Peeler. We're a uniform, not real people. And rightly or wrongly we now view the world from that perspective.

Green & Blue looks at the person behind the uniform and the different experiences of the individuals on either side of a man-made line in the ground.

'...a simple but effective way of exploring two sides of one conflict' – Belfast Telegraph

To assist a society in dealing with conflict there is a need for a broad range of voices to be heard. There are many narratives that only a small group of peers have knowledge of. Part of the artist's role is to identify these gaps and give a voice to the silent. The voice of uniformed policemen was missing in the Irish narrative. It is also not possible to truly consider a healthy, peaceful society without informed conversations about policing.

Peacebuilding charity Diversity Challenges, which has spent many years facilitating storytelling about the conflict in the north of Ireland, initiated 'Voices from the Vault' to collect oral histories from former police officers and their families, with the aim of enhancing understanding of the past. Transcripts of the interviews were published on a dedicated website. To ensure these stories reached a broader audience, they invited tenders from artists to animate the material. Playwright Laurence McKeown secured the tender.

To ensure the archive-contributors felt a sense of project ownership, several private readings were facilitated for committee members over the course of the 12-month script development. These readings were followed by discussions where themes, characters and concepts were debated.

It is difficult to manage community expectations when fictionalising actual testimonies. One of the major challenges is how to maintain artistic independence and integrity when re-imagining individual voices. The complexity of this is dramatically increased when advisers are not only representing themselves but their community. The individual has a heightened concern of misrepresentation. Narrative negotiation can be arduous and emotional – each contributor feels intensely responsible to those they represent. As Artistic Director of Kabosh, I facilitated this communication between Laurence McKeown and the Diversity Challenges committee, with the aim of keeping the contributors onboard while ensuring the artist wasn't compromised and his narrative diluted. Working so closely with the represented community ensured the production had invaluable advocates for audience development, as well as ensuring project authenticity through informed advisors for uniforms, terminology, props, etc. Design inaccuracies allow audiences to dismiss narratives they are wary of – they tend to equate physical errors with untruths in the story, and they grasp any opportunity to dismiss what they consider difficult to hear. Impact is maximised with quality work that embraces authenticity, such as when the characters have period-specific uniforms, the correct armoury is used, as well as ensuring any dramatic action (loading weapons, searching vehicles or radio communication) is conducted identical to military training. If the fabric of the production is real, then the narrative can take artistic licence while keeping the audience on-side.

As Laurence McKeown is a Republican ex-prisoner and former hunger striker, there were members of the 'police family' who found it difficult to come to terms with his being appointed as playwright. Through engagement in the process and/or experiencing the production, many preconceptions were effectively challenged. Other communities were encouraged to engage with the narrative because of Laurence's past. The ultimate consideration was how to nurture a trust based on integrity and an acceptance of different histories.

As part of the contract for this project, Kabosh agreed to stage two private performances north and south of the border. This was to allow past and present officers to engage with the production and debate its themes in their own environment. Post-show discussions often have input from contributors to the oral archive and Diversity Challenges members. To date, this production has toured extensively across Ireland playing prisons, theatres, community halls, historical ruins and schools, as well as being presented in Dresden and Paris.

***Those You Pass On The Street* by Laurence McKeown (2014–)**

Those You Pass On The Street explores the complexities of dealing with the legacy of conflict, especially when that conflict is localised and personal. It contrasts party-political positioning with individual needs. It challenges the view that any mechanism for dealing with the past is simply about 'whose side gets what'. The play presents the difficult concept of whether the right to move on from a violent past is personal, whether you have the right to do so without your action being selfish – should you take into consideration the impact of your action on family, friends, peers and community? Particularly if they are at a different place in the process of dealing with the past, or particularly when they see your action as betrayal.

The central character, Elizabeth, walks into a Sinn Féin constituency office seeking assistance regarding anti-social behaviour in her area. Frank takes her details and promises to look into it. He later learns from his colleague Pat that she is the widow of an RUC policeman, killed by the Irish Republican Army. He is warned to tread carefully. This brief encounter poses challenges for personal preconceptions and beliefs, straining family and political beliefs.

PAT: What if an explanation is not enough? What if they want to meet the one who killed him? What if they need to hear it from the one who pulled the trigger? It's always back to the big picture Frank and asking what if? Why do this? Do we need to do this? Of course, on a personal, human level the answer would be yes. But we can't afford to approach it from that perspective. It has to be strategic. It has to be political. It has to be collective. There's too much involved, too many implications.

