Telling And Retelling The Tale. Adapting the Murder Ballad 'Duncan and Brady' for the Stage as Past and Future Visions of a Folk Crime

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Abstract

In adapting the murder ballad Duncan and Brady for the stage as a one act play 'Been on the Job Too Long, and setting the story within that adaptation in three different places and times periods, the playwright made a decision to stage a meditation on how the true murder story of Duncan and Brady is an ideal tale to be told and retold. Telling and retelling the tale in different times and places had its own rewards for the writer, and potentially for performers. In writing three versions of this tale, the playwright stretched, challenged and gave himself increased scope as a writer and researcher, as well as stretching, challenging and giving a showcase to actors who perform the piece . This paper explores some of the key decisions, techniques and discoveries made in the process of adapting the ballad for the stage. It tells how this process gave the writer increased clarity in terms of his writerly objectives and personal vision.

Keywords

Playwriting, drama, writing process, folk songs, murder ballads, theatre, adaptation, technique, structure.

Introducing the Tale

May 2015 saw the world premier of my new one act play *Been on the Job Too Long* at a new venue, TheatreN16 in Stoke Newington, London. The play takes its story from a true crime, a historical murder which happened in St. Louis, Missouri in 1890. The crime, the murder of a police patrolman called Brady, is the subject of a well known murder ballad, 'Duncan and Brady'. My play's title comes from the last line of song's refrain, "He been on the job too long" (Dylan, 2008). Adapting this song for the stage gave me an opportunity to tell a story with real dramatic impact. It also allowed me to write a play which embeds within its structure some of my closest held beliefs as to what make a tale worth telling, and retelling. In the following, I will talk about the process of working and reworking the material sources. This process resulted in a work which is a meditation on stories and storytelling which plays on the repetition inherent in stage performances. It allowed me to concentrate and reflect on the core of my job as a writer, telling and retelling tales.

The true crime upon which both the song and my play are based took place in the Charles Starkes Saloon, St. Louis, Missouri on the 6 October 1890. Police patrolman James Brady was shot dead. A man by the name of Harry Duncan was arrested for the crime. Duncan claimed that he was innocent and that:

> …the crime had actually been committed by bar owner Charles Starkes, who denied it at the time. Duncan was convicted and sentenced to hang for the crime, but fought the decision with a series of appeals that took the case all the way to the United States Supreme Court. Lawyer Walter Moran Farmer presented his case and holds the distinction of being the first African-American attorney to argue a case before the Court. The appeal was denied and Duncan was executed by hanging on July 27, 1894. According to some, Charles Starkes would later confess to the murder on his deathbed (Rewald, 2010).

In practical terms, this story allowed me to fulfil the brief of a commission I was undertaking at the time. A trio of actors had asked if they might perform a short play of mine, *Merry Devils* (Charlton, 1999). *Merry Devils* is a mere 20 minutes long; the actors enquired whether I might extend it in order to make it into a full-length piece. I reread *Merry Devils* and felt that I had said everything that I had to say about its characters and their situation within the piece's brief running time. I suggested to my collaborators that it might be better to write one or two other pieces which could be thematically linked to *Merry Devils* and which would required the same acting resource: three male performers.

Merry Devils is set in hell and concerns competitive wrangling between three demons whose job it is to tempt human beings to sin and despair. The idea of sin being intrinsic element of the human condition danced around my mind and so I looked for a story which might play out this theme. Inspiration made me recall the lyrics to a song I had first heard when Bob Dylan performed it as the opening number of the first night of his stint at Wembley Arena in October 2000, the murder ballad 'Duncan and Brady'.

Due to the acoustics of the Arena and the idiosyncrasies of Dylan's voice, I did not take a great deal away from that first hearing than a rush of energy and the repeat of the chorus refrain, "He's been on the job too long". Playing bootleg recordings of this gig and others from the same period – Dylan played the 81 times from November 1999 until September 2002 (The Official Bob Dylan Site, 2015) – I grew increasingly intrigued as I pieced together the song's story. Dylan's recording of 'Duncan and Brady' was released in 2008 and I got the chance to hear things resoundingly clearly. Brady is murdered by Duncan when the former bursts in "here" whilst "a games going on" (Dylan, 2008); Brady ends up buried in the cemetery and there's some form of strange celebration after his funeral. The Brady of the song is given little sympathy, there being a strong implication that he deserved his violent end.

