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**JOHN BYRNE'S *THE SLAB BOYS*:
TECHNICOLORED HELL-HOLE IN
A TOWN CALLED MALICE**

William Donaldson

John Byrne's scintillating black comedy, *The Slab Boys*, hailed as "one of Scotland's defining literary works of the twentieth century,"¹ has delighted audiences for more than thirty years, yet has attracted less than its share of critical attention.² The reasons may not be very far to seek. First, there is its deceptively small scale. It plays very fast, and can struggle in larger performance spaces, so is easy to dismiss as an amusing trifle. Then there is the cascading verbal wit: we may think "surely something that funny just can't be serious?" Finally, of course, there is

¹ John Byrne, *The Slab Boys Trilogy* (Faber & Faber, London: 2003), cover note. All subsequent references, with the exception of *Nova Scotia*, are to this edition. *The Slab Boys* was first performed at the Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh, in April 1978, with a number of subsequent revivals and a television version. The London production won Byrne the *Evening Standard* Award for Most Promising Playwright for 1978; for details of the New York production see <http://www.ibdb.com/production.php?id=4209>, accessed May 20, 2015; for the television film version of 1997, see the *Internet Movie Database*, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0117663>, accessed July 6, 2015. The most recent revival was at the Glasgow Citizen's Theatre in spring 2015, reviewed in: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/theatre-reviews/11411090/The-Slab-Boys-Citizens-Theatre-Glasgow-review-one-distinct-flaw.html>, accessed June 13, 2015.

² Robert Hewison, *John Byrne Art and Life* (Farnham: Lund Humphries, 2011), contains the best study to date of Byrne's literary context; see also Cairns Craig, "Displacements—The Theatrical Art of John Byrne," *International Journal of Scottish Theatre*, 3:1 (2002), accessed February 10, 2015; Jennifer Hess Mouat, "Slabs and Scripts: John Byrne's 'Peculiarly Graphic Way,'" *Scottish Studies Review*, 9:1 (2008): 171-185, accessed June 23, 2015; and Adrienne Scullion, "Byrne and the Bogie Man: Experiencing American Popular Culture in Scotland," *Atlantic Studies*, 1:2 (2006): 210-27, accessed June 24, 2015.

its genre—it assumes that most apparently trivial of forms, the farce. Reflections such as these may have combined to undermine our sense of the play's ultimate significance. And yet, a more careful scrutiny may show that claims for its importance are well founded.

The action of the play takes place in the Slab Room of a fictional carpet company, A. & F. Stobo of Paisley, and occupies a single day towards the end of 1957. In the Slab Room the pigments for the carpet designers are mixed, and escape from its drudgery to a designer's desk appears to be the burning ambition of the three central characters, the slab boys of the title. These are Phil McCann, aged about nineteen, gifted, turbulent, perhaps even violently unstable; his colleague Spanky Farrell, Phil's equal in verbal wit and surreal humour; and the diminutive—to-all-appearances-conventional—Hector McKenzie, the runt of the litter and the butt of much of the humour of the play. All three are working class, but while Phil and Spanky are products of the undeserving poor—Phil in particular comes from “The Feegie”, sink housing estate of the socially doomed, Hector's origins—typically of the finely-grained social observation of the play—lie in the more aspiring and conventional upper working-class. The wider world of the carpet factory, and of the greater Scotland that surrounds it, is represented by designer Jack Hogg, “Plooky Jack”, long-suffering target of sloppily dished pigments and corrosive verbal wit; Willie Curry, the pinstripe-suited manager, embodiment of conventional middle class, middle-aged values, and given to ostentatious military talk; and glamorous sketcher, Lucille Bentley, “every slab boy's dream,” immaculate apotheosis of juke-box chic. Finally, a catalytic outsider, middle-class student, Alan Downie, appears, passing through on a vacation job from Uni., with fancy fountain pen, brogues and blazer, and a guaranteed free passage into the managerial class.

