

Institution: Queen's University Belfast		
Unit of Assessment: 27 English Language and Literature		
Title of case study: Creative Connections and Civil Rights: Connecting the Disconnected through Theatre		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: October 2014 – October 2019		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s): Dr Michael Pierse	Role(s) (e.g. job title): Senior Lecturer in Irish Literature	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI: 1/2/2013-present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: October 2016 – September 2019		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No		
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>Pierse's research has made a major contribution to public debate and understanding regarding the representation of marginalised communities in Ireland. In addition to the impact of his ground-breaking edited collection on Irish working-class literature, he has collaborated with other scholars on <i>Creative Interruptions</i>, a co-produced exploration of ways in which exclusion can be challenged through the arts. This collaboration engaged community theatre practitioners and participants from diverse marginalised communities to produce a play, <i>We'll Walk Hand in Hand</i>, which connected the past and present struggle for civil rights and equality in Northern Ireland. In doing so, Pierse's research has not only helped to inform community theatre practice and challenge public understandings of equality but it has also benefitted participants from different marginalised communities.</p>		
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>Pierse's research has probed new frontiers in the study of marginalised experiences and creativity in Ireland, particularly in terms of literature and theatre, exploring how the disempowered have been represented and in doing so, find ways to be heard. He edited <i>A History of Irish Working-Class Writing (1)</i>, described by Dermot Bolger in <i>The Irish Times</i> as 'Pierse's colossal undertaking' that 'restores a lot of these voices and narratives to their rightful context within Ireland's literature' (31.3.18). The collection shines a light on Irish working-class history and experience which, Pierse argues, has been 'shrouded in silences' (1). The book, to which Pierse contributed the Introduction and a chapter, expands our understanding of Irish working-class history beyond the narrow focus on labour history that has garnered most scholarly attention. It illustrates the extent to which scholarly neglect of Irish working-class traditions of storytelling, poetry, agit-prop, theatre and fiction have served to disconnect collective experiences across time and space, and how that cultural production has itself sought to connect those same experiences (1).</p> <p>In October 2016, building on this interest, Pierse joined with colleagues from four other universities, together with non-academic collaborators, to explore the role of arts and creativity within diverse, marginalised, disenfranchised communities. They embarked on a three and a half-year research project funded by the AHRC (Oct 2016 – Mar 2020) and led by Prof Sarita Malik (Brunel University). The project, <i>Creative Interruptions</i>, used creative processes and critical reflection to examine how marginalised communities in different parts of the world employ arts, media and creative practices to challenge social exclusion (2).</p> <p>As one of four Co-Is, Pierse's strand – <i>Creative Connections and Civil Rights: Co-Producing Memories and Connecting the Disconnected through Community Theatre</i> – aimed to connect marginalised communities across historical and intersectional contexts. It also sought to enable communities experiencing marginalisation to connect with relatable experiences from the past and other contexts of oppression in the present. This followed from Pierse's emphasis (1, 4) on intersectional oppression, which links class, gender, sexuality, disability and other contexts, and the extent to which working-class drama and writing highlights this intersectionality, thereby creating forms of empowerment and solidarity.</p>		

The project was timed to coincide with the 50th anniversary commemoration of the Northern Ireland civil rights movement (1968-2018) and to connect this struggle with contemporary struggles for rights and equality involving women's groups, LGBTQ+ communities and refugees. Pierse's research has repeatedly drawn attention to Irish working-class writers' complaints about their communities' subjection to various forms of exclusion from institutional recognition and support (5). But part of this research has also sought to emphasise how diverse marginalised communities can, through theatre, draw strength from each other (4).

As an important part of *Creative Connections and Civil Rights*, Pierse collaborated with a long-term community theatre practitioner, Martin Lynch, on the production of a community play, *We'll Walk Hand in Hand*, which was performed at the Lyric Theatre in Belfast in March 2018. While Lynch wrote and directed the play, and Lynch's company, Green Shoot Productions, produced it, Pierse's research informed both the drama's content and the creative process which was central to the play's development. In light of his emphasis on the value of diversity in contemporary drama (4), Pierse worked with Lynch and the cast to develop a participative, intersectional approach to the development of *We'll Walk Hand in Hand*. This methodology allowed a number of representatives of disenfranchised groups to draw on their experiences to help shape the play. Those involved included working-class community activists, individuals from the LGBTQ+ community, refugees and asylum-seekers, and women's reproductive rights activists. They collaborated together in small groups to produce four short dramas, elements of which were then incorporated in the final play. Subsequently, Pierse, Lynch and the project's Community Co-Investigator, Fionntán Hargey, reflected on this process in an essay on co-creation, theatre and collaboration for social transformation (2). Pierse also worked with Hargey to carry out documentary and interview-based research on the history of the Northern Ireland civil rights movement which informed the play's content.