Research into the song showed that it first recorded by Wilmer Watts and Lonely Eagles in 1929 and became well known through recordings by Lead Belly and Dave Van Ronk. I discovered that Duncan's conviction and execution was probably a miscarriage of justice and that the culprit was most likely owner of the saloon where the killing took place, Charles Starkes (Rewald, 2010). Apart from Duncan and Brady, the song only mentions in passing some colourful female mourners at Brady's funeral; having a third male character was extremely fortuitous given the circumstances of the commission.

Murder Ballads and their Stories

Been on the Job Too Long was not the first time that I had used one of Bob Dylan's performances of an American folk murder ballad as the springboard to a script. Around 2005 I developed a short film screenplay (Charlton, 2007) called *Staggered* – thus far unmade – which retold the story of 'Stack-A-Lee', aka Stagger Lee. The murder ballad 'Stack-a-Lee' tells the story of the killing of one Billy Lyons by one Lee Shelton (Stack-a-Lee) in St. Louis in 1895; the argument that precipitated the violence centred around Shelton's "high roller, milk white Stetson" hat (Brown, 2003: 23). My script revisions the tale as twenty first century story with an English underclass setting. Rather than being, as in the original, "about that John B. Stetson hat" (Dylan, 1993), *Staggered* has a baseball cap becoming the bone of contention.

That a person might kill for the slightest of reasons fascinates me as a writer even as it horrifies me as a human being. Fascination and horror are feelings that murder ballads themselves can evoke. In 'Duncan and Brady', the latter comes into the bar looking to "kill somebody just to see them die" (Dylan, 2008). This sense of a lack of a justifiable motive is sometimes present in news accounts of violent crime in our own time. At the time of writing *Staggered*, I was struck by an account of a school boy called Alan Pennell who killed his fellow students Luke Walmsley in Lincolnshire in 2004. A newspaper account of the crime from that time tells how:

> A combination of factors appear to have amplified the insecurities felt by the diminutive Pennell in the fortnight leading up to the murder. He and Luke fell out over his split with Luke's sister; Luke overcame Pennell's best friend in a fight; and Pennell discovered that Luke had been passing notes to his new girlfriend during lessons talking about a fight between the pair. There was also a suggestion that Luke had made derogatory remarks about his mother (Herbert, 2004).

The report adds "But the ultimate motive may have been fear of losing face."

In 'Stack-A-Lee', the title character says to his soon-to-be victim, "You stole my John B., now I'm bound to take your life" (Dylan, 1993). This is precisely what makes murder ballads so powerful and continuously relevant, that the events and characters which they describe – although based on crimes which happened at a particular place and time many years ago – could just have easily have happened today, and may happen again tomorrow. Anderson (1960: 107), in his survey of the variant forms of a ballad known as 'The Waco Girl', notes "the capacity of the murder ballad to survive time and changing social conditions." Dylan speaks about the timeless quality that myths and stories hold in the interview he gave to Cameron Crowe for the liner notes to his 1985 compilation *Biograph*, "When did Abraham break his father's idols? I think it was last Tuesday" (Dylan, 1985).

It became central to my thinking that song characters such as Duncan and Brady are figures who might appear in any place, at any time. In writing *Been on the Job Too Long*, my intention became not to merely retell the story of a St. Louis murder. I would follow a principle set forth by William Blake who, when writing about his own painting of the Canterbury Pilgrims, posits that these:

> … are the characters which compose all ages and nations: as one age falls, another rises, different to mortal sight, but to immortals only the same;(…) some of the names or titles are altered by time, but the characters themselves for ever remain unaltered… (Blake and Myrone, 2009: 49).