There are two main strands of plot. The first concerns Phil's talent as a painter and the discovery that he has skipped off work to submit his portfolio for admission to Glasgow School of Art. This is transgressive in a number of ways: first, he hasn't asked permission, and is therefore deemed to have flouted authority; second, it shows a commitment to high art values which are the antithesis of the commercial kitsch which prevails at Stobo's; and, finally, it breaches the terms of his indenture as an apprentice designer, since in theory everything he produces belongs to the company.

The second main area of business involves Phil and Spanky's bizarre schemes to get nondescript little Hector a date with Lucille for the annual staff dance which is to be held at Paisley Town Hall that evening. Their

attempts to spice up his hopelessly drab appearance produce sequences reminiscent of classic French farce with high-speed dashing about, hiding in cupboards, and general slapstick fun. This is so effective that we may overlook its actual significance. Phil's motives are—intermittently at least—genuinely altruistic; a part of him really does want to succeed in this seemingly impossible task, and he has a compassion for Hector's depressive, potentially suicidal, plight that is rare in the ethos of rat-like individual struggle that prevails at Stobo's.

While this is going on, news breaks in from the outside world; all of it bad. Phil's violently schizophrenic mother has escaped from "care," set fire to her hair and hurled herself through the plate glass windows of the local CO-OP. She has eluded the authorities and is now on the loose, a danger to herself and anybody she might encounter. Although she never appears onstage, Phil's Maw is a powerful presence, and her degrading treatment at the local mental asylum is the focus of her son's harrowing childhood memories. She is a symbol, too, of larger social malaise. The callous disregard with which women are treated when youth and beauty have faded is represented on-stage by the elderly tea-lady, Sadie, another powerful token of female rage and defeat, dragged down by drunken wastrel husbands and accumulating social despair.

The characters fall into symmetrical balancing and contrasting groups. There are two subversive boys, Phil and Spanky, echoed by two conventional counterparts, Alan and Hector; two boss figures—Jack Hogg and Willie Curry; and two women, Lucille and Sadie, each one a vividly-realised individual and each at the same time part of a group offering a many-levelled commentary on the others.

The setting, too, is ingeniously constructed and rich with implication. The conflicting worlds of the play are immediately visible onstage. The "technicolored hell-hole" of the Slab Room, filthy, chaotic, and violently daubed with pigment, at once evokes an atmosphere of challenge to order and authority, reinforced by the large poster of James Dean, symbol of youth rebellion, which dominates the stage.³ The oppositional credentials of the Boys are further emphasised by the tawdry glamour of their teddy-boy outfits, and greasy duck's-arse haircuts. The representatives of social order are likewise instantly identifiable by the drab conventionality of their appearance. The Salamander and Penguin editions of the play have

³ The phrase "technicolored hell-hole" is Byrne's description of the carpet company slab room in which he himself had served an apprenticeship as a youngster: see Hewison, *John Byrne*, 18.

detailed costume designs by the author—who is also an outstandingly gifted painter and theatre designer—specifying the precise implications of each outfit.⁴ Middle-class authority and working class subversion are pitted against each other from the outset, and continue to add their tensions throughout the action.

This sartorial dimension finds a vivid counterpart in the language of the play, a continuous interplay of contrasting registers, observed with deadly accuracy, and endowing the piece with a verbal opulence which is one of its most striking features. It includes Curry's military slang and frequent (allegedly fake) campaign reminiscences:

I often wonder how a pair of greasy-quiffed nancy boys like you would've fared in the tropics. By God, you had to be on your toes out there....Slant-eyed snipers up every second palm tree, drawing a bead on us jocks as we cut and hacked a path through the dense undergrowth. Is this what Wingate gave up his last gasp for? So that louts like you could get yourselves a cushy little number? (p.121).

