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CHARABANC, CULTURAL CAPITAL AND THE MEN OF RECOGNISED CREDIT

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Abstract:

This paper compares the cultural legacy of the all-female Charabanc with that of Field Day, its fellow counterpart in the Irish Theatre touring movement in the 1980s. It suggests that a conscious awareness amongst the all-male Field Day board of successful writers and directors of what Bourdieu has called 'cultural capital' is implicated in the enduring authority of the work of that company within the history of Irish theatre. Conversely the paper considers if the populist Charabanc, in its steadfast refusal to engage with the hierarchies of academia and publishing, was too neglectful of the cultural capital which it accrued in its heyday and has thus been party to its own occlusion from that same history.

Keywords: Charabanc, Field Day, Cultural Capital, Gender, Archival Research, Irish Theatre History, The Economics of Theatre.

This paper examines the cultural legacy of Charabanc and Field Day, two of the most significant theatre companies to emerge on the island of Ireland in the 1980s. It will consider why one company, Field Day, has published all of its work, received considerable scholarly and

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critical attention and achieved canonical status for at least three of its productions, while the other, Charabanc, has only recently managed to publish its plays, is fast becoming in danger of being occluded from the history of Irish Theatre and is usually only considered within the ghetto of women's theatre. Such a comparative approach is not novel. Scholars such as Helen Lojek have also sought to consider the all-female Charabanc's lack of cultural authority in the light of that enjoyed by their male contemporaries, Field Day. Lojek cites Charabanc's refusal to theorise its work and its choice of popular forms in its dramaturgy, which were at odds with the prevailing tradition of Irish literary theatre, as reasons for the cultural credit or lack of cultural credit assigned to the legacies of the respective companies. This paper wholly endorses Lojek's analysis of the reasons why Charabanc has received scant attention in the history of Irish theatre. However, it builds upon her position by suggesting that an application of Pierre Bourdieu's theories of cultural capital to the historical discrepancy in the critical legacies of Field Day and Charabanc throws further light upon the subject. It is at this point that I must position myself as a founder member of Charabanc Theatre. In my analysis I might therefore stand accused of a degree of partisanship. It is, however, over twenty years since I parted company with Charabanc. To paraphrase Christopher Marlowe it seems now as if that experience took place in another country and "besides the wench is dead". This Charabanc "wench" is still very much alive but hindsight has enabled a more objective critical perspective on the respective significance of Field Day and Charabanc.

In 1964, based upon his analysis of student performance in higher education in *Les étudiants et Leurs études*, the French sociologist Bourdieu arrived at the conclusion that "behaviour within the economic system relates strategically with behaviour within the social and cultural systems" (Robbins 34). In equating culture with currency in "a system which assigns more value to some tastes than to others" (Robbins 32) he explains how "students who lacked the necessary 'cultural capital' were destined to failure" (Robbins xiii) within an education system

which privileged cultural investment. In refining this notion Bordieu came to the conclusion that “the cultural sphere operates autonomously as a market” (Robbins 34). By applying his equation to the world of the arts it follows that an artist who has invested in acquiring objectified cultural capital (an identifiable track record of previous achievements in his or her artistic product) will find it easier to generate further cultural credit in terms of funding and credibility. As Benjamin Franklin puts it in economic terms: “the honest man of recognised credit” may “for six pounds a year . . . have the use of one hundred pounds provided he is both honest and prudent” (qtd. in Weber 2). An application of this maxim to the cultural sphere is pertinent to the accounts of both Field Day, men of recognised cultural credit from the outset, and Charabanc, whose inception and development were achieved in spite of a considerable deficit in cultural capital.

The Men of Recognised Credit

In her programme notes for *The Cure at Troy* in 1990 Mary Holland records the origins of Field Day, which she locates in its co-founder Stephen Rea’s desire to return to Ireland to “make some contribution to what was happening here” (Byrne 66). Christopher Morash puts a less altruistic spin on Rea’s motivation when he states that in London Rea was “chafing under the limitations imposed by success” (235) and of being an Irishman adrift in the world of English theatre. Similarly Friel, at the same time, wanted greater control over the staging of his plays expressing frustration at the degree to which a director could “interpret his [Friel’s] plays in any way which is distinctive to him” (Morash 235). Both men were searching for an opportunity to take control of their own artistic product and were looking towards a homecoming to enable them to do this. An opportunity presented itself when, as Holland suggests, Rea “heard that there might be some money available from the Northern Ireland Arts Council to promote theatre in the province” (Byrne 66). Up until this point regional touring in Northern Ireland had

