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“STUFF FROM BACK HOME:”<sup>1</sup> ENDA WALSH’S  
*THE WALWORTH FARCE*

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**Abstract:**

Since its first performance in 2006 by Druid Theatre Company, Enda Walsh’s award-winning *The Walworth Farce* has toured Ireland, Britain, America, Canada, New Zealand and Australia to great acclaim, with the brilliance of the directing, design and acting engaging with the intelligence and theatricality of Walsh’s script. The play deals with a family, who as part of a daily enforced ritual, re-enact a farce, written and directed by Dinny, the patriarch, a story which accounts for their exile in London, and away from their family home in Cork. Their enactment is an attempt to create a false memory, for their performance is very much at odds with the real events which provoked their exile.

**Keywords:** Enda Walsh, *The Walworth Farce*, Druid Theatre, Farce, Performance, Diasporic.

First performed on 20 March 2006 at the Town Hall Theatre in Galway, and produced by Druid Theatre Company, Enda Walsh’s *The Walworth Farce* went on a national tour and from there opened with some cast changes on 5 August 2007 at the Traverse Theatre in

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Edinburgh where it won a Festival Fringe First Award. (Garrett Lombard played Blake, Denis Conway took the role of the father of the family, Dinny, Aaron Monaghan performed as Sean, and in its current run, Tadhg Murphy replaced Monaghan and Hayley was originally played by Syan Blake and in 2008 by Mercy Ojelade and in between both by Natalie Best). The Druid production received its American premiere on 17 April 2008, when it opened at St. Ann's Warehouse, New York, and its London debut at the Royal National Theatre, Cottesloe, on 24 September 2008, before returning to Ireland that autumn to play at Project Arts Centre, Dublin, and Town Hall Galway again. (*Hunger*, a film Walsh co-wrote with director Steve McQueen, won the Caméra d'Or prize at the Cannes festival in 2008 and his most recent play *The Electric Ballroom* was performed in 2008 at the Galway Arts Festival).

The play, in the words of Walsh himself, is "a Druid-type play that is going to be done in the rhythm of farce" (Walsh/St. Ann's Interview), thus merging in the one performance something that has a traditional Irish emigrant dramatic sensibility and farce, which is a more broadly European style than an indigenously Irish theatrical form. Irish Theatre, per se, has no real extensive tradition of farce, in Walsh's view (Walsh/St. Ann's interview). Writers like Hugh Leonard and Bernard Farrell would probably disagree with him. What Walsh blends together delivers a radical variation on the traditional Irish diasporic play, as farce or enforced farce becomes the ironic and contestational frame to misalign and misappropriate sensibilities and pieties often long associated by some with the Irish communities in metropolitan cities like London. That said it is vital to remember Walsh's comment that "Theatre does not come from a real place" (Walsh/Sierz interview).

For Walsh, however, the characters "are not Irish builders, they are Irish theatre makers in a fucking council flat on the Walworth Road. I kept having to remind myself that they are actors, a director and a writer in a play [...] as opposed to deranged, feral [...] beings" (Walsh/St. Ann's interview). Cocooned world, a sort of second life, or a familial "third way" or third space the play has no real connection to reality, even if

space and time connects them or locates them in relation to London. The situation is no more real than the smouldering stuffed dog impaled on a tent pole that makes an appearance towards the end of the play.

## **Waiting for Tesco**

Part of the daily ritual for the family is to enact a farcical performance of the events that led up to their exile from Ireland, involving funerals, sibling rivalry, the reading of wills, potential sexual infidelity, and five murders. Dinny, the father, plays himself throughout, while initially Sean, plays Dinny's brother, Paddy, and the other son, Blake plays his own mother, Maureen (red wig) and Paddy's wife, Vera (black wig). Later Sean and Blake add to their repertoire of characters: Blake plays Mrs Cotter, Eileen, (blonde wig/altered dress) and her husband Jack, and Sean gets the chance to play Peter, Eileen's brother. (The young men also play their younger selves, and, when Blake has to play more than one woman at the same time, he wears one wig and holds the wig of the other woman, swapping them on and off his head as necessary). Dinny is acknowledged as the writer of the piece. He is the actor/manager, director, scenographer, stage manager, prompter, ensemble member, adjudicator, critic, and spectator. The sons are playing to and for him, and less for each other. Partly, it is a measure of their commitment to their father that is being tested throughout the performance.