Then there is Lucille's precarious poise between earthy working-and aspiring middle-class idioms. While as capable of memorable utterance as any of Byrne's characters—entering the Slab Room she exclaims "Honest to God, see when you come in here it's like trying to find your way through the middle of Gene Vincent's wardrobe with a glow-worm on the end of a stick" (p.41)—she can descend to a gutter coarseness that contrasts shockingly with her immaculately-groomed appearance. Startled by Hector's bloody visage at the Slab Room window, she declares: "I swear to God. I nearly shit a brick" (p.75).

Then there is Jack Hogg's inexhaustible supply of limp platitudes, the verbal equivalent of the mediocrity against which Phil wages constant war:

Sorry I took so long [...] bit of bother with one of the jute backings. How're we doing? Lads filling you in all right? [...] the boss has just hit me with a half-drop for Holland. Any problems give me a shout... Okay? Okay? Ciao. (pp.26, 48)

This is counterpointed by Sadie's bottom-of-the-heap argot, strewn with lumpenproletarian verbal markers:

Some nice wee fairy cakes the day? What's up with you? 'S that not terrible? [...] Come on...tea's up. And where's my

⁴ John Byrne, *The Slab Boys* (Edinburgh: Salamander Press, 1982); John Byrne, *The Slab Boys Trilogy* (London: Penguin Books, 1987).

wean? Here, son, come and look what your mammy's brung you
(p.34).

And, most spectacularly, Phil and Spanky's powerful command of popular culture registers suggesting deep immersion in comic-book literature, public libraries intensively used, and an intellectual acuity markedly superior to anything else on display. When Curry confiscates the portable radio Hector was planning to give his mother as a present, Phil comments, in a delicious parody of English public school idiom:

Bless my boater, did you catch that, Cherry? A yuletide cadeau
for the squirt's mater and blow me if old Quelch ain't went and
confiscated the blighter! (p.16).

The reference is to Frank Richards's Greyfriars School stories, whose comic anti-hero Billy Bunter enlivened many a British childhood in the middle years of the twentieth century.⁵ Phil's skilful shimmying between registers sets him apart from the conventional characters, making the audience wonder "who *is* this guy?" It also vividly reflects the colliding worlds of the play: high social class and low; wealth and poverty; privilege and oppression.

In the constant power struggle that rages at Stobo's, language is used both to defend and to attack. The Boys cruelly mangle the names of people they dislike (Alan Downie turns into "Archie, Andy, Agnes, Eamonn;" Barton the boss is twisted into "Waldorf Bathroom," ingeniously combining social pretentiousness with human waste) and spectacularly insult their personal appearance. Here they are elaborating on Jack Hogg's pimply complexion:

SPANKY: Why don't you vamoose, Jacky boy?

PHIL: Yeh, Plooky Chops...them boils of your is highly smittal.

JACK: I'm warning you, McCann...

PHIL: Keep away from me! Hector, fling us over the Dettol!

JACK: Jealousy will get you nowhere, McCann... just because I'm
on a desk.

SPANKY: It's a bloody operating table you want to be on, Jack.
That face... yeugh.

PHIL: You can put in for plastic surgery, you know... on the
National Health.

SPANKY: Or a "pimplectomy".

⁵ [For readers unfamiliar with the Greyfriars saga: a boater was a straw hat, Cherry was the surname of the school hero, "the squirt's mater" meant the younger boy's mother, and Mr. Quelch was the form master in charge of the Remove, the low-level class that includes Bunter and his friends. Ed.]

PHIL: It would only take about six months...

SPANKY: ... and a team of surgeons...

PHIL:... with pliers. (p.17).

The Boys twist everything, caricaturing it, reducing it, and so assert a bizarre sort of authority over their surroundings, continuously testing reality with ingenious verbal invention. It is clear from the skill with which they do this that Phil and Spanky are the sharpest people around; yet they are at the bottom of the heap socially and in the workplace, and seem destined to stay there. This paradox will lead us eventually to a major theme of the play.

The uncomfortable things that lurk behind the bland surface of normality are continuously uncovered. In one of the defining moments of the play Phil describes to Spanky the horrors of his Maw's treatment in the mental asylum, with its callous, brutal regime and relentless assault upon personal dignity and autonomy:

SPANKY: How long'll she be in this time?