been confined to “buy-ins” from companies such as Theatre North, based in England, and the South of Ireland’s Irish Theatre Company (Arts Council of Northern Ireland Annual Report 1977-78). However, by the end of the 1970s “following the lead given by cultural critics such as Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams” (Kershaw 17) in England, there was a swing in ACNI’s funding priorities towards a more indigenous, culturally democratic policy. Bourdieu has suggested that the possessors of institutionalized cultural capital, such as Arts Councils, “are consolidated social groups which have the power to prescribe or pre-empt the ways in which individuals might try to use objectivated cultural capital” (Robbins 35). In other words the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, feeling assured of the success of Field Day because of the illustrious track records of Friel, the internationally successfully playwright, and Rea, an established London-based actor, “prescribed” the funding of these “men of recognised credit” to carry forward their plans. The words “funding available”, magical to the ears of any theatrical entrepreneur, no doubt gave Friel and Rea encouragement to form the new regional company which they called Field Day.

The choice of Derry as a launching pad for a new theatrical venture was a canny one. Derry has long been perceived, rightly or wrongly, as a location of victim-hood: the site of “Bloody Sunday”; the place where “the men on the dole take the mother’s role” (Song: Coulter, Phil. *The Town I Loved So Well*); the underdog vis-a-vis the capital Belfast, rejected in favour of Coleraine as the site for a new university and theatre. Thus, the city’s symbolic significance certainly added to the cultural resonance of the project. It did no harm either that Field Day’s “maiden” voyage, *Translations*, took place in the “maiden” city with its border location between two states and its proximity to Inishowen [Donegal], the setting for *Translations*. The role of Derry City Council, who provided £13,000 to build a stage and install a lighting rig in the Victorian Guildhall, was fundamental in turning the première of this new play into an important civic occasion. The Council recognised the

political and cultural capital to be made out of staging a new Brian Friel play by a company which included such theatrical luminaries as Stephen Rea, Ray McAnally and Liam Neeson. They settled their usual "Nationalist versus Unionist" political differences to ensure that, for one night, "Derry would become the cultural centre of Ireland" (Morash 238). Unionist Mayor, Marlene Jefferson, played hostess for the evening. Morash records that she was joined by Friel, local politicians and the famous Irish actor Cyril Cusack. The audience also included "two future Nobel Laureates, Seamus Heaney and [politician] John Hume, as well as the Abbey's Artistic Director, Joe Dowling, Colm O'Briain and Michael Longley [from the two Arts Councils], Tom Murphy, Seamus Deane and reporters from all the major Irish and British newspapers" (Morash 238) plus the Catholic Bishop of Derry. The seating plan for the evening required careful planning as to "who was going to sit beside each other" (Rea, Stephen. Radio interview). The event was meticulously planned, underpinned by the resources of both local government and Arts Council subsidy, endorsed by the hierarchies of church, state, the arts, academia and the media and involving prestigious and culturally powerful men amongst its main protagonists. It was an unmitigated triumph for Friel, Rea and their hosts. Everyone was a winner and Field Day's stock in terms of relationships with its funding partners, its audience base, its employees and its reviewers was at its highest.

Marilyn Richtarik has recorded how the gathering together of a board of directors for Field Day was based on the pragmatic reason that such a body was needed to enable the company to apply for the charitable status which would open the door to funding opportunities. She also records that Seamus Deane, poet, literary critic and academic, Seamus Heaney, poet and Nobel Laureate, David Hammond, musician and film-maker, and Tom Paulin, poet, critic, academic, playwright and arts broadcaster, were all part of the Friel /Rea wider social circle (Richtarik 66). The addition of four (the playwright, Thomas Kilroy, joined the board at a later date) such accomplished and well known