For Joan Fitzpatrick Dean "the term farce, even in its most sophisticated manifestations, still carries the pejorative connotations of facile amusement and limited vision" (485). Dean is right to take that narrow viewpoint to task. It is too reductive a response when applied to either great farce or to what Walsh achieves in the play. Joe Orton, whom Dean is writing about, and Walsh have a lot in common, as both delight in perverting norms and corrupting expectations, deploying characters that have few limits to their behaviours, particularly to their aggression. Farce, whether boulevard farce or tragic farce, is concerned

with sexual taboos, violence, anarchic licence and death. Those familiar with the form of farce will recognize and anticipate in the Walsh piece the elaborate plots, the inhibiteness, the secrecy, the plotting, the cross dressing and terrible wigs, the overheard exchanges, the misunderstandings, the conspiracies, the double entendres, the near misses, the near exposures, the preposterous excuses and justifications, the frustration of illicit couples who cannot copulate and the frustration and displeasure of those who cannot carry out murder. In addition, for Walsh, farce has “fuck all to do with emotion”, it has nothing to do with truth; it is just mathematics, it’s movement” (Walsh/St. Ann’s Interview).

Eric Bentley identifies specifically the “abstractness of the violence” in farce: “Prongs or a rake in the backside are received as pin pricks. Bullets seem to pass right through people, sledge-hammer blows to produce only momentary irritations. The speeding up of movement contributes to the abstract effect” (222). The violence in this piece is both abstract and something way beyond that, as characters do not brush themselves down that easily. For Bentley farce “is a question of the speeding up of human behaviour so that it becomes less human” (247). Bentley goes on to say it slightly differently, claiming that farce is “the theatre of the human body but in a state far from the natural [...]. It is the theatre of the surrealist body” (252). Here in the Walsh play, the forbidden is not sexual, but murderous activity, the bodies and the sense of selves are so distorted that they are surreal and the violence is far more that abstract, it is de-realized, having a visceral quality to it that helps frame spectators’ responses.

So, the farce is an elaborate fiction, a sort of “busy work” that Dinny obliges his family to play out on a daily basis for almost two decades, and it is an affirmation of origins, exile and hope. Here in this hermetically sealed world of performance, an inhabited, exhibitiv space, they are imprisoned by some sick family ritual, that is governed and orchestrated to maintain Dinny’s control of and dominion over his sons. It is a make believe world functioning on paranoid, maniacal,

delusional beliefs and compulsiveness. The enemy is the outside world, occupied by zombie-like figures or the living dead, who are hell bent on invading their space. All this scenarioizing and catastrophizing is thus done to serve the cult of Dinny (patriarch). Maddy Costa in an interview with Enda Walsh records the facts that: "Over ten years ago Walsh himself experienced two years of panic attacks and borderline obsessive compulsive disorder". If he didn't drink a glass of water at the exact same time every day, or visit the same cafe for exactly the same lunch, he would plunge into panic. "At the time it was exhilarating," he confesses. "It affected my writing for eight years, in terms of characters having to live like that" (Walsh/Costa).

Blake, the elder brother, has never left the space and his confusion is very evident in one of his comments to Sean. He talks about memories, sensations, smells, and how they have been displaced by his father's words and how the world they live in is set behind a barricade of words, behind the mesh of performance. Words keep all else at bay.

BLAKE. Dad all talk of Ireland, Sean. Everything's Ireland. His voice is stuck in Cork so it's impossible to forget what Cork is. (*A pause*) This story we play is everything [...]. (220)

The notion that the performance is "everything" is a profoundly distressing concept, but individuals do play out such scenarios all the time, if not to the extent of these characters, but to their limits of fixated repetition and compulsiveness. For Richard Schechner "Playing, like ritual, is at the heart of performance [...]. Play is looser, more permissive – forgiving in precisely those areas where ritual is enforcing, flexible where ritual is rigid. To put it another way: restored behaviour is playful: it has a quality of not being entirely 'real' or 'serious'" (89). Play is never "everything", as it is too loose, flexible, and potentially a negotiating space. Dinny's notion of performance is less "restored behaviour" and more enforced enactment, the extent to which this is the case is seen during the playing of the farce. Marina Jenkyns deploys

Robert Landy's ideas on the paradox of performance with the actor "living simultaneously in two realities" (Jenkyns 10). In a recent article I proposed that Jenkyns suggests that for Landy the "taking on a role and taking off a role is a kind of living and dying" and

of striving and surrendering, of catalysing and crystallising, of display and disguising, of status altering and of lowering, of revelation and duplicity, and one of being and not being. Of course when an actor assumes another role within a script, then an additional layer of complication is added. Foregrounding the performativity of their characters brings an alertness to the given circumstances, a reflexivity to power, domination, and licence, and, of course, tilts towards the viability of difference. Performing emerges as a mode of being, of knowing, of imagining, and of embodying creativity, confidence, or engagement. (Jordan 160-1)

The negative aspect of performance is evaded by these comments, but the potentiality of destruction is to be found in the world of Walsh's play. Here in this play, performance, initially, does little to expose horror or to prompt contestation of power and authority; instead it disguises the past, confuses what actually happens, blurs boundaries and perversely facilitates murder. Trauma is foregrounded by the attempts to play with memory, and there is little consolatory or enabling as there is no real clarifying light brought to bear on the mayhem.