Cross-community project *Healing Through Remembering* (HTR) wanted to commission a piece of theatre that would assist the public to deal with the legacy of the conflict. They wanted a provocation to stimulate animated debate around pertinent themes that could be taken into a broad range of community settings. Private readings were hosted for members of the HTR committee to allay concerns that one community may be more receptive to the narrative than another. Facilitation of these meetings needed to be sensitive to ensure perceived community reaction didn't result in the narrative being safe and non-confrontational.

At the core of the play is an action that took place – the wife of a murdered RUC man did walk into a rural Sinn Féin office for assistance. The rest of the play is fictional. Often in post-show discussions this fact is shared with the audience, so they cannot dismiss the premise of the story. It supports them in imagining what the potential fallout of this single action is. They are then more receptive to go on a journey created by the playwright, put themselves in the shoes of the characters and self-reflect on the impact of conflict. Given the controversial subject matter that you want an audience to consider, they will look for a way of undermining the material, so they don't have to undergo self-reflection.

Again, authenticity was enhanced with input from HTR members regarding the pain experienced with the murder of a loved one. This supported the actors in sourcing a multi-faceted emotion.

Examples of audience feedback:

'We all have our stories to tell and we mostly know the stories of people in our own communities when it is more important to learn the stories from the other communities. We need to keep talking, but more importantly, we need to keep listening'

'Made me think about how far we've come, and how much hope there is for the future'

The set for this production underlines the effort an individual makes to take that first step forward when attempting to address issues from the past – it is simply two empty doorframes which provide a visual underlining when a character enters or exits a space that is not theirs. These doorways are the borders that must be traversed for communication to begin. Also, the four characters are always on stage, so they can bear witness to each other's journey, which has resonance for the communal experience by the audience.

Those You Pass On The Street has toured extensively into a broad range of spaces across Ireland. To ensure this piece of work is still relevant after four years on the road, some social references have been edited to reflect cultural changes – this means the play can never be considered a history piece and open for dismissal. Its impact remains fresh. It is a human story for now.

The production has also played to capacity audiences at the National Arts Festival in Grahamstown, South Africa, on the genocide memorial in Kigali, Rwanda as part of the Ubumuntu Arts Festival, and at the Societaetstheater, Dresden. On each occasion the production themes had considerable resonance for these post-conflict audiences and resulted in animated discussions. Through gaining a knowledge of the Irish conflict, international audiences reassessed their own experiences.

***The West Awakes* by Kieron Magee, Jimmy McAleavey, Laurence McKeown and Roseleen Walsh (2010–17)**

The ever-increasing number of visitors to Belfast since the signing of the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement want to experience an authentic city, have access to local communities and personal narratives, and visit the iconic landmarks associated with the conflict. They have an expectation of high-end cultural tourism. Building on the success of the existing political tours of west Belfast, Kabosh commissioned four playwrights, each choosing a location along the historic Falls Road, beginning at St Comgall's School, and taking in Conway Mill, An Chultúrlann (a Gaelic arts hub), the City Cemetery and Milltown Cemetery. Each playwright was contracted to liaise with community experts at each site and script a 10- to 15-minute play set before 1969, when the most recent conflict started with the Battle of Bombay Street on the Lower Falls Road.

The project aim was to put the first-person narrative from Coiste (support agency for Republican ex-prisoners) tour guides into an historical context. Each tour guide tells the story of the Falls Road and the local community from 1969 to the present day, sharing their personal experiences of the British/Irish conflict and reflecting on the local and wider history of Ireland as they lead the audience from Divis Tower to Milltown Cemetery. (For those with mobility problems Kabosh partnered with Taxi Trax, who transported the audience in black taxis and the local drivers provided the tour.) The two-hander plays pop-up (guerrilla-style) on locations along the route as part of the two-and-a-half-hour living history tour.

An extract from the play at Conway Mill by Roseleen Walsh:

BIDDY: Poverty is a terrible thing, but so is the love a mother has for her children; it's not only terrible but frightening the lengths a mother will go to to protect her child! I may have been powerless against you BILLY because of poverty, but, for my children with all my weakness, I'd move mountains; (whispers softly) or at least I'd try!

Each play brings to life the rich and vibrant history of this unique area of the city of Belfast. The plays focus on men and woman who played key roles in the life of the Falls Road, exploring censorship within the British media, the industrial heritage of the area, origins of the Irish language, class politics and the power of the unions.