PHIL: Usual six weeks, I expect. First week tied to a rubber mattress, next five wired up to a generator.

SPANKY: That's shocking.

PHIL: [...] Never knew us the last time. Kept looking at my old man and saying, "Bless me, Father, for I have sinned." [...] Medicine? Forty bennies crushed up in their cornflakes before they frogmarch them down to the "relaxation classes", then it's back up to Cell Block Eleven for a kitbagful of capsules that gets them bleary-eyed enough for a chat with the consultant psychiatrist.

SPANKY: Not much of a holiday, is it? (p.27)

Madness and incarceration are seen not as an individual aberration, but as a possibly general fate. When Alan Downie asks if three years is a normal stint in the Slab Room, Spanky replies "Nothing's normal in this joint, son" (p.49), and when he queries Phil's eccentric behaviour, "You mean he's nuts...", Spanky replies "We're all nuts, kiddo" (p.50). Then we learn about Hector's suicide bid: "Know what the mug done? [...] Just 'cos some stupid lassie wouldn't look the road he was on? Took the string out of his pyjama trousers, tied it round his throat and strung himself up from the kitchen pulley [...] His old dear had to get the man next door to cut him down with the bread knife. You can still see the rope burns." (p.87). It is clear that Phil may not be the only one on the edge psychologically. The asylum is shown to be merely a heightened example of the assault upon the self routinely practiced at Stobo's. Just as there are two pivotal female figures, Sadie and Phil's Maw, one visible

and one not, so there are two lunatic asylums in this play, one—Stobo's--vividly presented onstage, and the other—the real one--a constantly brooding presence in the background, recurring metaphor for a society on the verge of going collectively crazy.

At first sight the play is intensely, even microscopically, local—there is detailed reference to specific neighbourhoods of Paisley, and the widely differing communities that lie in the backgrounds of the principle characters, ranging from blighted council estates with multiple social problems to genteel and privileged middle-class milieux. Sectarian rivalries, possibly baffling to outsiders but which have long marked Scotland's industrial west-central Lowlands owing to large-scale immigration of Irish Catholic labour during the boom years of the Industrial Revolution, rumble on throughout. These, too, are linked to social advantage and the kind of passage through the world that one may expect. "Place is crawling with masons" says Phil. "Don't listen to them" says Hector "They're always going on about masons. 'Jimmy Robertson's a mason...Bobby Sinclair's a mason...Willie Curry's a bloody mason.' SPANKY: He's a bloody mutant." (p.20). Stobo's itself is presented as a Protestant stronghold. When Hector says "Hang off! I went to Johnstone High...I'm not a bloody pape!" Phil retorts: "No sense denying it, Heck...how else would you be in the Slab?" (p.22). Spanky adds that "soon as Father Durkin heard we were working here...Phil's Auntie Fay got beat up by the Children of Mary..." (p.21). Alan claims ignorance of all of this: "I don't know what you're talking about" (p.21) and obviously means it—signs of a middle class upbringing untroubled by such antipathies.

Yet the play never loses sight of the wider world. Curry's wartime experiences frequently transport us to the jungles of Southeast Asia, while Phil's omnivorous reading presents a panoramic backdrop of British and American popular culture. The play itself experienced a similar transition. After its modest opening in the Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh in the spring of 1978, it quickly found a wider audience, transferring to the Royal Court in London, then playing on Broadway in 1983 with a glittering cast which included the youthful Sean Penn playing Spanky Farrell, Kevin Bacon as Phil McCann, and Val Kilmer in the role of Alan Downie.⁶

⁶ See <http://www.ibdb.com/production.php?id=4209>, for production and casting details (accessed 20 May 2015).