So, it is the deployment of play in that intermediate, mediating space, alongside the darkness of their playing that makes the drama such a fascinating piece, as it shifts from the realm of the notionally real to the domain of performance and throughout both spaces and the identities of the characters and the characters they play in the farce are in intermittent dialogue. These realities are interwoven brilliantly by the playwright and realized exceptionally by the cast at Mikel Murfi's disposal. For Scott D. Taylor "The physicality of farce helped to liberate

the theatre from the constraints of linguistic psychologism and mimetic representation, favouring, instead, an intra-textual performance mode, a theatre turned inward" (275). For Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins: "A play-within-a-play disperses the centre of visual focus to at least two locations so that the viewer's gaze is both split *and* multiplied" and that "[P]lays-within-a-play demonstrate a split specularity that forms a location of difference; the two object sites of the gaze can never be identical" (250). That notion of "split specularity" is vital to any understanding of this play, combining very well with the notion of a theatre "turned inward" rather than outward.

The sinister nature of the enactment is not lost on audiences and many may see similarities in some notorious contemporary incidents. Maddy Costa notes that like most people Walsh was unnerved by the story of the Fritzl family as it emerged from Austria, but "unlike most people, however, Walsh felt a troubled sense of familiarity, a connection, with the story. "I thought, 'Oh my God, that's my territory. This is my plays'" (Walsh/Costa). Fritzl's story, Costa reports, almost made Walsh want to "jump in the air and say, 'See, they're not that weird'" (Walsh/Costa). Yet, Walsh holds out for a clear distinction between theatre and reality: "There was a review of *The Walworth Farce* that said, 'Surely social services would have got on to these two boys?' What are you talking about? This is theatre!" (Walsh/Costa).

## Performing Island

The farce's plot briefly is as follows: the mother of Dinny and Paddy has died in a tragic accident; she was struck down by a horse, which had been catapulted over a hedge having been hit by a speedboat. The mother was out picking gooseberries in order to make alcohol. The boat had left the sea at Kinsale, having supposedly struck a sea lion at one hundred and forty miles per hour. At the helm was a ninety-six year old man, in a little sailor's outfit (26), glued deliberately into the seat. Because they had no access to Dinny's mother's grave when they

attempted to bury her, they had to transport the corpse away from the graveyard. Dinny brings the mourners not to his own house, but to a house in an exclusive area, one that he believed to be unoccupied, and which Dinny had become aware of whilst working as a painter and decorator. From this space, Dinny hopes to live out a life lie, under the pretence that he is a wealthy brain surgeon, in order to prove to his unemployed brother, Paddy, who lives in London with Vera in squalid conditions, that he is the more sensible and successful, and therefore the rightful executor to his mother's will. (Dinny's explanation of his career change is hilarious in its ridiculousness: a couple of years of part-time night classes in "basic brain surgery" (11) was all that was necessary to up-skill himself). In her final will their mother wanted the son without greater acumen to provide a monthly allowance to the other brother, in order that money from the sale of the family home would be distributed and dealt with in a prudent manner.

However, the plot thickens, so to speak, when the real owners of the house come back with the body of their own father, whom also could not be buried. He, of course, happens to be the man who was glued to the seat of the wayward boat. He was murdered by his own son Peter and his daughter's husband, Jack, so that they could get their hands on the elderly man's wealth. Through the exchanges between both diverse parties, the sexual attraction central to bedroom farce occurs, when Peter becomes sexually interested in Vera and Eileen flirts with Dinny. Jack, on his own sexual journey, starts to wear a dress. Peter is informed by Vera that Jack is in possession of a bucket of poison. Peter also pours poison into lager. Jack, rather than give the lager to Paddy, consumes the poisoned brew himself. Vera and Peter consume their portions of chicken. Paddy overhears their plans to run away, and thanks to his "fragile hole," he drops, like an Irishman, onto his knees, and screams "Erin Go Bragh" (80) as he dies. With Paddy gone, Vera and Peter momentarily believe they can be freely together, but they die. Next Eileen dies, leaving five dead to be added to the already dead parents. After five of the characters drop dead, Dinny fills his pockets with the (monopoly) money discovered in the Cotter father's coffin,

and so he wants to turn death into something good, to put order on chaos and to "come up smiling," (83) with the two boys supposedly to follow him to London and Maureen to wait for them back home.

Sabine Dargent's brilliant design concept for the Druid production has three dominant and adjacent spaces; the living room, the kitchen area and the young men's bedroom, along with two other less spacious curtained off areas, one leading to a bathroom, the other to a closet of some sorts. Items decorating the space include a picture of a football team torn out from a newspaper placed on the wall of the bedroom, shelves of cornflake boxes, packages of Bachelor's peas, a USA biscuit tin, in which Dinny keeps his money, and a football trophy, that serves as the prize for the best actor that has been awarded by Dinny, and only to Dinny thus far.