'The West Awakes provokes a response from its audience, forcing conversation and ultimately a greater understanding of our own collaborative identity' – *Irish Theatre Magazine*

The project appeals to local, national and international visitors, but it is also a unique way for the local community to experience their culture and landscape, and that of the 'other' community as told by them.

Since its inception this project has been revived on a regular basis for local festivals, tourism events, one-off commissions and international field trips. Each of the plays has also been performed in isolation without the linking tour guide at relevant conferences and events locally, nationally and internationally, highlighting pertinent issues of social and political importance.

The methodology for this project (short plays exploring social and political history performed in unusual locations as part of a guided walking tour) was utilised for *Shankill Stories* by Seth Linder on the Shankill Road. These tours were delivered by a member of the Shankill Area Social History Group examining military past, the impact of the Troubles, contemporary Unionist culture and the economic impact of industrial decline. The dramas were staged at Shankill Cemetery (grave robbing and body snatching), Shankill Library (the painful impact of the Battle of the Somme in the First World War), the Hammer area (women in the linen mills) and local community centre the Spectrum (the history of the area).

In addition, both *The West Awakes* and *Shankill Stories* were developed into an immersive digital app entitled 'Streets of Belfast'. This allowed audiences to experience the story of these two roads, told by its residents, from the comfort of their own environment. This is important for those who are still not ready to walk along either of the roads as they feel threatened by the single community identity of each (Falls: predominantly Catholic, Nationalist, Republican; and Shankill: predominantly Protestant, Unionist, Loyalist). The app also facilitates archiving the narrative and fabric of these infamous thoroughfares at an important period in history. The participating communities are also empowered by others bearing witness to their history as told by them.

Two Roads West by Laurence McKeown (2008–13)

Two Roads West tells the story of Rosie, back from London after 40 years, looking for memories of the city that once was. Her guide to the Belfast roads is taxi-driver Bill, cynical, world-weary, but not without hope. As the journey unfolds a connection is made. It is performed for an audience of five, in a black taxi that travels up the Falls Road, through the interface peace wall (a metal gate was opened for each performance to allow access), and down the Shankill Road.

The fabric of the two roads and its citizens are the backdrop to the story – they are a third character. In the aftermath of conflict arts projects such as *Two Roads West* can provide reasons for individuals to journey into the other neighbourhood. An essential first step in informed dialogue.

BILL: As long as it's the complete past, warts and all. If you just choose the bits that suit then you live in denial, thinking of a time when it was all supposed to be glorious.

ROSIE: Well maybe when we look back on things we remember the good and forget about the bad.

BILL: But then we never learn from the past. We end up with a distorted view of it which informs what we do now.

The play explores issues of identity, politics and change, and how space can look much different depending on our experience of it, the information we have, and what position, geographically or time-wise, we look at it from. It examines how we remember and often misremember.

'The concept that we ain't so different ain't so different, but what is different is this beautiful play's attempt to say we have more in common than apart' – *Culture NI*

In developing the script, Laurence McKeown met with several community leaders to ensure the political and historical fact was accurate, and to ensure ownership by residents. In addition, advice was sought from local activists regarding iconic landmarks for the taxi to pause at, and the characters to comment on, so due consideration was given to the narrative the local community would like explored. To keep the production live, the script was updated on a regular basis so any physical changes on the production route (such as murals, building work or demolition, and signage) were reflected.

For many local audience members, the production was the first time they had ventured to the other side of the peace wall. Often audiences didn't look at the actors but rather treated the experience like a radio play and watched the city unfold before them. They had safe access to un-curated daily life while listening to a drama. They were afforded the opportunity to look at their city with fresh eyes.

This project was reinvented for the Derry/Londonderry UK City of Culture 2013 and involved the audience journeying through the city in a taxi taking in the historical city walls, the Unionist Fountain area enclave and into the Nationalist Bogside area.

The following principles underpin our work.

How to avoid retraumatizing

Our ability to come to terms with conflict, and reconcile ourselves with its legacy, is determined by where we are on a time/geography axis to the source of violence: that is how recent/distant it was, whether we are in the same location, and how much we were impacted. Distance gives perspective. As an artist, determining what new narratives our audience is ready to consider directly impacts what we stage. An audience will simply reject a narrative or have a shallow engagement if they are not in a personal space where they can hear alternatives. This is very individual, which is why it is important to create work that can be revived and remounted for audiences when they are receptive.