individuals to the stellar partnership of Rea and Friel brought an additional advantage: an enhanced network of personal interconnectedness with the individuals who were the decision-makers and major players in publishing, the media, academia and the wider cultural sphere in Ireland, the UK and America. However, the involvement of the new board in the Field Day business was not to remain on a purely policy-making level. Friel is on record as saying that "it seemed wasteful not to make use of the talents of enthusiastic friends to deliver future plays" and "contribute to the debate between culture and politics" (Richtarik 66). "In 1983 the company began publishing pamphlets, the first set written by three of the new directors: Paulin, Heaney and Deane" (Byrne 67). These "first pamphlets caused considerable controversy and received a stormy reception in intellectual circles" (Byrne 67) due to the perception that they were promoting a nationalist agenda. This diversification into publication has been cited by Richtarik as "the most basic fault line" (239) in the company's structure. The pamphlets, she suggests, blur the line between art and criticism and obscure Field Day's original theatrical impetus. Fifteen years on, in the wake of the collapse of the Field Day operation, her observations have proved prophetic. As the nineties progressed, the original "fault line" developed into a seismic split in which the energies of the company were increasingly diverted away from its theatrical intent by the financial pressures of its publishing arm. The troubled history of Field Day's venture into canon-formation with the publication of *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* is recorded in the Field Day board papers.

These papers, recently acquired by the Theatre Archive of the Linenhall Library Belfast, are composed of minutes, bulletins and items of correspondence. From 1981 to 2002 they chart the development and demise of Field Day. They allow us a glimpse "warts and all" of the internal debates among board members, the sometimes haphazard process of commissioning writers and theatre directors, the crippling debt incurred in

the production of the Field Day Anthology and the board's attitudes towards their contemporaries, which was not always complimentary.

The pre-1990 papers reflect Board meetings as convivial gatherings of "the Field Day clan" (Field Day Minutes 11th December 1988; this set of minutes is written entirely in verse). There is sometimes an atmosphere of general levity at the meetings in which in-jokes are shared and board members poke gentle fun at each other, but Field Day's cultural situation "at the heart of Irish intellectual life" (Hughes 67) is never far from the surface. At a meeting at Drumaweir House in 1988 the discussion on commissioning the following year's play reads like a "who's who" of Irish letters in the 1980s. The extract is worth quoting almost in full since it demonstrates not only Field Day's methods of commissioning plays but their personal inter-relatedness to prominent figures in Irish cultural life:

In sum Brian Friel is to 'work on' Eugene McCabe [...]. Thomas Kilroy said we should nurse the McGahern play which he liked. Others didn't but Stephen Rea encouraged Thomas Kilroy to talk to McGahern and see if he would write something else [...]. Stephen Rea was to talk to Stewart Parker and Thomas Kilroy to Frank McGuinness, in that order. Brian Friel raised possibility of Thomas Kilroy play opening with The Organisation by doing some deal of a squalid nature with Max Stafford Clark [...]. Derek Mahon was mentioned as a possibility [...]. (Field Day Minutes: 28th May 1988)

The above extract makes plain how the institution that was Field Day was seeking to maximise its objectified cultural capital by including in its future programming only male Irish writers of established track record who might bring cultural prestige to the enterprise as well as delivering a play which would hopefully achieve canonical status. The December 1988 minutes in particular demonstrate that the members of the Field Day board were consciously aware of their own cultural capital and how to manipulate its system of balances and debits. In the "verse"

minutes in a discussion about securing reviews for Field Day pamphlets, Tom Paulin and Seamus Heaney raid

Their memories for the literary editors
Who could be thought to be the creditors
In a cultural sense of our enterprise.

(Field Day Minutes: 11th December 1988)

Post-1990 the Field Day Papers are marked by an absence of such cultural confidence. There is a sense that both economically and culturally the company is running out of credit. There had been a split between the founding partners Rea and Friel, when Friel by-passed Field Day and gave his play *Dancing at Lughnasa* to the Abbey for production. At the same time Rea's own burgeoning film career was beginning to prevent him from taking a lead in programming the theatrical arm. The other directors, though wholly conversant with the intricacies of the world of publishing, appear to have had little understanding of the business of putting on plays. At the beginning of the 1990s company relationships and morale were at an all-time low. In a handwritten up-date to the board directors David Hammond writes, "I was taken aback by the actor's letter, by its tone and its huge catalogue of complaints". He observes: "somehow or another, we need to give more support to the people in our employ [...] we need to arrange a system where we can remain in touch with them and their salaries and working conditions" (Field Day Memo: 13th August 1990).