Pierse drew on the findings this latter research to curate an exhibition, *Connecting Civil Rights: Then and Now*, which was displayed initially at the Linen Hall Library in Belfast from 4th July to 31st August 2018, before travelling to community venues in Belfast and to a festival at the British Film Institute (BFI) in London (3). The exhibition featured artefacts from the Library's collection of Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association, together with some interviews from the *Creative Interruptions* project, and a showcase of the work of the community drama project.

3. References to the research

1. **Pierse, Michael, ed.**, *A History of Irish Working-Class Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p.461. **Output in REF 2.** Edited book. **Quality:** Declan Kiberd noted the collection will '...set many of the terms of cultural debate in the decade to come' ('Foreword'). Muireann Leech: 'Michael Pierse has done a great service to Irish studies in editing this first comprehensive examination of Irish working-class writing.' *Biography*, 42:2 (2019), pp.432-5. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/731820>
2. **Pierse, Michael, Martin Lynch and Fionntán Hargey**, 'Creatively Connecting Civil Rights: co-creation, theatre and collaboration for social transformation in Belfast' in Malik, Sarita, Churnjeet Mahn, Michael Pierse and Ben Rogaly (eds.), *Creativity and Resistance in a Hostile World* (Manchester: Manchester UP, February 2021) pp.142-180. ISBN-13: 978-1526152855. Book chapter. Available from HEI on request.
3. **Pierse, Michael** *Connecting Civil Rights: Then and Now* (2018, 2019) Linen Hall Library, Belfast; BFI, London, and other venues. Output type: Other/Exhibition. See: <https://linenhall.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Annual-Report-2018-web.pdf>
4. **Pierse, Michael**, 'People: Race, Gender, and Class on the Contemporary Irish Stage', in *The New Irish Studies: Twenty-First-Century Critical Revisions*, ed. by Paige Reynolds (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, July 2020), pp. 25-46. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108564205>. Book chapter. Available from HEI on request.
5. **Pierse, Michael**, 'Ireland's Working-Class Literature: Neglected Themes, Amphibian Academics, and the Challenges Ahead'. *Irish University Review* (2020) 50:1, 67-81. Journal article. DOI: 10.3366/iur.2020.0435. **Quality:** Peer-reviewed journal.

4. Details of the impact

Pierse's research has had a demonstrable impact on the role and understanding of marginalised communities in Northern Ireland in their struggle for civil rights and equality in three related areas. His work has positively informed local community theatre practice; it has resulted in beneficial impacts for theatre collaborators from marginalised communities across Northern Ireland and it has changed audience perceptions and challenged audiences, participants, and young people to reflect on the many-faceted fight for equality.

Impact on community theatre practice and participants

Pierse's research, and its emphasis on finding new ways to dramatise and understand working class and marginalised experiences, was instrumental in shaping both the conception and direction of the *Creative Connections and Civil Rights* project. It was also important in helping develop the dramaturgical, aesthetic and historical aspects of the community play produced for the project, *We'll Walk Hand in Hand*. This was especially important for helping staff from the play's production company, Green Shoot Productions, to better understand how people's experiences of marginalisation connected to the larger themes of the project (E).

We'll Walk Hand in Hand was written and directed by the community playwright, Martin Lynch, in partial co-production with community participants, and explores the parallels between the civil rights movement of 1960s Northern Ireland and the quest for equal rights in Northern Ireland today. The writer paid tribute to the ways in which the play's ethos, approach and content was indebted to Pierse's the historical and dramaturgical research:

'[I]t was entirely due to Michael's intervention that the play – originally intended by the playwright to be a historical play – was transformed into a play that covered and dealt with, not only the original civil rights struggle but the issues of contemporary civil rights, such as, gender, abortion, housing, asylum seekers and sexuality. Very importantly, Michael pushed the idea that we should have community participants centrally involved, including actors...His work on research and specifically his substantial interviews with veteran 1960's civil rights activists was particularly effective and useful for the project. This had a strong influence on the ethos of the project and finally, on the script for the theatre piece, *We'll Walk Hand In Hand*.' (G)