Murder ballad characters such as Stack-a-Lee, Billy Lyons, Duncan and Brady exist, like Chaucer's pilgrims, in all ages. Historical specificities will change but their characteristic feelings and actions remain the same. I decided to foreground this timeless quality in my 'Duncan and Brady' play.

Form, Structure and Meaning

All scriptwriting projects need to balance sets of complimentary objectives. During each stage of writing, I strive for solutions which meet more than one of the objectives at the same time, in a complimentary manner. In planning the form of *Been on the Job Too Long*, I weighed the need to tell the story with my desire to somehow express the timeless quality of the tale, whilst at the same time offering a showcase for the three commissioning actors. My solution was to tell the tale of Duncan and Brady not once but three times: once in the original time and location, once more in the 1970s in London, and yet again in the late 21st Century in what I futuristically envisaged to be a by-then much expanded Greater China. The three retellings would eloquently make the point that the characters and actions are historically transferrable.

I chose to stop at three retellings as three versions make a point which would become overstated in more duplications, as well as overloading what is a short play. Any reader of nursery rhymes, folk and fairy tales will notice the number three cropping up as a structuring device ('The Three Corbies', 'The Three Billy Goats Gruff', 'The Three Little Pigs'). Happily, given that Blake's Chaucer quote played on my mind throughout the play's conception, the critic Blake scholar Frye (1969: 368) observes that the number three "in Blake's later prophecies [is the number of] cyclic recurrence". Thus, having three retellings embeds meaning within the structure for the piece. It also gives each of the actors the chance to showcase their versatility, adapting their performance of their chosen character to a disparate range of times and places, showing off their skill with accents and ability to portray the nuances of local behaviour.

Been on the Job Too Long developed into a one act play consisting of three sets of three monologues. Each set opens with Brady, followed by Duncan, and is finished by Starke. The three sets played chronologically in terms of time setting - late 19th century, then late 20th, then late 21st century. Each time, Brady sets up the events of the night of the killing, Duncan tells of the killing itself, and

Starke[1] reflects back on the killing of Brady and fate of Duncan from his death bed. The three sets of monologues lasts around 20-25 minutes in performance, depending on the pace of the actors.

The monologue form was partially chosen to contrast with the quick fire dialogic nature of *Merry Devils*. The monologues give each of the actors their own time in the spotlight, to personally engage the audience and showcase their skills. The monologic form also enabled me to give a nod to the theatre of Samuel Beckett, more specifically to his 1963 one act *Play* (Beckett, 2006). *Play* features three characters trapped in funeral urns, intercutting a trio of monologues in which each tells their side of a love triangle. The text is repeated twice during the action of *Play* and there is an implication that they will continue to tell their tale *ad infinitum*. Similarly, my characters are re-telling their story continually, albeit in different historical situations. Beckett used the monologue form in a number of his theatre plays, partially in order to show the extremes of isolation that his characters experience. The form helps to create the sense of existential bleakness that is a striking feature of Beckett's theatre. This feeling of a bleak universe inhabited by essentially solitary beings was something I was keen to make a key feature of *Been on the Job Too Long*'s affect.

Content and precedent combined with the circumstances of commission tend to prompt me towards a play's structure. The demands of this play's genesis as a work for three actors and its affinities with Beckett's *Play* meant that the monologue form felt highly appropriate. A Three Act structure and a pre-war dramaturgical approach was appropriate for my previous play *Coward* (Charlton, 2013) due to its subject being Noël Coward, a writer who worked in Three Act structures in his own playwriting in the 1930s, when the play is set. *Coward* was likewise commissioned expressly to showcase a trio of male performers but the subject matter prompted a formally different play.