In a bulletin to his fellow directors dated 11th December 1991 Friel himself complains that Field Day had lost touch with its audience and no longer had the groundswell of support which they had enjoyed prior to and after the production of *Translations*. In Gramscian terms they had lost the sentimental attachment of their particular people nation. They had raised hackles by including few women writers in the first anthology and funding bodies were becoming wary when promised projects were not realised. The papers reveal project after project being

shelved because no-one seemed to know how to take them forward. Even the important relationship with Derry City Council was foundering, with David Hammond remarking on 4th September 1992 that no one had time to meet with its representatives to discuss a proposed project. The perceived elitism of the subject matter of their plays had lost them their popular support. Ironically, in his programme notes to *Three Sisters* (1981), Seamus Deane had criticised the Lyric Theatre Belfast for its elitist desire to give a poets' theatre to the people of Belfast. Whereas, it could be argued, given the number of poets and scholars who contributed plays to the Field Day canon (Heaney, Mahon, Paulin and Eagleton) that in many ways Field Day itself had become a theatre of and for poets and academics. This, combined with the self-avowed disaster of productions such as Kilroy's *Madame Macadam Travelling Theatre*, led to a falling away of the Field Day audience. In 1991 Friel laments:

Once the dominant, most audible, even the defining voice of Field Day, our theatre is now in a very depleted state. We have lost our audience. Neither playwrights nor actors want to work with us. For the first time ever we are in serious debt. (Field Day Memo: 11th December 1991)

At a meeting in Derry on 4th September 1992, the board were divided about whether to proceed with an option on a play by Terry Eagleton. The administrator, Gary McKeone, cautioned that the company had "to do something by the end of March to keep the Northern Ireland Arts Council grant of £52,000". He also observed that

Field Day seemed intent on finding the perfect play. This did not exist and he felt that risks should be taken in an attempt to win back some of the lost energy. He suggested that the perfect way back was to do a new Friel play. Brian Friel said he had had two plays rejected by Field Day and was still hurting about that. (Field Day Minutes: 4th September 1992)

It would seem that by 1992 Field Day was floundering in its search for an artistic policy. The cultural credit accrued in the 1980s was ebbing away along with Field Day's actual financial credit.

Seamus Deane in his programme notes to *Three Sisters* remarks: "Field Day is a sense of risk, from the economic to the aesthetic level". Given their subsequent financial embarrassments in the 1990s, he never said a truer word. The cost of producing the successive volumes of the *Anthology of Irish Writing* in the late 1980s had landed the company with a financial headache. In 1993 Paulin wrote to Friel about the "enormous debt" which "weighs on us". He states: "I worry a lot about the debt and wonder how we can ever repay it or get it somehow rescinded" (Field Day Letter: 21st February 1993). Later that year the decision was taken to secure a loan from a sympathetic benefactor in the USA. There is no doubt that the burden of this loan repayment was central to the Field Day "endgame". The thrust of all the post-1990 minutes is concerned with how it is to be paid back. By December 1992 Friel was remarking that Field Day "could not approach the old reliables again" (Field Day Minutes: 13th December 1992) amongst American funders in order to bail out the deficit on the Anthology project. Field Day were reduced to considering "selling off the family silver" in terms of items from their archive in order to raise cash. The Field Day Papers do not reveal how the financial dilemma was resolved. The resignations of Kilroy, Paulin and Friel left Deane, Hammond and Rea to wind up Field Day.

The reasons why Field Day eventually folded are not of course completely economic. The "fault lines" occasioned by the tension between their artistic and critical operations as cited by Richtarik, personal and artistic differences, the unwieldiness of having a board of seven (most of whom were not resident in Northern Ireland) to determine both artistic policy and programming, the communication problems which arose between executive, management and employees and the economics of running a large organisation on comparatively little funding, these all played their part. However, there can be no

doubt that in undertaking *The Anthology of Irish Writing* the "men of recognised credit" had finally become "overdrawn".

Field Day's demise may have been somewhat painful but the place of this company in Irish Theatre history is guaranteed by ample consideration of its work in major overviews of Irish Theatre, on-going critical interest in the company and the presence of its plays on the syllabi of schools and universities. Antony Roche in *Contemporary Irish Drama* suggests that "the dramatic qualities of the plays it commissioned remain Field Day's greatest strength and legacy" (244). Christopher Murray has suggested that of the twelve plays staged by Field Day "at least three, *Translations*, *Double-Cross* and *Pentecost*, stand out as being among the best Irish plays of the past twenty five years" (222). Such is the legacy of the cultural capital which Field Day carefully accrued during its theatrical "glory days" in the 1980s.