As with farce proper, there are enough entrance points, really door frames or arches without doors, to bring performers on and off at considerable speed. While the set is functional, dramatically speaking, it is also seriously dilapidated, with most of the plasterboard off the walls, thus the wooden partitions between the spaces are exposed, leaving no sense of an isolated space. It is almost open plan in the most perverse meaning of the phrase. The young men have decrepit single beds stacked on top of one another in order to function like bunk beds, which seems to suggest the sleeping arrangements of children rather than adults.

## **The Butterfly Defect**

The farce begins very comically with the actors readying themselves to perform in Cork accents in a performance style that "resembles the Three Stooges" (7). Dinny prepares by limbering up in an exaggerated, vain, self-important fashion; Blake, half naked, irons clothing, before dressing himself in his multipurpose female garb; and Sean prepares the consumables for the piece, with a certain growing dread. A cardboard coffin, made from Corn Flake boxes, is also readied

for action. Ben Brantley's response to the opening moments is telling: "Why is the young man in saggy underpants ironing a dress and then smelling it? And what about the older, stockier guy who keeps striking poses that bring to mind a steroid-inflated Fred Astaire?" (Brantley)

Dinny turns the lights on and off, and the action is ready to begin. That the song "An Irish Lullaby" cannot be lined up right by Dinny is the second warning that things are not going to plan. The first indication came, a little earlier, with Sean's unhealthy reaction upon the realisation that he has brought home the wrong bag of shopping from Tesco and therefore has the incorrect props for the performance. Instead of "overcooked chicken, white sliced bread [...] creamy milk, two packets of pink wafers, six cans of Harp, and one cheesy spread" (43), Sean comes home with Ryvita and salami.

As scripted, Blake, as Maureen, brings in the sandwiches with the spreadable cheddar. However, the absence of bread leads to the first stall in the action, with Dinny berating Sean for the error, with Dinny slipping out of character or into character depending on how you look at it. The "story calls for sliced pan bread" (13), remarks Dinny. For Dinny "The story doesn't work if we don't have the facts and Ryvitas aren't the facts" (13). Dinny's insistence on factual authenticity is inherently symptomatic of something genuinely disturbing. The world order that Dinny craves is already beginning to crack as things start spiralling out of control.

Of the two sons, Sean can be viewed as the more resistant character, and the one more frequently punished by his father for his inability to play as written, in a way that seems to suggest that Dinny is aware of Sean's dissidence, whereas, a perverse, incomprehensible disbelief from Lombard's Blake, in his wide-eyed obedience, is less questioning, more fearful of the outside world and he is the one with most to lose if this fictive world caves in. Both captured, in different ways, the pain, frivolousness and the oppression they felt at the hands of their father. However, in their loyalty, dutifulness and obedience, there is a strange sort of strangulated and misconceived love.

Sean is also challenged for not being line-perfect, and even for not getting right a new line that Dinny has now decided to throw in. Blake kick starts the farce, a few lines back, as a director might restart a theatre rehearsal, but Dinny still persists in giving expression to his distaste for the mistake by Sean. When the script gets to the point of reading the will, the absence of chicken and the presence of "salami sausage" lead to Sean being struck with a pot in performance, (but the script suggests a frying pan in the back of the head [20]). On both occasions I saw the play in performance, the brutality and the instantaneousness of the blow was staggering; both sets of audiences were repelled at the decisiveness and callousness. There was no build up of tension, no advanced signalling which would have given an audience time to brace; the deed was simply executed with a raw brutality. Blake looks after Sean during his recovery period.

The notionally real space is not occupied for too long. The performance mode is foisted upon them again, as characters pick up the action where it had stopped. When the Cotters, owners of the house, return also with an unburied body, the farcical tests are set for both the characters and cast alike. How will the performers cover additional roles as the two family groupings now cross-contaminate or intermingle, making it more and more testing for the actors to maintain all their roles, to time their exits and entrances and to cope with character changes in an apt fashion. (An audience has been brought up to speed, by their calculated emersion into the action initially, so the increasingly frantic shifting of roles is not so difficult to follow or tolerate). Also, how will Dinny rustle up an explanation to rationalize his family's presence in the Cotter home? He provides a plausible, if ridiculous excuse: that he is present in their house in "Montenotte," an affluent suburb of Cork (24), performing a scenario for the sake of his insane and slowly dying brother—who had been bitten by a snake.

As they run through the more complex story of the Cotter's accusing Dinny (or Denis) of cooking their food and drinking their alcohol, Dinny freaks out because the sausage is not just working for

him. Dinny's annoyance fuels Sean's doubt and affords him the opportunity to query the validity of the story in the first place. The skilled insistence of Dinny to close it down is cleverly captured by Walsh, but it is also indicative of where the dramatic action is heading. Sean has now a disposition of confrontation, partly prompted by the emergence of a woman, Hayley, in his life, but more importantly because of the clear memories he has from the past, that have long remained un-articulated. He witnessed the aftermath of the real murder of Paddy and Vera. (When Dinny gets stressed, he applies moisturiser to his head in an aggressive fashion or/and he smells the contents of a biscuit tin, where he stores his money).