Research, Development and Technique

Been on the Job Too Long gave me not one but three distinct research and development challenges within the writing of a single play. Not only did I have to successfully portray men who lived in St. Louis in the 1890s, I had to do the same for my second chosen setting of London in the 1970s and – perhaps the greatest challenge – envisage the futuristic world which I had chosen for the third Duncan and Brady retelling.[2]

St. Louis in the 1890s offers a distinct challenge as an era before the development of sound films; there is little archival spoken sound material from the place and time. In writing the monologues for the St. Louis Brady, Duncan and Starke, I hunted for literature set in that city or thereabouts in Missouri dating from the era. I came across a dime novel set along the Missouri river and featuring lots of ripe language in its characters' dialogue. Finding such exclamations as "Jehosiphat!" and seeing the dropping of 'e's (as in "b'lieve") was a rich source (Ellis, 1868). My intention in writing my historical dialogue was not to recreate in a slavishly realistic fashion as might satisfy an expert in the past

dialect of St. Louis; rather I give the dialogue a flavour that might persuade a regular member of the theatre-going public that to them it sounds like we might be approximating St. Louis in the late 19th century. Similarly, Arthur Miller in *The Crucible* creates a language which suggests Massachusetts in the 1690s (1953).

The original Harry Duncan was a black man, set up to take a fall in a society rigged against him. Just as the play itself draws its story from a popular ballad version of his tale, I use elements of late-19th century popular culture to expose Duncan's position in society. When he talks about his conversations over wages with his employer Starke, Duncan says:

> Worse bosses than Mistra Starke, I suppose. Pay is… well… Don't too pay well but Mistra Starke, he says, "what a man like you, Duncan, gunna do with money anyway?" "Well,' says I, "I'm not sure how I'd get rid of it, but it sure might be interestin' tryin'" (Charlton, 2015).

Duncan's reply is based on the kind of rueful response that a character in a late 19th century minstrel skit might give. In embedding elements of minstrelsy into the text, the play uses a similar technique to that employed in the musical *The Scottsboro Boys* (Kander and Ebb, 2010). The black character refers to the entertainment world stereotype of his ethnic group but the action of the piece tells the real world truth about their social position and their fate. Brady's opening joke brings the casual racism and the threatened violence of the society to the surface:

> Ha! Remind me of the one about Sam. Wife sent him to the doctor's, worried about his performance, if you know what I mean. So Sam goes out in his raggy ol' clothes, comes back home and guess what? He's wearing a brand spankin' new suit. Bespoke! Waistcoat and fancy handkerchief perusin' its way out of yond top pocket. Wife says "Sam, what you doin' in dat dere new suit?" Sam says, "Well, doctor says I'm impo'tant, so I's sure as hell gonna dress impo'tant" (Charlton, 2015).

I was told that joke by someone who claimed to have heard it performed by the notoriously politically incorrect English comedian Bernard Manning. Manning had his roots in and working men's clubs, which themselves have an affinity with the Music Hall, Vaudeville and Minstrelsy traditions. The joke about Sam and impotence would be at home in any of these contexts. My placing of this joke in the St. Louis in 1890 emphasises that this tradition is imbued with a targeting of minorities for mockery. This trend has its ultimate outcome in the kind of social injustice which befalls the Harry Duncans of this world.

In the London 1970s segment, Brady – now an officer in the Flying Squad – tells a joke about an Irishman. In the historical context of Britain in the 1970s, the Irish were a targeted minority and – as happened in the cases of the Guildford Four and Birmingham Six – were sometimes on the receiving end of severe miscarriages of justice. Duncan in the 1970s story is an Irish barman who ends up hanged in his cell, his murder disguised as suicide. Brady's joke is at the expense of an Irishman:

> Here, you hear about the Paddy got sent down for murder? Afterwards he wrote to his solicitor that he could prove he was innocent because he was in gaol at the time of the crime. 'Why on earth didn't you tell that to the court?' asks his solicitor. The Irishman says 'Hell, I thought it might prejudice the jury against me' (Charlton, 2015).

I chose the London 1970s setting to give the London-based, middle-aged actors I was writing for roles with which they might readily identify, and which they and their British audience could have fun recognising and playing around with. A heavy dose of episodes of the LWT series *The Sweeney* helped with the writing of D.C.I. Brady. Biographies and autobiographies of the London criminals of the period helped with the creation of the sub-post office raiding, illegal card-game organising, Spain-retiring 1970s gangster Starke.