Charabanc: The Feisty Young Fillies

If Field Day were at the centre of the establishment and at the heart of Irish intellectual life, Charabanc operated in its margins and peripheries. Parallels have been drawn between the two companies perhaps because they emerged around the same time (Field Day in 1980 and Charabanc in 1983) or perhaps because Field Day were six men and Charabanc were five women. Roy Connolly includes Charabanc in the list of theatre companies called into being by the example of Field Day (Connolly 39). In actual fact the emergence of the Derry-based company did not influence the Charabanc actresses in their early career either to react against or to emulate its example in any way. Fully occupied as they were with the difficulties they faced in trying to live and work in Belfast, they paid scant regard to the phenomenon which was happening in Derry. Imelda Foley has described the two companies as existing almost in "binary opposition" (39). Charabanc was in fact everything which Field Day was not. The co-founders of Field Day had established artistic and academic

reputations which were more than sufficient to secure Arts Council subvention for *Translations* from the outset.

The women of Charabanc, who had no such track record, had to seek funding from the Action for Community Employment Job Creation Scheme and rely on the generosity of their fellow actors to fund *Lay Up Your Ends*. Field Day was concerned in its work with traditional male-oriented issues relating to conflict and national identity, whilst Charabanc took a broader definition of what is considered political and concentrated on issues of gender and class. Field Day commissioned individual authors who were solely responsible for scripting the plays. Charabanc relied on a more collaborative means of production. Field Day was perceived to be intellectual and even elitist, whilst Charabanc was deliberately populist. Field Day had all their plays published. Charabanc, up until 2006, had only one play, *The Hamster Wheel*, in print. In that year Claudia Harris's collection, *The Charabanc Theatre Company: Four Plays*, was a warmly welcomed addition to Charabanc studies. Charabanc's first play *Lay Up Your Ends*, which was not included in Harris's collection, was finally published in 2008, the 25th anniversary of its first performance.

Charabanc was a company of women who brought little cultural capital with them into their creative enterprise. What credit they accrued was due to their enormous energy, an openness to new ways (to them) of approaching theatre and a determination to succeed born out of their indignation at not being able to work as actresses in their own place. Most of the previous acting experience of Marie Jones, Maureen McAuley, Brenda Winter, Carole Scanlan (now Moore) and Eleanor Methven had been confined to supporting roles in provincial theatre mostly in musicals, children's theatre and schools touring. As actresses resident in Belfast they all found it difficult to find satisfying work. This was in a large part due to the fact that they were employed, or rather mostly unemployed, in a male-dominated industry where "women were proportionately under-represented in the most senior directorial posts [...] and in the membership of theatre boards" (Cork

Enquiry into Professional Theatre in England 1986. Qtd. in Gardiner 98). The situation was even worse in Belfast where "until 1991 [...] the three main houses, the Grand Opera House, the Belfast Civic Arts Theatre and the Lyric Players, were controlled by male boards of directors" (Foley 23). An examination of the Lyric Theatre's cast-lists between August 1981 and July 1982 reveals its board to be heavily biased towards a masculine-led means of theatre production. In that year eighty-three male and thirty-eight female roles were cast in a season which exclusively featured the work of male playwrights (Connolly 254). Consequently the majority of Belfast actresses were culturally and economically surplus to requirements.

Casting decisions in 1981 at the Lyric Theatre were the responsibility of the artistic director, Leon Rubin, who exacerbated an already bad employment situation by "importing" actors from England to play leading roles in the season. It was indignation which galvanised the Charabanc actresses into doing something about their unemployed status and they decided to stage their own production. They approached writer Martin Lynch to ask him to write some sketches which they could perform in community venues. He suggested they should produce a full-length play which, with his help, they would research and write themselves. Collaboratively the company, with Lynch, wrote and produced *Lay Up Your Ends*.

Lay Up Your Ends opened on 15th May 1983 in a packed-to-the-rafters Arts Theatre Belfast. By October it had been seen by 3,515 people in 96 performances in 59 different venues. The play toured to community centres, leisure centres, converted cinemas and theatre venues, in rural and urban areas, north and south of the border and on both sides of Northern Ireland's religious divide. The company played to acclaim at the Dublin Theatre Festival and at the Glasgow Mayfest where they won the prestigious "Spirit of the Festival" award. A tour of the then Soviet Union subsequently took the company to Moscow, Leningrad (St Petersburg) and Vilnius in Lithuania.