The farcical action is interrupted again by a knock on the door. The family response is almost paranoid; Blake opens the door, holding a kitchen knife. Hayley enters with the correct bag of shopping, which she brings round during her lunch break from her workplace. For Walsh himself, she is the "first non-Enda Walsh character, one who has not been living with dysfunction" (Walsh/Sierz). She is viewed as an intruder/outsider. As Sean and Hayley chat, Blake begins to mimic and impersonate her. He is rehearsing, what in his mind will be in all likelihood a future role, another female part that may come his way.

With the latest restart, Hayley serves as their immediate audience, though not quite a captive one. The performance is sinister in its threats towards her; it allows another person to view the world in which they operate, and it is also a way of them preparing for the partial assimilation of Hayley, however harrowing, into their performance/lives. It is a moment that marks both her significant presence, and her potential invisibility or erasure. Also, in performance, it is a staggering shift of register. As the farce resumes with renewed pace and menace, there is the defiance to be maintained, an urge to create a disciplined performance in the face of persistent errors, misplaced props, interruptions and now invasion. (Michael Frayn's play *Noises Off* [1982] serves as an obvious template, and intertextual echo).

Initially, Hayley fails to understand the dynamics of the performance mode and interrupts, wondering if there is salt to be had in the home. Hayley is at first dumbfounded by the scope of the performance and by the persistence of them to maintain its momentum. However, having grasped something of what is going on, Hayley begins to warm to the mayhem. In one instance, Dinny comments on the action, unpacking a specific detail that impressed him for Hayley's consideration (50).

There is a great challenge facing an actress playing Hayley, who, in her commitment to the role, has to communicate the uncertainty as to how she should engage with the performance. When Hayley wants to discuss the paper coffin, Sean points out that it is just cardboard; in a way she is measuring the theatricality of what she is experiencing and he is bringing it back to a banal reality. In the most recent performance, Mercy Ojelade brought to the role mild levels of anxiety, engagement, perplexity, hesitation, aggravation, observation, and shifting uncertainty that was countered by her precise, if perverse curiosity, which is prompted by her interest in Sean and her delight in getting insight into the family dynamics. However, when she declares her intention to leave and go back to work, then the exact nature of her relationship to Dinny and the family becomes apparent. Dinny's aggression towards her, pining her to the door, confirms that she has not just walked in on a bit of a mayhem, with family members playing out a bizarre re-enactment, that inter-culturally should not, per se, daunt her. Unfazed by Blake's earlier crossing-dressin and by the shaven pate of Sean, she now realises that she is not only in a transgressive space, but somewhere that is far more sinister and ominous.

Hayley is positioned by Dinny as the woman about to break up the family, its irony reverberating with the dramaturgy of an older generation of Irish drama that represented a fear of relationships with those unapproved or not reared within a tribal community. She is now terrorised. It is difficult for an actress to maintain all of those strange and contradictory emotions, but Ojelade managed to do so brilliantly.

("DINNY. Here to break us up, boys. Trick us and drag us down to the street" [51]). Blake helps her off with her coat, and immediately puts it on himself in an attempt to test himself out as Hayley. The complete perversity of it all was underplayed brilliantly by Lombard's attendant evocation of a primitive innocence, and by the fact that he refuses to acknowledge the gravity of their false imprisonment. Dinny, regardless of the circumstances, wants to persist with the farce. Sean relents and re-starts the metadrama again; the rationale for his submission is no longer in need of physical confirmation or articulation.

Violence between the brothers emerges with Blake, as Jack, slaps Sean, as Peter, a little too aggressively. Sean and Blake end up scrapping on the floor. Blake, who is the stronger, now realises not only the severity of the situation, but can't decide if Sean is undermining their way of life or the victim of circumstances beyond his control.

BLAKE. But you're wanting me to kill Dad, aren't you, Sean?  
We kill Dad, break the story, step outside like you've got it all planned [...] but then you walk away from me with her (57).

This wonderful sequence of lines captures all of Blake's needs, phobias and savagery. The fundamental desire is to rupture the cycle and to "break the story" that Dinny has perpetuated. Sean wants the two of them to leave, but Blake's elemental sense of place remains inside the flat. "BLAKE. WE BELONG IN HERE" (57). Blake has completely internalised his own captivity and his sense of belonging is now, accordingly, utterly perverse. Blake threatens to kill Sean but Sean retorts: "Then you'll have to live with what he lives with" (57). This is the first decisive expression that affirms that the farce is an imposed false reminiscence, used by Dinny to veil his murderous activities.