With regard to the futuristic version, the research methodology was different. I was faced with having to imagine what my play's future was like. Writing plays set in the present and past involves a mix of facts found in observation and research combined with acts of speculation. My aforementioned play *Coward* intermixes real-life characters and settings with fictionalized character and story elements. Writing the future gave me more room for speculation, yet I wanted to speculate within certain bounds. The St. Louis and London sections of *Been on the Job Too Long* are set in specific milieus and have no fantastic, supernatural or unrealistic elements. I required myself for consistency's sake to carry this convention forwards into the futuristic section.

Writing the Future

What will our world be like in the later part of this century? Where in particular should I set my future action? I speculated, with a nod to Shaw's prediction of Chinese hegemony in *Back to Methuselah* (1921), that the future might possibly belong to the Chinese. I set the play in what I call the 33rd Canton of The People's Republic of Greater China. I envision this future world as akin to the anyplace Joe Strummer suggests in 'Straight to Hell':

> "It could be anywhere
> Most likely could be any frontier
> Any hemisphere..." (Clash, 1982).

I needed to sort out who my future characters were. In the 1970s, patrolman Brady is a flying squad D.C.I., the patsy Duncan is a barman, and Starke's saloon is the upstairs room of a pub used for illicit gaming. Perhaps in the future law-enforcement might – as often it has been portrayed in science fiction – be performed by replicants. Brady became an A.I. "lawdroid" and Duncan followed suit, becoming a different model of robot designated to perform menial functions in retail and leisure establishments. Brady's joke became a mocking of a less adept machine unable to pass the Turing Test:

> …one about Roboto who sit Turning test… answers this question directly and clearly… that question correctly and clearly… fails as assessing officer says “what human being answer each question correctly and clearly”… (Charlton, 2015).

The Charles Starkes Saloon became the “Chiang Starke Synthetic Pleasuredrome” where varieties of adult games involving sex, violence and gambling opportunities can be found.

Research into A.I. convinced me that the functional Brady and Duncan robots were not without the bounds of possibility. I read that soon A.I. will be able to “provide physical assistance with various domestic chores” (Whitby, 2008: 143). In pursuing this idea, I had to solve for myself an issue which plagues A.I. developers, around how A.I. machines negotiate environments. Robots cannot tell a mobile phone from a glasses case. Perhaps the answer might come from looking at the problem from the other end? The cell phone and the glasses case could identify themselves to the machines. This could be done by having all objects microchipped. Machines entering a space will scan it and collect data from microchips within the space, making all objects distinguishable and identifiable to the machine. The microchip would also include ownership information. There might be some objects – like match sticks or fresh food – which a machine might encounter without a microchip; these would be dealt with in the same way that computerized counters deal with “unexpected items in the bagging area” – people would have to help out the machines. People themselves would also be microchipped with their identities for the benefit of the A.I. machines.

The initial microchipping would involve a large-scale project to ensure that all spaces are machine-friendly. Would people agree to this whole-scale adaptation of their environment for the benefit of A.I.? I thought about the way in which an *xBox kinect* works, and the way in which my partner’s nephews and nieces are happy to adapt where they stand in a room for the benefit of play. Humans have always been willing to adapt their environments and behaviours for the benefit of technology, as long as they believe they're getting a *quid pro quo*. I now saw how the machines in my play might negotiate their environments. Writing a piece of science fiction forced me to think about the solution to problems as if I were a scientist.

The self-perceived “superiority” of each Brady is based in their buying into the idea that social status gives access to higher grade technologies and consumer goods, thus conferring personal superiority. Each Brady has a status symbols of which they boast. Patrolman Brady, as in the song, has a “brand new ‘lectric car”. D.C.I. Brady has a Jaguar. Each of them brags that their corrupt police practice has rewarded them with their ill gotten gains. In St. Louis:

> BRADY: What I got me, one of them brand new spankin’ ‘lectric cars. All charged up. All ready to get all the way up to seventeen miles an hour! How’s that for a horseless carriage?