In its twelve-year history Charabanc produced eighteen new plays and toured to Germany, Canada, London and the USA. Ophelia Byrne credits Charabanc with being in "the vanguard for independent touring in Ireland" (73). They generated a huge amount of new writing demonstrating that women could produce work which was funny and meaningful and relevant to people's lives. The Bloomsbury Theatre Guide described them as "one of the most entertaining companies to emerge out of Northern Ireland" (Byrne 74). A study of the company's tattered scrapbook (Charabanc Collection Linenhall Library Belfast Cat no. Char/SB/1) reveals that, from London to Leningrad and from Belfast to Baltimore, they were lauded and praised for their "pithy and dark and incisively unsentimental humour [...] and their ensemble playing" (*Irish Times* 29th December 1987).

However, *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth Century Irish Drama* published in 2004 entirely occludes Charabanc Theatre Company in its survey of Irish Theatre, although the founding of the company in 1983 is mentioned in its chronology. The absence of any other mention of the company in such a prestigious publication would seem to indicate that its work is perceived as being of no great import in the history and analysis of Irish Theatre. Other overviews of Irish Theatre do mention Charabanc warmly but they skirt briefly over its work and influence. Roche refers to Charabanc as "a major development in women's theatre" (241). His designation of their work as "women's theatre" could be interpreted as suggesting that this form is outside the mainstream of theatre and, therefore, need not be subject to the same rigorous, critical consideration. He does, however, devote a page to detailing the history of the company, praising in particular *Somewhere Over the Balcony* as characterising "many of Charabanc Theatre Company's strengths" (241). Morash also confines Charabanc's work within an "emergence in the 1980s of women's companies, gay and lesbian theatre, and theatre [by] and for the disabled, all of which introduced new voices to the Irish stage" (263). Morash does admit that Charabanc was the "most important of these voices" (263) and that

Charabanc went on "to travel the world" (266) but only spends fourteen lines on detailing its work. Murray devotes a paragraph to Charabanc but considers them in the context of their association with Martin Lynch. He does say, however, that Charabanc "deserves attention in its own right". He identifies their major achievements as the development of Marie Jones as a writer and their ability to sustain a position of neutrality in Northern Irish politics commenting that "in the North that is no mean theatrical trick" (195).

The analysts who have written in a more sustained way about the company are all American women. Helen Lojek has observed that "American academics (perhaps sensitized by their own provincial status, perhaps intrigued by work emerging from a region that was home to so many of [their] ancestors, were more interested in Charabanc than were the English analysts who lived in closer proximity" (90). One might add that, with the notable exception of Ophelia Byrne whose short overview of Ulster theatre devotes six pages to Charabanc, these American students of the theatre seem more interested in the company than even those who were living on the same island. Lojek, Maria Di Cenzo and Claudia Harris have all done much to highlight and promote the work of Charabanc in Ireland and in the United States.

Why then has the legacy of Charabanc been critically neglected on the island of Ireland? It might of course be that their work lacks intrinsic and sustainable value, or it could be that their choice of a dramaturgy influenced by post-Brechtian methods of British popular, political theatre, which they were introduced to by their first director Pam Brighton, was at odds with prevailing paradigms of the Irish literary canon and its preoccupation with identity and the national problem. Mary Trotter has stated her belief that "Irish women dramatists are in a double bind, as the very forms of Irish realism traditionally used against hostile representations of Irish culture are themselves often hostile, or at least indifferent, to the realities of Irish woman" (176).

She suggests that successful Irish women dramatists, such as Marina Carr and Christina Reid, have circumnavigated this difficulty by translating the traditional father/son focus of the Irish realist family-

memory play into its mother/daughter equivalent. Charabanc by virtue of gender and choice of a non-realist, non-literary approach to its work was in precisely the “double-bind” which Trotter describes.

The status of the Charabanc women as actor-managers and the collaborative and collective nature of their initiative undoubtedly contributed to the long delay in the publication of their scripts. Charabanc’s failure to publish until 2006 has played a significant role in the occlusion of the company from the history of Irish Theatre. Unlike the writers and academics who made up the board of Field Day, the Charabanc actresses, fixated by what they were doing on the stage rather than the commitment of that work and its analysis to the page, had neither the experience, time nor the inclination to put much effort into finding publishers. They certainly did not have the network of contacts in the world of publishing that was available to Field Day. Lojek has suggested that the collaborative nature of the Charabanc means of production would have been unattractive to publishers who prefer “single authorship” (86), fearing disputes over rights and ownership. It is no secret that, as with Field Day, the founding partnerships of Charabanc were eventually divided by professional and personal difficulties. These difficulties may have made it harder for the actresses to act as a unit to push forward publication of the scripts. Up until 2006 the plays in the form of unedited typescripts were only available from the theatre archive of the Linenhall Library Belfast, a situation not conducive to scholarship.