Soon after, Sean is obliged by Dinny to tell it as he remembers the events that led up to them leaving—and he does so bravely. Dinny forces Sean and Hayley to re-enact their conversation from earlier in the morning. The imperative is to "Play it" (60). Through the re-enactment,

Hayley declares her interest in Sean, and Sean articulates his desire for her. But the poignancy and intimacy of the enforced re-enactment is then followed by Blake's partial demolition of the flat to the song *A Nation Once Again*.

Blake forces the farce back on track and Sean participates despite being dazed. However, Sean uses the guise of re-enactment to smuggle to Hayley her handbag, and he eventually takes over temporarily Eileen's role to keep the plot going from Blake, but also to distract from the fact that he had passed Hayley her phone. Sean puts on Eileen's wig and does Blake's lines in order to disguise the fact that Hayley's phone rings, to the tune of Destiny's Child's *I'm a Survivor*. (There is real irony in that song title). However, when she tries to communicate her circumstances to her mother, Hayley is grabbed by Blake from under the table, and he pulls her into the bedroom, ties her arms behind her back and gags her, and then proceeds to put on her coat.

To Sean's line, "I can't do it anymore" (68), Dinny presses a knife under his throat. Dinny confirms his previous acts of murder and pleads that the story he made up was to keep the family "safe" (68). Dinny is arguing for the safety and comfort of the lie as a fundamental necessity. Dinny realises that Blake needs Sean, but he also fears that Sean is plotting to kill him. Provocatively, Dinny states "To kill me would only turn you into your dad. Isn't that what you're thinking, Sean? Answer me, boy" (70). When Sean does not answer, Dinny goes to an opposite extreme: "It would never happen on *The Waltons*. Can't imagine John Boy or Jim Bob raising a nasty hand to Daddy Walton, can ya? Never in a million years, despite all those wood-carving tools hanging about their house, would you see such a thing on Walton's Mountain, Sean" (70).

Soon after, Sean embraces his father. That is an important gesture as it is a simultaneous revelation of love and hate, of the need to protect and need to destroy. It is also an action of submissiveness and connection. Never one to give up, the embrace prompts Dinny to restart the farce yet again. Meantime, Blake wants assurances from Hayley that she will "stay" with Sean (71). On that proviso, Blake believes he

can “finish it so” (71). Hayley, untied a little earlier by Blake, is now free to prepare the lunch. As they run through the farce, Blake and Sean have their own private exchanges. Blake offers to kill Hayley, if necessary, comfortable within the scenario, having been conditioned by the frequency of his performances as a murderer.

## Death Becomes Us

Dinny incorporates Hayley into the script as Maureen—having inducted her into what she is required to do. As she plays so well, Hayley is rewarded with Eileen’s wig by Dinny. Hayley is fed two lines by Dinny. As the farce concludes, Maureen warns Dinny to stay away from the chicken as she knows of Jack’s plan to poison Peter and his wife, Eileen. (Blake overplays it and Dinny cuts him short). Despite the awareness, five characters die, three thanks to the poisoned chicken, one from poisoned lager and Paddy, from an ongoing health condition.

In the story, as Dinny readies himself to leave his family behind, he calls his boys towards him for a fond farewell, but in his words, it is also a “final farewell” (83), as he is well aware of his own impending tragic demise. Blake, instead of maintaining his part to a conclusion, plays a different one, and murders Dinny. Even while facing death, Dinny manages to utter the final line of the farce. The murder leaves Hayley petrified. Blake tells Hayley to scream as the latch is opened on the locked cupboard, where Sean has been recently tricked inside. Hayley screams, but not knowing the consequences of her playing the role of damsel in distress. Sean assumes Blake is trying to kill her and Sean stabs Blake to stop him in his tracks. Blake had rehearsed that scenario previously to himself, practising the line of scream and turning swiftly, so that Sean can plunge a knife into his body. Dying, Blake uses the line of his mother’s after Dinny had killed the Paddy and Vera, “Now leave, love” (84).

The weave between performance text and context is complete. The significance and substance of the intermeshing are deeply

unnerving, but also hugely funny. It is in the combination of both worlds where the play's success resides. Hayley opens the door and flees. Sean, as a version of his father, (the only person apart from Dinny to play Dinny), puts the cash from the tin into his pockets, rewinds the tape and re-plays the song *An Irish Lullaby*. The action is rewound back to where the play started. Sean locks the door, re-dresses the stage, and he reprises the main scenes from the farce's first act, taking "two minutes" to do so (84). Sean then picks up Hayley's coat, handbag and Tesco plastic bag, puts some brown shoe polish on his own face, so that he can make "Hayley's entrance" (85). The play ends, "as we watch him carefully lose himself in a new story" (85).