> What's that you say? Oh, don't deny it, I hear you say it. I hear them all say it out of the reach of my little ear. How's ol' King Brady able to afford him one of them brand new 'lectric cars? On a patrolman's salary? Ain't no way he saved up, way he spends on clothin' and furnishin' that fine house of his up on yond better side of town. Oh, yes, ol' King Brady lives on yond better side of town now, he does. So with all those outgoin's and so little incomin', how come Brady got that brand new 'lectric car?
> Ha! The only person gotta ask that question must be stupid. Must not know ol' King Brady. You must not know no police, no siree. Ol' King Brady, he patrols and he polices his downtown St. Louis beat and what do you think, he closes all these emporiums and those bordellos and them gamblin' dens like the law says? Hell, even the city mayor doesn't want him to do that! Gotta keep the economy turnin'. Yet ol' King Brady don't turn his eye away for nuttin'! Oh no, sir! Take a little somethin' to wet my beak. Take a little sweetener in my coffee, thank ye kindly (Charlton, 2015).

In London:

> BRADY: Here, what's that you say? How can I, a mere Detective Inspector in the Sweeney, afford to buy a Jag? Geezer thinks too much of his taxes are going on policeman's salary! You think I can afford a motor like this on Flying Squad wages? You're having a bubble, fella. Ain't saying I ain't earned it. Don't get nothing without working. You see this here.
> *(He points to his eye.)*
> This eye here. It sees brilliant. It's on you. But you see this other one.
> *(He points to his other eye.)*
> Blind as a bat. For the right amount (Charlton, 2015).

In the 33rd Canton of The People's Republic of Greater China, Brady is his own status symbol: a "K.I.N.G." model "lawdriod". It was writer's luck that the original Brady was nicknamed "King', that the word 'king' has an N in it and that the future Brady is neural networked. A neural network is "a collection of units that are connected in some pattern to allow communication between the units" and that the "great appeal of neural networks is that they can learn a task" (Callan, 1998:2-4).

The neural network of my A.I. replicant Brady allows him to learn law-keeping on the job and, by extension, learn how the human beings with whom he interacts behave. He learns through observation:

> … you have privilege to be in the presence of ultimate paradigm A.I. lawdroid… complete self-knowledge of the excellence I am… life-long learning as to how to transcend time of manufacture limitations of consciousness … very expensive… because I'm worth it…
> *(BRADY admires itself.)*
> …am thing of beauty… joy forever… ambition make men ugly… yet my beauty come from absolute fidelity to ideal of human behaviour as practiced in social pool I operate in… would not be traited human without

> ambition for self-promotion… quick learned lesson for all us K.I.N.Gs… law enforcement agenda self-overidden by personal-advancement activities outside rule book … Brady see, Brady do… see what you do…. (Charlton, 2015).

In my future vision, A.I. post-humans do not transcend the faults and bad habits of humanity but rather learn selfishness from the all too human objects of their imitation.

The Same Old Songs

I had my three settings and enough background, research and imaginative material to be able to write them. I found that one other technique helped to bind the trio of retellings together. A number of quotes and allusions to folk songs – 'Duncan and Brady' itself but also others – began working their way into the mouths of the 1890 characters. Brady opens his first speech with the same line that opens the Lead Belly and Dylan versions of the song, "Twinkle, twinkle, twinkle, little star" (Dylan, 2008). This line as an opener for the play does a number of jobs. It creates an immediate link between the play and the ballad, it tells us that Brady's monologue takes place after sunset, and is a reference to the star of sheriff's badge which Brady can be seen wearing in the only available picture of the actual man (The Officer Down Memorial Page (ODMP), 2015). Having begun the first section in this fashion, for consistencies sake I began all of the Brady monologues in a similar fashion, referencing a star lyric in a popular songs. In the 1970s section, the song was that perennial of UK radio play throughout that decade, Don McLean's 'Vincent', with the line as Brady looks up at the sky being "Starry, starry night" (McLean, 1971). In the future, as I do not know what music will be around then but wanted an allusion to an existing song rather than one I had invented, I chose 'Pyramid Song' with its intriguingly futuristic reference to a "moon full of stars and astral cars" (Radiohead, 2001). This becomes the line the A.I. Brady uses to orientate himself and the audience in the futuristic moonlit evening.