The play also reflects the broader intellectual currents of the age. The anxiety and alienation which lurk behind the comic mask echo the Existentialist attitudes widespread amongst Byrne's generation, founded in the belief that the world is an absurd and futile place and that its inhabitants, estranged from meaningful contact with themselves and with others, are doomed to futile internecine strife. The play's dark emotional tone, and its protagonist's struggle against impersonal and dehumanising forces and the artistic mediocrity they promote, prompt ready enough parallels with Sartre and Beckett.

The play has debts also to a more characteristically Scottish tradition. At its heart lies a brilliant reworking of the perennial theme of "the lad o' parts" which has loomed large in Scottish literature for at least two centuries. This charts the struggles and eventual success of the capable young man of humble origins who has nothing to recommend him but drive and ability. In the background lie cherished beliefs about Scotland as a uniquely meritocratic community whose public bursary system based on open competitive examination paid the university fees and expenses of bright plebeian lads (and lasses) for centuries, trudging up to college with a bag of books over one shoulder and a barrel of oatmeal on the other. It was the ultimate dream of an egalitarianism founded on limitless possibilities of social mobility. There was no position, rank or degree in Scottish life to which brains and hard work could not aspire. In *The Slab Boys*, however, we see a different story. None of the youthful characters, except Alan Downie, who is born into privilege, seems likely to "succeed". For most of the action of the play, being a member of the lower working class in urban Scotland in the second half of the twentieth century looks like a life sentence. It is a world strewn with broken dreams and frustrated aspirations: Phil doesn't get into art school; Spanky doesn't climb the promotion ladder; Hector doesn't get the girl.

Still, the play ends on a note of wild optimism. Phil has just been fired for laziness and insubordination; his family lies in ruins and his future seems bleak, yet he exits with a defiant cry: "Christ, I've just remembered something...*(takes a couple of steps and executes a cartwheel.)* Giotto was a Slab Boy!" (p.122) So with a typical blend of learning and audacity—relying on the audience's knowledge that the great painterly careers of the Renaissance typically began with the apprentice-like grinding of pigments, just like the Slab Room (but with incomparably greater career potential)—the action ends. Phil's cartwheel is not just a symbol of youthful rebellion, a protest against the older generation or restrictive social convention, but a triumphant assertion of

selfhood and joy; a defiant repudiation the drab negativity of everyday life.

Excited audiences in 1978 left the theatre with little idea that the story was far from over and that there was still much to be told. *The Slab Boys* was quickly followed by two sequels—*The Loveliest Night of the Year* (later entitled *Cuttin' a Rug*) which was unveiled in 1979, and *Still Life* in 1982. These follow the characters further into their lives and apparently completed the deepening spiral of disillusionment and despair.

Cuttin' a Rug takes place in Paisley Town Hall at Stobo's annual staff dance on the evening of Phil's dismissal. It is very much a companion piece to *The Slab Boys*, with the same group of central characters, but with an important shift in standpoint: the female characters assume much greater prominence and the audience sees things more from their point of view. The problems of being a woman are heavily stressed. It seems one must either have a dependent husband like Sadie or a dependent mother like Miss Walkinshaw (one of Stobo's designers, a shadowy presence in the earlier play but here an interesting and complex voice). The implication is that other people are a mere burden. Sadie's conclusion that "You can keep the plaster on a currybunkle for so long but underneath it's suppurating away" (p.164) might serve as an epigraph for the whole sequence of plays. Her remarks about knocking old people out with ether is a final comment on the squalid fate of women in this world.

The strain of misandry—Bernadette Rooney says her mum will break her jaw if she ever comes home with a man (p.187)—seems entirely intelligible, and merely one aspect of a wider social malaise. "You know how it is with best friends...we can't stand one another," Bernadette says of Lucille (p.187). "What now, Phil?" says Spanky at one point. "PHIL: Let's choke one another. SPANKY: Good idea. (They grab each other by the throat and fall to ground.)" (p.193). These plays offer abundant support for the idea that hell is other people.