The text picks up brilliantly on the madness and mayhem of a world twisted and contorted into an extreme, how a fantasy, no matter how farfetched can be normalised, and how dysfunctionality can be structured in a most extreme way. Mikel Murfi notes that the "writer puts you on what you think are two roller coasters, simultaneously at the beginning of the first act, and about half way through the first act he puts you on a third, which you don't know about, and in the second act, that third one crashes. This is a huge ask of the actors" (Murfi/St. Ann's Interview). Traditionally, farce has been associated with a certain type of unrefined, un-rounded characters, corrupt, deviant sorts beset by villainy, selfishness, self-obsession, sexual desire, with a propensity for infantile or murderous leanings. The fundamental deprivation of characters of their sexual or vengeful longings was put to one side by writers like Joe Orton, all too keen to allow his characters to have their way, giving licence to almost ludicrous levels of promiscuous and deviant behaviours, as well as a framework where even murderous activity was de-contextualised and deprived of the fussy moral reflexes to such actions. Joan Fitzpatrick Dean identifies the "primitive vitality" of farce and, in this instance, that is a very apt comment that can be applied to the Walsh play (482).

This play is remorseless in its primitive playfulness, sharing the high resolution energy of a typical bedroom farce, and all the seedy,

black comedic potential of funeral farces like Joe Orton's *Loot* (1965). The mechanical nature of farce can be read as another layered comment on the automated nature of society. (One of the cruder, if more complex, and provocative realities of the piece emerges when Hayley, who is now responsible for cooking the chicken, is playing Maureen's role, but because she is black, Dinny wonders, "What are we going to do about that" [56]. What he does about it later is to smother her face with moisturiser cream, a gesture that has made audiences cringe).

### Story within a Story

While Dinny murders and flees, plots a cover story and hides behind it for nearly twenty years, he is not clever enough to devise another story, or offer a conclusion to it. His story becomes stale. In many ways, Dinny fits Bentley's framework of a knave, who is not "deep or purposeful enough to be a villain" (248). The momentum of farce takes Dinny over. He is exposed as an impostor and the knave gets nowhere. Bentley identifies that in farce the "mischief, fun, misrule seem an equivalent of fate, a force not ourselves making, neither for righteousness nor for catastrophe, but for aggression without risk" (245). Here aggression has serious risks for the family, and the outsider, Hayley. Sexual infidelity is not really broached as is usual with farce, but the violent fidelities, and the sentimental pieties of home are. And it is these that have to be betrayed. Alex Sierz in an interview reminds Walsh of his previous comment that he had said that "we are only accidents away from becoming monsters" (Walsh/Sierz Interview). It is that sense of monstrosity that threatens the order of the play and I suppose the easy responses of audiences, who have to do a good deal of work.

For Dinny the farce offers "a day of twists and turns and ducks and dives and terrible shocks. A story to be retold, no doubt, and cast in lore. For what are we, Maureen, if we're not our stories?" (82) What if individuals and communities are not their stories? The compulsion to construct verifiable narratives of authenticity is closely challenged by

the play. Diasporic communities often define themselves by a sense of home, by the rupture from familiar place and the innate determination to return. Sometimes, these communities are enraged by the circumstances of their leaving the home place, yet find themselves in contradictory and compromised responses to their new lives and circumstances. On the one hand, the characters in this play are migrants, living away from home, yet incapable of establishing a home or the notion of home away from their home place, and they live lives either on the margins, or in liminal realities of varying complexity. The characters cannot integrate into London because they cannot assimilate the past into the present, stopped by the replaying of a false disturbing narrative, partially influenced by a fixation on their cultural trappings and the imperatives of heritage, and partially by the gross unwillingness to test the new world in which they live. (It is not clear if Dinny goes outside). Home is being storied throughout the drama, in opposition to the place in which they now live. London is rejected as a despicable hostile space. Dinny denies his two children a sense of a new home, or a diasporic identity, and only grants them the substantial identities as children or as performers, but not as young men. Performance is used to control and to repress. They are not allowed to age naturally. Desire for home and sexual desire are kept at bay, even intermingled. The idyllic home, as much as anything else in their lives is made to be "everything", just like the story they enact is "everything" to Blake. For the men, Cork is endowed with all the beauty and London is its sacrilegious, criminal and violent antithesis. Cork is not the "Pork Sity" of *Disco Pigs* (5). Dinny had planned to go to London to build a "castle to overlook the English scum" (82). Yet Sean contends "London's not the way he tells it" (33).

The play queries, what is necessary in order to "break a story", in the words of Blake. What happens if one has no access to a story or one that cannot be affirmed by another individual? For Enda Walsh "I'm defined by five stories to my brothers. I know they know me through these stories and I know my brother John through four stories, and that