Many other song allusions litter the monologues. The 1890 setting references 'Stack-a-Lee' – whose murder of Billy Lyons took place in St. Louis just across the road from the Charles Starkes saloon – as well as 'Love Henry' and 'Roving Gambler'. These give this segment the underlying suggestion that this is in some way a performance on the folk scene. The 1970s monologues draw on a somewhat obscure progressive rock album, *Turn of a Friendly Card* (Alan Parsons Project, 1980) which, although little remembered today, was heavily advertised on TV at the time. The songs on the album are melancholy and bitter reflections on mortality, time and addiction, so they suited the story of Duncan and Brady and the gambling den in which the killing takes place. The title track's lyrics include a suitably Blakean allusion to "…unsmiling faces in fetters and chains / On a wheel in perpetual motion" which brings into play the idea of the characters trapped within the repeating rounds of a sung story from which they cannot escape; it became Duncan's reflection on the denizens of Starke's gaming club, "Unsmiling faces, fettered and chained to that circle of a table. Serious

business when your whole life depends on the turn of a friendly card" (Charlton, 2015).

For the futuristic segment, I drew upon a disparate variety of popular songs which deal with futuristic subject matter and robotics. 'Paranoid Android' (Radiohead, 1997), 'The Body Electric' (Rush, 1984), and the hilarious 'Mr. Roboto' (Styx, 1993) each gave me some choice and apposite phases. The Styx song includes the singer's deliberate mispronunciation ""I am the Modren Man" and nodding to this in Duncan's monologue allowed me to demonstrate his model's inbuilt technological inferiority and inability to pass the Turing Test as compared to the K.I.N.G. paradigm Brady:

> I am the modrem man… is how you know I paradigm Roboto… asset name Duncan… inbuilt speech impediment on certran words… (Charlton, 2015).

Each of these allusions is appropriate to their particular moment in the play. They also happily reiterate the idea of stories being retold, or songs being covered. Human and A.I. life and speech is shown in my three visions of Duncan and Brady as being constituted of reiterated and repeated stories, phrases and refrains.

Telling The Tales In Pubic

As often happens in the theatre, the actors who commissioned the piece were not the producers and stars of the first public performances of *Been on the Job Too Long*. I presented the Brady monologues, performed by actor Tom Hayes under my own direction, at *Stage the Future: the First Conference on Science Fiction Theatre* at Royal Holloway (2014). We were particularly interested in exploring whether the actor's process differed in rehearsing for the two human versions of Brady and the A.I. Brady. We discovered that rather than excavating the motivations behind the words, in the A.I. version we were having to find computer calculations happening within the "Lawdroid" Brady. We found that the A.I. Brady's monologue is particularly challenging in terms of learning the dialogue, a challenge also experienced in the futuristic section by the actor playing Duncan in the TheatreN16 production of the play. Hayes's Brady was very different to the TheatreN16 Brady (Bosley dir. 2015) – more jokey, less edgy – yet both of the performances were successful in their own terms. Tom's performance as the three versions of Brady was videoed for archive purposes (Charlton, Hayes and Roshini, 2015).

At Theatre N16 all three actors (each playing either Brady, Duncan and Starke) were white males. Whilst the actors took on accents generally appropriate to their characters' times and places, the fact of the 19th century Duncan's Afro-American ethnicity was left as an implication of the text, rather in any explicit indicators within the Duncan actor's performance. This was the right decision, otherwise taste might have been breached and needless offence given. My own preference would be to cast a black actor in the Duncan roles, and have him perform outside of his ethnicity in the 20th century. It is not made explicit in the

text which ethnic appearance the 21st century Duncan A.I. machine has been designed with.

Hopefully the play is sturdy enough to be performed by actors with any consternation of ethnicity or even gender. It could just as well be performed by nine actors each performing one of the monologues apiece, or by a single performer as a monopolylogue. This latter might give *Been on the Job Too Long* some of the effect that Dolan (2005: 67) posits as belonging to "the monopolylogue form", one that "models the fluidity of cultural identities and offers a method through which performers and spectators might experience them."