In *Cuttin' a Rug* the continuing strain of dubious wartime reminiscences give the past a disturbingly unstable quality reminiscent of Beckett. We could almost be in *Godot*, with Phil and Spanky as juvenile versions of Vladimir and Estragon. Here they are on the balcony of the Town Hall waiting for significance to descend:

SPANKY: (*Whistles*) Look at the moon....'s huge [...] And just look at all them stars... 's dead romantic, isn't it. There must be thousands of the bastards. Heh...look! One of them's moving!
PHIL: Where?

SPANKY: There...just next to the Great Bear's bum...see? Aw, it's went out...

PHIL: Maybe it was the Sputnik with the mutt in it...?

SPANKY: No...I think you can only see that through a smoky-flavoured dog biscuit...It was a shooting star.

PHIL: Don't be ridiculous...what would a shooting star be doing over Paisley?

SPANKY: Yeah...right enough. (pp.196-7).

Their conversation veers into social criticism, the evils of capitalism, rickets-ridden weans and so on, then by a process of surreal association into the links between disability and art in the work of Toulouse-Lautrec and Henri Matisse. In a moment of self-revelatory seriousness Phil says:

D'you know what it's like being able to draw? It's the most exciting thing in the world... bar none. You don't need to send anybody up there [into space] to see what the world looks like.

You only have to open a book of Ingres's drawings... there we are... you... me... him... her... them... us... (p.198).

The Town Hall's erratic electrical system repeatedly plunges the set into darkness during which Hector, driven to desperation, pulls a knife on Phil but only manages to stab himself in the wrist. This is sordid and horrible and it has no right to be wildly funny; but it is, and it issues in a marvellous bon mot as Phil imagines Hector talking to his psychiatrist: "Tell me, Mr McKenzie, was it the hurlyburly of modern life that drove you to it or was you just at a loose end?" (p.215). We remember Hector's earlier suicide episode, and soon discover that worse is to come. The play is really a meditation on the possibility of happiness, and comes to conclusions not unlike Burns's, that "The best-laid schemes o' mice, an' men / Gang aft agley, / An' lea' us nought but grief an' pain, for promis'd joy." Like its predecessor *Cuttin' a Rug* is full of dramatic movement: lights flashing on and off, blood everywhere, relationships renegotiated with lightning speed, and sudden bizarre revelations.

The third play, *Still Life*, takes us ten years forward in the characters' lives, amidst a gathering sense of *ubi sunt?* Phil has become a struggling painter with a couple of shows to his credit and Spanky has made it as a middle-ranking pop star. Meantime he has married Lucille Bentley and they have a daughter. They have just attended the funeral of Hector McKenzie and greet one another with the usual cheerful insults. Phil says "You're a child of the fifties, Farrell...you're too old for this 'New Generation' malarky. You grew up with sweetie coupons and Stafford Cripps, not hash cookies and florescent underpants" (p.244). Spanky ripostes:

Call yourself an artist?[...] Is this the guy that cartwheeled out the door of A. F. Stobo's Slab Room in nineteen fifty-seven to go fifteen rounds with Pablo Picasso? 'And there goes the bell for the First Round and...oh, fuck me! It's an uppercut from the Spanish boy [...] he's down! He's on the canvas...but hold on, folks, the Paisley featherweight is desperately trying to draw himself together [...] but the dusky Dago's too quick for him...a left jab to the solar plexus and it's all over!' (p.245)

It emerges that Hector has been murdered, his head bashed in by his male lover in a squalid *crime passionnel* in a changing-room at the public baths, the climax of an acute psychological crisis which has seen him, too, confined in the local asylum. As usual, Phil is the only one who really seems to care. As he and Lucille discuss life in their usual strain of genial misanthropy they agree that it is hardly worth the living, she concluding "Well, he's better off if you ask me" (p.253). They declare their love for one another and embrace. Spanky returns and attacks Phil. Lucille sorts them out, and the act ends with screams of exasperation and despair.