A total of twenty-two members of marginalised communities were initially involved in co-producing the four small-scale dramas and a radio play which fed into *We'll Walk Hand in Hand*. An activist congratulated Queen's, Green Shoot Productions and Creative Interruptions 'for the opportunity to participate and state our case for free, safe, legal abortion in Northern Ireland' and underscored Pierse's emphasis on using 'creativity' to 'tackle silence and stigma' (E). Eight of the original participants went on to perform in the final play. It was the first time that any of them had acted in a professionally produced play (D). One of them, Warsame Mahadi, an asylum seeker from Somalia, was given a major role, despite never having been in a theatre before the project (J). Another, Tony Catney, who had not previously acted, left a building site early every day for rehearsals and reported significant personal development 'out of my comfort zone' (J). Others reported similar impact (D), particularly in terms of the small-group process. One participant noted, 'I think the smaller groups take the lead in effectiveness. People were dramatising their own stories, which were powerful and relevant' (D). The extent to which Mahadi's acting skills developed in the production is illustrated in the *Irish News* reviewer comment he 'made a very good stab at Mike' (A). In an interview for a documentary broadcast by the community TV station, NVTV, Mahadi commented: 'Being on stage, it's great [...] It's amazing, yeah' [I]; the premier was 'my happiest day ever' (J). In project evaluation feedback, other marginalised participants spoke of gaining 'greater appreciation for the struggle of humanity'; of feeling their involvement had 'opened my eyes to the struggles other people are going through'; being 'proud of my community's involvement'; and appreciating the fact that 'people were dramatizing their own stories, which were powerful and relevant' (D).

The play's process also raised the awareness for individual participants of the challenges and experiences which those from other groups participating in the project had undergone. Orla

McKeagney, a community facilitator commissioned by Green Shoot Productions, worked closely with the groups of participants during the project. She recalled that some members of the refugee and asylum seeker group had initially been wary of working with the women's reproductive rights activists; '... but that [attitude] then changed ... because they felt they were being listened to ... so they felt more prepared' (H).

Impact on public attitudes and understanding

Through the play, exhibition and school visits, a significant number of people engaged with the work of the *Creative Interruptions* project in Northern Ireland, including the following:

- An estimated 18,000 people visited the Linen Hall Library from 1 July to 31 August 2018 (B) and of these a good proportion would have seen the Connecting Civil Rights exhibition which was centrally displayed across two floors of the library including at the main entrance.
- 3,329 people saw *We'll Walk Hand in Hand* in large audiences in Northern Ireland's premier theatre, the Lyric Theatre, Belfast (22nd – 31st March 2018), in the Sean Holywood Arts Centre, Newry (10th April 2018), at a sell-out performance in Derry's main theatre, The Playhouse (11th April 2018), in The Marketplace Theatre, Armagh (12th April 2018) and the Burnavon Arts Centre, Cookstown (13th April 2018) (A).
- The exhibition was hosted by two libraries in socially deprived areas of Belfast in February and March 2019 (11th February – 4th March 2019: Colin Glenn Library (Dairy Farm); 4th March – 25th March 2019: Shankill Library). From 17-19 June that year, it also travelled to the British Film Institute, London, to form part of a festival, 'Creative Interruptions: A Festival of Arts and Activism'. Between these venues, the exhibition received hundreds more visitors. A NI librarian noted that visitors 'expressed great interest in the subject matter and thought that it was very interesting and very informative' (B).

The play had a beneficial impact on the knowledge and perceptions of a significant number of its audience. 342 audience members took part in an optional anonymous questionnaire-based survey at the Lyric and Playhouse theatres (C). 40% of respondents reported that the play had 'very much' challenged them to think differently about a community or person represented in the play (C). Just over half (52%) said they intended to reflect privately on the meaning of the work after the performance, while almost half (45%) said they intended to read more about 1960s civil rights after the performance; 40% said they intended to read more about contemporary civil rights (C).

The play also provoked a range of audience emotions and responses, often quite intense. Examples include: 'Anger at what happened. Sympathy. Anger that politics is just as bad at present'; 'Sadness, because we should all be equal and in 2018 we're still fighting for rights'; 'Very strong emotions, but feel we do need change, rights for everyone' (C). *Irish News* reviewer Jane Hardy noted that there was a standing ovation at the performance she attended. She also commented that the play successfully conveyed 'a sense we still need that spirit of the 60s' (A).