It is a commonplace observation as to stage texts, that different performers in various productions can bring out different aspects of the same role. In the context of a play which meditates upon the same story recurring in different circumstances, this feature of revival of the same thing under different circumstances reflects the structure of the play, exposing a metatheatrical quality of the work.

When I presented the research behind the play at the NAWE conference in 2014, there was some discussion in the Q&A afterwards as to whether the A.I. Duncan's social position can really be analogous to the black and Irish human, historical versions. Was discrimination against outmoded form of android really comparable to discriminating against a subsection of humanity due to racism embedded within a social structure? Perhaps there is something analogous between the positions of colonized peoples vis-à-vis their more powerful colonizers, and between more advanced androids and oout-of-date models, in that it tends to be a technological advantages that leads the colonizers to their socially privileged position. Yet the human tragedy revealed in contemplation of racism and social injustice is far sharper than the mild sadness evoked by thinking of a piece of machinery becoming defunct and being discarded.

This discontinuity between the tragedies of the two human versions of Duncan and the robotic, the tragedy thus becoming something synthetic, is another place in which the deeper meaning of the play emerges. Do we feel less for the robot Duncan in performance than in the two previous human enactments? It is difficult to tell oneself that the sorrows experienced by the robotic child protagonist of *A. I. Artificial Intelligence* (2001) are without stakes given he is a mere machine, due to the manipulations of cinema and Haley Joel Osment's very human performance in the role. Similarly, it is difficult not to feel for the robotic Duncan in the futuristic version of the tale. Within the play, the futuristic Starke feels pangs of guilt over the destruction of "my little Duncan" (Charlton, 2015) no less than the previous versions of Starke feel their nagging guiltiness with regard to their responsibility for the human Duncans' deaths. Duncan and Brady were themselves real live people, whereas the characters that populate the song about them and now my play are fictionalised and unreal. Can a retelling ever match real events?

Telling and Retelling Tales

My hope with regards to *Been on the Job Too Long* is that each of its retellings brings on stage an old and ongoing injustice, an old and ongoing cause for suffering, pain and regret. This suffering, pain and regret has been with human beings for as long as recorded time. It is likely to be with us into any foreseeable future. Wishing to experience performance of human suffering is, I believe, one reason why people perform and listen to murder ballads such as 'Duncan and Brady' and other sad stories.

In his book about the blackface yodeling minstrel Emmett Miller, Tosches (2002: 294) ruminates on the deepest meaning within the repetition of primeval pain through story and song:

> An old song made new, to shake souls, then as now, now as then. "The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done: and there is nothing new under the sun." Lovesick never changes, but Lovesick Blues sure can make it new…

The response to the performances of *Been on the Job Too Long* by TheatreN16 was very positive. I was satisfied that that *feeling* of the play came across, especially when an audience member wrote to me of the "pretty bleak" quality of the piece, also saying that they "enjoyed it" (Francis, 2015).

This mixed sense of enjoyment and pain is a quality I get from listening to a murder ballad such as 'Duncan and Brady'. Such a song can make me laugh, it can make me contemplate, it can make me weep at the folly of men. It can hold my attention in many different versions. Adapting 'Duncan and Brady' for the stage in a threefold manner helped me to understand with greater clarity my job as a writer, a storyteller retelling tales that will remain relevant long after I am gone. The stories I choose to tell are those which, due to their ageless quality, will continue to attract balladeers, folk writers and forgers of myths, playwrights and players as well as audiences in future times, as they do now and did then.

Footnotes

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[1] I rename Charles Starkes 'Starke' in the play as the name is sharpened by the loss of the second 's', especially given that the word "stark" is a useful indicator to the bitter truth of the story – the innocent man is wrongly punished and the guilty get away with murder.

[2] As I teach scriptwriting in Higher Education, it also struck me that getting students to undertake this kind of adaptation of folk and fairy tales or myths to different periods, or getting them to reset real life stories or their own work in different times and places, would be a useful developmental exercise. It would result in higher levels of research skills and ensure that their stories have the kind of timeless quality that often makes a good tale.

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