is enough for us [...]. We're blood, it's enough for us, it is our church, our mass, our kitchen at home [...]. But what if these stories are not real, if they are actually lies, or when do they stop being real" (Walsh/St Ann's Interview). In another interview Walsh notes "As I got older, I started to wonder if to my brothers I'm just those five stories," he said. "Maybe they really don't know me" (Walsh/Zinoman). Richard Kearney notes that "storytelling may be said to *humanise* time by transforming it from an impersonal passing of fragmented moments into a pattern, a plot, a *mythos*" (4). Kearney argues that "without this transition from nature to narrative, from time suffered to time enacted and enunciated, it is debatable whether a merely biological life (*zoe*) could ever be considered a truly human one (*bios*)" (3). He continues that it is "only when haphazard happenings are transformed into story, and thus made *memorable* over time, that we become full agents of our own history" (3). That sense of agency is wholly misappropriated by Dinny, through his fundamental dishonesty in foisting a bogus narrative on his children, however needy the motivation and through what he superimposes on his two sons. Dinny's sense of self does not follow Kearney's suggestion that "you give a sense of yourself as a *narrative* identity that perdures and coheres over a lifetime" (4). The narrative identity that this family tries to establish fails to endure and cohere. Instead it fragments in the face of repetition compulsion and denial, and in the face of the stress test the outside world, in the form of Hayley, ultimately brings. Michael Billington notes "Enda Walsh's characters are for ever trapped inside their own myths". Billington is slightly inaccurate in this observation, because generally myth by its nature is public, a collective intensity of energies that binds around elemental events or scenarios.

The family is locked into a false narrative and instead of the usual format of narrating a story or of articulating a collective memory of an event from the past, this group prefers "showing rather than telling". Under normal circumstances, memories evolve, some things get added, and some lost as the significance of actions or of people adjust, but here

something altogether bizarre occurs. Dinny scripts a completely false narrative and finds solace in the framework of farce. Like clockwork, each morning Sean enters the outside world to purchase the props for the play. Like clockwork, the farce is played out and the clock winds back to times long gone. Memory is a displacement activity and a fundamental charade. The two sons invest heavily in their roles, but their given circumstances and super objectives, in a performance sense, are carefully clouded, and brilliantly ambivalent. Farce becomes more and more troublingly real. The young men experience a form of Stockholm syndrome, and, developmentally, are hindered by some oedipal configuration. (Amongst his female roles, Blake is obliged to play his mother and the possible mistress of his father).

Despite the best efforts of the young men to maintain the farce and the façade of communal memory, deeper emotions trouble the performances consistently. That the acting could achieve such consistent simultaneity and multi-perspective is remarkable in its own right. The director, Mikel Murfi, brought great clarity to something that might seem convoluted and imposed a wonderful playfulness to his direction. Murfi's training at École Jacques Lecoq and his clowning work with Barabbas [...] the Company, and his experience as a performer in Lennox Robinson's *The Whiteheaded Boy* (1916), directed by Gerry Stembridge in 1997, can be seen to have shaped his approach to the directing of this piece. Walsh claims "my intention is to make a part impossible for an actor [...] to bring them to a point of despair", disorientating the actor, who then can successfully integrate it, which will lead to a similar type of dizziness for an audience (Walsh/ St. Ann's Interview). Murfi oriented his performers brilliantly in the face of that challenge

Walsh tells Colin Murphy, "I knew I wanted to write the play that every Irish playwright has to write—the old Irish people in London—but (I knew) I have to explode that kind of play and bring it somewhere else" (Walsh/Murphy). Walsh's dramaturgy moves the play between the abstractness of farce and the humiliations that go with it, and between a postmodern surface emotion and the eerie sense of

dispossession central to many diasporic experiences. Ultimately, *The Walworth Farce* is a combination of oedipal and bacchanal farces, where anarchy is more potent than lust, and murderous intent more significant than community or family. It is a world modified by the sensibility of farce, and malformed by a twist of the curious and dangerous imagination of Walsh, as nothing is “integrated”, no closure is possible, but the repetitive compulsive pattern that Sean enacts through the failure of resistance to the inevitability of history or farce, or history as farce, farce as history. As Dinny suggests to Maureen, “the day of the dead it most certainly is” (82). Bizarrely, dysfunction does not necessarily win out. That is where the affirmation emerges in a curious way, as the diasporic dystopia on offer is contested by constructive creativity, inventiveness, and the free spirited nature of the performances. The assuredness, exuberance and the commitment of the performers win out despite the chaos. The production becomes a celebration of performance.

## Note

1. Enda Walsh in an interview with an unnamed individual available at [http://www.stannswarehouse.org/enda\\_interview.html](http://www.stannswarehouse.org/enda_interview.html) [Assessed 3 January 2009]

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Home » Reviews » The Walworth Farce. The Walworth Farce. Date: Wednesday, 24 September, 2008. Genre: Drama Opened 24 Sep 2008 Written: by Enda Walsh Directed: Mikel Murfi Cast: Denis Conway, Garrett Lombard, Tadhg Murphy, Mercy Ojelade. Synopsis: It's 11 o'clock in the morning in a council flat on the Walworth Road. In two hours' time, as is normal, three Irish men will have consumed six cans of Harp, 15 crackers with spreadable cheese and one oven-cooked chicken with a strange blue sauce. In two hours' time, as is normal, five people will have been killed.