There are several Kabosh projects still touring into communities five years after their premiere, performing to audiences who are only now ready to engage with the subject matter. Getting the timing of stagings right can only be done in association with agencies and individuals working within the community. They are experts in what might be well received and what may be too early in a community's development. When these gatekeepers become performance hosts, the impact is deeper, as they are trusted by the community; often this trust has been built up over a considerable period of time. Their presence, and their advocacy for the project, encourages the community to be receptive to the challenges thrown up by the production.

The artist must be prepared to listen when community agencies state their community isn't ready to explore certain issues of conflict resolution. Given the sensitivity of the themes, the artist must be cognisant that any timeframe for reconciliation is personal, as it can do untold damage when a community is forced to address issues before they are ready.

Single identity engagement

Too often when utilising arts to effectively address social issues, we measure success on the basis of getting different communities together to share their own testimonies and discuss their relationship with conflict. We progress to these 'Romeo and Juliet' projects, where we choose participants because of their perceived differences and to meet a quota, with unnecessary haste. The value of single-identity work is regularly under-estimated. In the north of Ireland, funding and policy often dictate that we move to cross-community work to demonstrate impact.

This can tend to produce a thinner reconciliation that simply means 'no violence' as opposed to the development of empathy and acceptance. Many members of society who lived through conflict have not been afforded facilitated environments where they can share personal experiences; they have frequently suppressed trauma and define themselves as unaffected. They have suppressed reactions as they opt to 'get on' with existing, ensuring they put in place the 'necessities of life' – education, healthcare, employment and housing; they never consider themselves as victims, but the pain is just below the surface, and unless we offer safe environments where informed conversations can take place, sectarianism will implode. Suspicion of the 'other' will germinate fear that can easily result in violence.

Crossing borders

Our work often encourages audiences to cross physical borders: traversing a peace wall (as in *Two Roads West*), entering a building associated with an opposing identity (as in attending *Green & Blue* in a Republican club), or walking through a community (as in *The West Awakes*). As well as taking the audience on an emotional journey, the theatre offers a reason for geographical exploration – borders are crossed. Having access to someone else's space begins the process of challenging prejudice.

Attending theatre is a collective activity, but the experience is individual. Memories are subjective; they can change with time and often we mis-remember, so it is important that theatre offers an alternative lens through which to view the past and challenge our recollections. This is particularly important when memories are painful, as we often form an acceptable perception of this past, so we can cope with its existence. These memories need interrogation and we need a facilitated opportunity to discuss them. Unless conflict and post-conflict communities are afforded these opportunities, the legacy of the past will lie dormant just below the surface, and with a distinct possibility of re-surfacing. When cultural memories are not dealt with, the cycle of violence can reignite in this pain.

The arts in the aftermath of conflict are essential in opening dialogue between communities. They bear witness to those we perceive to be other, challenging perceptions and building bridges through education and sharing of histories. Staging an alien narrative in a community setting allows for safe conversations that examine volatile issues around lack of integration. The perceived political independence of the artist allows difficult questions to be asked.

These issues emerge from our work and may be applicable to similar projects in other places marked by violent conflict.

Assessing impact

The impact of this work is experienced in the quality of post-show discussions. They are always animated. Audience members often thank the actors for reminding them they existed, that they are grateful that their pain is finally acknowledged and reassured they are not alone.

Quantifying impact is difficult, but Kabosh has developed an outcomes evaluation system to measure extent of audience attitudinal change regarding production themes. User-friendly evaluation forms are completed by audience members where they indicate attitudes on a sliding scale pre- and post-production. There is also space for additional comments. Through this system company output can be improved and impact can be articulated.

Long-term attitudinal change is notoriously difficult to assess, so Kabosh develops proactive links with community leaders to allow for different projects to be brought into communities when they are ready; the company has developed a canon of work exploring conflict resolution that ranges in sensitivity for different communities. These requests for new and repeat visits are quantified. Given that the work is designed for revival, Kabosh can respond to requests from different communities and/or venues when they arise. A tangible indication of impact is the number of performances delivered and how demand is ongoing.

Many of the projects also serve to become catalysts for new stories; audiences recognise that their voice is under-represented and feel motivated to share. Kabosh is constantly adding to its canon of post-conflict work motivated by community interest.