In Act Two five years have passed. Spanky, now enjoying major success as a rock 'n' roll star in the United States, has tracked Phil to the same Paisley cemetery where he is standing by the newly-dug grave of his mother. His expansive transatlantic diction "what is this? Hey...come on...it's cool...yeah? Shit...where's it at if you don't know where the fuck it's at...right?" (p.283) contrasts strikingly with Phil's laconic judgement on his mother: "She lived...she died" (p.281). Phil is now married to Lucille, and Spanky has formed another relationship in the US. He's come to ask Phil to do the artwork for his new album. As he enlarges on how big Phil's work could be in the States, it is clear that his values have become entirely mercenary, and we reflect that whatever else can be laid at Phil McCann's door he remains passionately committed to High Art, a vision of something beyond the mundane that contrasts strongly with the compromises that most of the other characters have been forced to make. It emerges that Spanky and Lucille's marriage has broken down over his heavy drinking and that she has got custody of their daughter, leading to a painful estrangement on Spanky's part.

And so the dysfunctional family duly reproduces itself in the next generation. Phil says he will never have children:

You bring them up, they spit in your eye. [...] Who asks to come into this world? I certainly didn't...did you? [...] Then you're hardly in it till you're out of it [...] Well, Christ, look at it...what

is there? You scab away for three score year and ten...What is there at the end of it? What d'you leave behind, eh? (p. 292)

He concludes: "Mothers? They should all've been strangled at birth" (p. 291).

When we reflect on Miss Walkinshaw's earlier comments on the crippling burden of *her* mother, it begins to look like a collective genetic doom. Men are eaten up by drink and folly and women shrivel into caricatures of themselves, (neatly summed up by Phil's intended mural for a chip-shop wall showing Lady Godiva mounted on a black pudding—p.314). And so we leave the central characters seemingly fated to spin round in an endless Sartrean triangle of destructiveness and suspicion.

And there things rested, until suddenly, fully twenty-five years later, a fourth play appeared, entitled *Nova Scotia* (2008), taking the main characters thirty years forward in their lives, into their embittered sixties. Although spiced as usual with Byrne's scintillating wit, it takes an even darker view of the human condition.⁷ Phil McCann is by now a noted Scottish painter, but past the peak of his fame, and he is married to a much younger conceptualist video artist, Deirdre (Didi) Chance, whose career, on the contrary, is booming. She is shortlisted for the Turner; she "sells" (the big baronial house she and Phil share belongs to her); she has a younger lover, and the marriage seems obviously headed for the rocks. The action is complicated by the arrival of a glamorous arts journalist, Nancy Rice, at work on what is clearly going to be a violently destructive attack on Phil's career; plus a film crew directed by Phil's long-estranged son, Miles McCann, making a bio-pic about Spanky Farrell—also visiting—now in the Bruce Springsteen-style elder statesman phase of his career, and also somewhat past his peak, and his wife, Lucille Bentley, who by now has been married, unhappily, to both him and Phil.

The play has two main areas of focus: fierce in-fighting within an art world shown as divided and strife-torn, and the past as a continuing baleful influence on the present. Phil and Didi represent the opposite poles of contemporary art: he is a figurative painter and a notable portraitist, she is a devotee of high abstraction and modern technology. They have an impassioned exchange at one point in which he denounces her installation/multi-media approach as fraudulent piss-artistry, and she rips into his style as bankrupt and passé. Didi says: "I wouldn't expect

⁷ First performed at the Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh, Friday 15 April 2008, and subsequently published by Faber and Faber (London, 2008).

someone of your generation to embrace the sort of irony that artists of my generation employ,” to which Phil replies “Well, the fact that not one of your generation can draw to save yur bloody lives has to be the ultimate irony, given that you all talk about yurselves as bloody ‘artists’...that much I can embrace,” and Didi retorts:

Oh, for God’s sake, it’s the twenty-first century! It’s not about drawing per se, it’s about making a statement, drawing conclusions...not a bloody artifact to stick in a frame. You and that mob of feeble-minded retards from the RSA,⁸ with ‘ma knob’s bigger’n yours’ mind set, contribute sweet fuck-all to the current discourse on contemporary work. The world’s changed, and the art world along with it, which is why there are more and more *women* making their mark, and that really bugs you, doesn’t it?

