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Opinion

Music and drama play big role in seeking harmony for victims

Tuesday, November 06, 2007

In every country, after a prolonged conflict, there are attempts to get the opposing factions to accept responsibility for the death and injury they have inflicted on each other. The idea is to uncover the truth about what happened - and the motivation - but we're not making much progress, are we?

We've got the political process moving, of course, but at grassroots level the animosity engendered by 35 years of contention hasn't diminished by much. The pain, caused by the mayhem, hasn't been acknowledged properly in a public forum, and its effects will continue to prejudice our future prospects - socially and economically.

We're getting down to business at long last, with the Eames-Bradley commission looking at how any inquest into the past might function. If ever a Victims Commissioner gets to be appointed, he or she will obviously have a vital role.

But, although there are a lot of avenues being explored, and old sores being opened, there has been no real opportunity for the victims, on both sides, to have their say. Would it help them, and us, to get at the truth and achieve some kind of closure? Or would it prolong the agony, best left to die out over time?

It's hard to be sure, because every conflict situation is different, but the South African experience was dramatised at the Lyric Theatre in Belfast last week in the wonderful Truth in Translation, played by black and white actors.

A crash course in South African politics would have been useful beforehand but, even so, the combination on stage of anguish, rage, raw humour and that unique foot-stamping music got the point across.

Our communities have been torn, in many ways, by 3,600 killings over 40 years. Their death toll, over centuries of colonialism, amounts to millions - and their Truth and Reconciliation Commission processed 21,000 victim statements, relating to 38,000 incidents and the killings of 14,000 people.

The conventional way to tell the TRC story, over its four years of hearings, would have been to have actors speaking their lines straight from the transcripts. But it was far more effective to go behind the scenes and see how the translators, interpreting the witness statements into South Africa's 11 official languages, reacted to the atrocities described.

They became victims, too, although they were warned not to get involved. They had to speak the words of bereaved mothers and mass-murdering police chiefs without showing emotion. After their day's work, the tensions between black and white translators took their toll.

For members of the audience prepared to do their homework, posters were hung in the theatre foyer to fill in the background. There was a Methodist minister with no hands, victim of a letter bomb, and, as a reminder of events nearer home, the Brighton bomber was pictured with the daughter of one of his victims, who had chosen to forgive him.

And that was the message, difficult as it is for everyone and impossible for some. Forgiveness is the way that Nelson Mandela survived his 27 years in prison, and enabled him to remain a leader of the bloodless revolution that followed, rather than staying a victim of his oppressors.

"Can we forgive the past to survive the future?" That is the question that Mandela posed, and which the black majority - amazingly - answered in the affirmative.

The aftermath hasn't been perfect, with so much crime and poverty, as well as government denial of the

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facts of Aids, but the overthrow of centuries of white rule could have been so much more violent.

The contribution of the TRC, chaired by Archbishop Tutu, to the peaceful way in which ordinary South Africans have accepted the new order was enormous, though the play reckons it was "only 9.5% successful". But it meant that innocents and killers had to face each other and live out the moments of death and torture.

Could we do the same, or adapt the system to meet our own situation? I was glad to see at least one distinguished reconciler in the front row of the Lyric and I hope there were many more.

The differences are obvious. All they had to do was introduce democracy and their basic white-versus-black problem was solved.

We've found a temporary solution, through political accommodation, but the unionist-versus-nationalist problem remains. Although peace has been declared, the causes of conflict linger.

In South Africa, there were winners and losers, so an incentive could be offered to the losers - the white security forces - to tell the truth. Amnesty was granted to individuals - both whites and blacks - as long as their crimes were politically motivated, proportionate and there was full disclosure. Applications had to be made in writing, telling all, so much more of the truth was uncovered.

Could we stand up to such scrutiny here?

Would victims be able to tell their stories, and listen to the excuses or justifications of the guilty, without whole communities demanding revenge? In South Africa, there was no requirement for remorse to be shown.

Most important, of course, amnesty has already been granted here, to most of the guilty, so there is no incentive for them to come clean, except to help the victims. Would they do it, when the two sides have to live together?

We're not ready yet, though the South Africans have been busy recording our experiences. The time may come, years hence, when there is resolution. But I'd still like to see a local version of this play, made bearable by magical musical interludes. Over to you, Van Morrison.

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