There is recognition for the invaluable role academic scholarship can play in evaluating and critiquing creative work, researching assessment methodologies, framing the work within a global context and developing user-friendly tools for data collation which the artist often does not have the resources to undertake. Artists are always looking to the next project and have limited time to explore long-term impact or intensive appraisal, which often devalues creative industry legacy within reconciliation. Artistic/academic partnerships offset this weakness.

Academia can also distil practice ensuring it is archived for future revival and taught to emerging artists and communities. Through mapping and cataloguing both process and product alongside project outcomes, this helps the artist define transferrable methodology for sharing locally, nationally and internationally. This sharing can take place within the formal education system and through workshops for practitioners.

Too often, academic knowledge as impetus for projects is underestimated by academics and the arts community – both are coming from a subjective interest base with refined knowledge determined by event and individual. There is value in academics being the catalyst for projects.

The transnational nature of this work

In recent years Kabosh has toured work about the conflict in the north of Ireland to Nigeria, South Africa, Rwanda, Germany and France. On each occasion, the performance led to informed, emotive conversations about the legacy of conflict, personal impact, and hope for the future. Experiencing human narratives of international conflict resolution provokes a reassessment of personal context. We remind audiences their memories are fluid, malleable and that this makes positive change possible.

In addition, methodology is transferrable across borders. There are many conflict zones that do not have a history of utilising theatre to deal with social issues. There is limited collaboration between artists and community-based NGOs. It is important to share the role artists can play in challenging myths, confronting prejudice, representing trauma and ultimately assisting individuals process the legacy of conflict.

Care of the artist

Difficult subject matter can be explored by professional actors, as they are perceived to be neutral, outside of the community. They can embody controversial characters, giving voice to polarised thoughts, aggressively challenging what is considered acceptable because the public don't consider them to be from a specific community, with an inbuilt loyalty or even carry personal baggage.

But as producers, it is important to remember that artists are individuals, from a specific community, part of the electorate. They can't be neutral. Undertaking work of this nature is emotionally challenging; for the sake of wellbeing, it cannot be undertaken continually. Given the goal is to encourage honest, emotive conversations, inevitably it results in audiences sharing personal narratives. The artists become keepers of these stories. This can be overwhelming.

Commemoration

Anniversaries offer an opportunity to interrogate the past within a new context. They offer a political willingness for investment, a community appetite for celebration, and an academic desire to garner responses from a range of informed voices. It is important that communities mark these historic occasions within their own settings and share their voice with other communities who haven't previously engaged with the narratives. Too often, commemorations host the acceptable narratives, memorialise rather than interrogate, and the opportunity to examine the past isn't embraced. This does not allow for a reassessment. We should aim with each anniversary to move the conversation forward. We should not find ourselves asking the same questions year on year. If we do, then we are not staging work that is attuned to the context of the production – we are not taking full advantage of the opportunity an anniversary offers.

In conclusion, in utilising theatre to assist with addressing sensitive issues around conflict and post-conflict, the responsibility of artist towards audience is heightened. Being acutely aware of production context is key. Striving to stage a production when a community is ready to really hear the subject matter, when they are ready to listen to a character. This is affected by what is being discussed (policing, victimhood or sectarianism), where it is staged (a single-identity community space, a perceived neutral non-arts space or a theatre), when it is staged (as part of a commemoration/anniversary event, as part of a grassroots development programme, the time of year and distance from conflict), and why it is happening now. There are occasions when it is not the ideal time to ask probing questions, when the community is not in a position to be open to new ideas, when the risk of retraumatising is heightened – the artist can still avail of the opportunity to gather first-person stories, research histories and explore community contacts with the aim of examining the event in future years.

The language of conflict and post-conflict is universal – we are dealing with the same issues: how can we move on without betraying the memory of a loved one or our community? How to avoid passing bitterness onto the next generation and repeating a cycle of violence? Is it possible to draw a line under the past or must we forgive and does that mean forgetting? How to reconcile oneself with the terminology of 'post-conflict' such as victim, survivor, perpetrator etc.? How to reimagine new possibilities for policing, justice or social structures?

We consider conflict parochial, but it is often easier to consider one's own history through engaging with another's. Sharing that termination of conflict is achievable, and difficult conversations can begin to be had, which generates hope for an inclusive, peaceful society. Theatre is an ideal live, communal medium to do this.

Paula McFetridge is Artistic Director of Kabosh Theatre Company





‘When cultural memories
are not dealt with, the cycle
of violence can reignite
in this pain’

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Photography

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