Charabanc, unlike Field Day which was intrinsically interconnected with the cultural establishment, was just not interested in inviting onto its board “highly placed” cultural figures who might have given them an entrée into publishing and academic circles. Eleanor Methven has described the fundamental difference between Field Day’s attitude to amassing cultural credit and that of Charabanc:

Field Day [was] formed [...] on a very different basis, on an academic basis,

on an aspiration of making a statement [...]. We came along from the other end of the spectrum. They had academic and literary heavyweights on their board and we had trade-union leaders and anybody who had been nice to us along the way. (Foley 39)

This statement is emblematic of Charabanc's dismissive attitude towards hierarchies. As the company developed, it was becoming aware that they were very much regarded as "the poor relation" to Field Day both in funding terms and in terms of cultural authority. In drawing comparisons between the critical reception of Field Day and that of Charabanc, the actresses would joke that they were regarded as "the feisty young fillies" who could entertain the masses, whereas Field Day were regarded as men of letters who were making a serious and important contribution to Irish Theatre. They did not, however, take any feminist stance in order to oppose such perceptions, preferring the plays to speak for themselves. With both eyes on the next production and not on their legacy to Irish Theatre, they also resolutely refused to be drawn into theorizing their work. Lojek has suggested that if Charabanc "had provided critics with issues to raise, if they had supplied academics with explanations of the politics of their style, if they had contextualised their work" (91), then they might have achieved more critical recognition. Of course as performers they were not obliged to engage in what could become a destructive dissection of the work, impeding its freshness and spontaneity through over-analysis. Nor did they feel any real antipathy towards academics, or "epidemics" as they have been subsequently dubbed by Jones. The numerous press interviews recorded in the Charabanc scrapbook would indicate that they were happy to talk to anyone about their work. The necessity to set the company's existence within a theoretical framework was just not seen as the most pressing concern given that, with only one permanent member of staff, they had a production to fund, research, write, produce, market and perform. However, lack of time and resources was not the only factor involved in their avoidance of all things theoretical. The

company was resolutely, if instinctively, committed to refusing “to preserve class-distinction between high and low culture” (Lojek 91). In this they were guided by their sense of loyalty to their audience and the people they were portraying in their plays. Marie Jones could still have been speaking for Charabanc when she said in 1996:

The people I write for are the people in my plays. They are really just ordinary people who are really powerless; who really don't have a voice. I have always felt this huge responsibility, because the background I came up in nobody had any power, nobody had any voice. (*Irish Times* 20th February 1996)

The sense of responsibility felt by Charabanc to identify at all levels with the people they were portraying led them to eschew any modes of behaviour which could be construed as elitist, such as adopting an overly intellectual approach to the work. The company wore their anti-elitist, anti-intellectual stance like a badge of honour. Harris cites a Theatre Ireland report of a poetry reading which Charabanc gave during their 1987 USA tour. They ended the performance with a question: “Is Charabanc becoming intellectual?”—and a statement: “We’ll be publishing pamphlets next!” (Harris xxix). Such a quip is typical of the Charabanc self-deprecating sense of humour, but the statement is also a satiric rebuttal of an overtly intellectualized approach to theatre, everything in fact that Field Day represented. However, in choosing to use humour as a weapon with which to express their sense of frustration at the inequity of their dismissal as light-weight entertainers, they paradoxically fostered an impression which has somehow prevailed. Their insouciance and defiance of hierarchies and pieties has, unfortunately, played its part in Charabanc’s denial of its place as a significant force in Irish theatre in the 1980s.

The Charabanc actresses were never naïve. They well understood how, and why, the work of Field Day had achieved cultural pre-eminence over their own. As women and as actor-managers they just did not

have the direct access to power and the cultural capital of Field Day with which to challenge such perceptions. They were not stellar individuals in their own right. They did not immediately rush their plays into print. They did not engage in intellectual debate. They were not well-connected to editors and journalists. They just wanted to make good theatre. They may, therefore, stand accused of not having been mindful enough of their share of cultural capital which they had won against all the odds.

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