Follow-on impacts from project and production

There were three further strands of impact which arose from the research and its contribution to the play. Firstly, for eight weeks in July and August 2018, the aforementioned exhibition was held at the Linen Hall Library in Belfast. This subsequently transferred to the BFI in London in for 17-18 June 2019. The Green Shoots founder noted that the exhibition 'provided a great focal point for the project, the actors, the stage play and the public at large' (G) while the play's freelance facilitator stated that Pierse's curation of the exhibition 'add[ed] a lot of weight to what we are doing too which [is] really important to us' (E). Evaluating the impact of the exhibition, Green Shoot's founder remarked, 'Visitors were such that we received numerous requests from a varied range of schools, community venues, etc to host the Exhibition and this was duly done' (G).

Secondly, there was a beneficial impact on school and further education students. From November 2018 to January 2019 and in response to those requests, Green Shoot Productions ran a number of workshops based on the play and exhibition. In total, 153 students in four

schools and further education colleges in Belfast took part in these sessions and all responded to an evaluation survey carried out by GSP. Of these 153 students, across these institutions, 89% (136) said they knew more about civil rights than they had previously. 'Very good, made me change my point of view,' one respondent said, while another commented on 'the rights people are fighting for and my rights as a person' (F).

Thirdly, the research has had a marked impact on Green Shoot Productions' broader community theatre work; commenting on this, Green Shoot's founder said that working with Pierse 'enhanced our knowledge of our own practice, our capacity to access funding, helped attract interest from a documentary maker and get our work into libraries in Belfast and the British Film Institute in London' and concludes, 'I would do it all again in a heartbeat' (G).

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- A. Newspaper and Facebook captures. The Green Shoot Productions Facebook page (9 April 2018) stated that these two productions were sold out.' Jane Hardy, 'We'll Walk Hand In Hand leaves you with a sense that we still need the spirit of the 60s', *Irish News*, 30 March 2018. Email from GSP confirming overall box office figures.
- B. Linen Hall Library Annual Report, 2015, which reports annual footfall 112,723 (p. 12). The figure of 18,000 is a conservative QUB estimate based on a proportion of the Linen Hall library's overall annual footfall. A separate email from librarian, Libraries NI, details the impact of a smaller exhibit at two local libraries.
- C. Excel worksheet containing audience survey data. 342 audience members took part in the survey as a whole. The 40% figure relates to the 328 respondents who answered the question 'To what extent did you feel challenged to think differently about a community or person represented in the play?' by selecting 5 (= 'very much') on a scale running from 1 to 5. The other percentage figures reported relate to the proportion of question respondents who answered 'yes' to relevant statements in the survey questionnaire in each instance. The total number of respondents for each of those latter questions was 296.
- D. Responses to Participant Survey – interview data from interviews conducted with participants in the performances and workshops ran by Creative Interruptions team. This was opened in August 2019, to all community actors on the project, via a Google Forms survey platform and incentivised with a £10 voucher. Six responded.
- E. Community groups and theatre practitioners. (i) Co-Chair of Women's Support Network comments at launch of *Departures* (radio play). (ii) Interviews with Theatre practitioners (working for/through Green Shoot Productions) and community workers conducted by Co-ordinators of Creative Interruptions project.
- F. Schools Survey data. This was conducted by Green Shoot Productions, with the Excel sheet data input by an assistant at QUB. 122 students responded (Boalian sessions) and a further 31 students who attended the workshops (153 in total).
- G. Testimony, undated, from writer and director of 'We'll Walk Hand in Hand' (and Founder of GSP): comments on Pierse's contribution to Creative Connections and Civil Rights project.
- H. Hasan-Bounds, Daisy, and Sarita Malik and Jasber Singh, "'Lived theory': the complexities of radical openness in collaborative research" in Malik, Sarita, Churnjeet Mahn, Michael Pierse and Ben Rogaly (eds.), *Creative Interruptions: Creativity and Resistance in a Hostile World* (Manchester: Manchester UP, November 2020), pp.41-80 (esp. pp.41-57).
- I. NVTV documentary, '[We'll Walk Hand in Hand](#)' (August 2018). Mahdi comments from 29:18-29:40 mins.
- J. Pierse, Michael, Martin Lynch and Fionntán Hargey, 'Creatively Connecting Civil Rights: co-creation, theatre and collaboration for social transformation in Belfast' in Malik, Sarita, Churnjeet Mahn, Michael Pierse and Ben Rogaly (eds.), *Creativity and Resistance in a Hostile World* (Manchester: Manchester UP, February 2021) pp.142-180. ISBN-13: 978-1526152855. Book chapter. Available from HEI on request.