The reply is devastating:

You don’t understand *anythin’*--language...culture...art...nuance. *Irony* to you lot’s like a *baseball bat* is to a *bouncer*! As for *nuance*...you don’t even know how to fuckin’ spell it! You take a throwaway line—a *bagatelle*, a piece of *gossamer*—and you cast it in reinforced *concrete*, for Christ’s sake! The size of a house. Then, as if that wasny *lumpen* enough, you [...] screw up bitsa paper an’ sellotape them to the walls of this colossal *conceit* [...] compared to which, ‘ma knob’s bigger’n yours’ sounds like a quote from the Wit and Wisdom of fuckin’ Sophocles! (pp.59-60)

Didi’s lover, Corky Doyle, and Phil’s son Miles are film-makers, manipulators of the mechanized image, and reinforce the conflict we see throughout between an art which seeks for and attempts to convey the truth, like painting, and electronic media such as film which are branded as intrinsically shallow and mendacious.

Patterns of pain and grief keep repeating in *Nova Scotia*, echoing the earlier plays. Now in her early sixties, Lucille has had a Sadie-like double mastectomy, and her years of marriage to Phil have landed her in a mental asylum undergoing electric shock treatment, just like Phil’s mother. When Miles McCann shows up, sounding creepily like Alan Downie, he reveals that he’s had the family DNA tested. It turns out that Phil is the child of an incestuous union between his mother and her own father. The idea of inherited corruption, of hereditary taint that runs through all these plays, turns out to be even worse than anybody thought. The pursuit of happiness appears to be illusory, and “success” fleeting

⁸ Royal Scottish Academy.

and unsatisfactory. A major career in rock 'n' roll has brought Spanky only trouble:

Thurty years of chronic alcoholism, marital infidelity [...] family breakup [...] two jail terms for assault an' battery, addiction to heroin, divorce, lawyer's fees, bankruptcy, managerial fuck-ups, lawsuits, rehab [...] homelessness, women trouble, band problems, six paternity suits in this country, fourteen in the States, bounced cheques, extradition from the US to fuckin' Panama on a trumped-up drug-traffickin' rap [...] huvvin' to fork out every month fur child maintenance in order to send five of my alleged offspring through schools an' colleges in Boston, Tulsa, Philadelphia, Oklahoma City an' Battle Creek, Michigan...." (p.87)

When he denounces life as "this rotten ramshackle dumb arsehole of *existence*" (p.86), and declares in a spasm of sardonic remorse "I feel like a total *jerk*. I *am* a total jerk! I know it's selfish, self-centred, an' fuckin' immature, but I'm a rock star! I canny cope wi' *reality*. The real world's a sick fuckin' joke!" (p.88), we feel inclined to believe him. By the end of play, the only thing that does not seem to have declined and fallen is the protagonists' ability to inflict damage on one another.

The original production of *Nova Scotia*, at the Traverse in April 2008, closed with Phil, his career in decline, his marriage wrecked (again), homeless, and alone, staring grimly into the dark. This was a plausible reading of the general trajectory of events, but the published version gives final stage directions to close the play with the same unexpected splash of optimism we saw at the end of *The Slab Boys*:

Lights slowly down as Phil stands alone in the garden. He turns to face away from the house and studio. A flash of lightning picks out Lucille, who appears in the garden behind him. Phil turns. Blackout.

Another lightning flash—longer this time. Lucille in Phil's arms. Blackout.

Curtain. (p.100).

Is this history repeating itself, the past giving another sardonic twist of the knife, or a real chance for a new beginning? We do not know, and it is typical of the skill with which Byrne handles his characters that we are genuinely in doubt. Although the mood often seems bitterly nihilistic, it is tempered at key points by suggestions of resilience and hope.

Whatever may eventually emerge (for this may still be work in progress), John Byrne's *Slab Boys* tetralogy, must be one of the most significant Scottish works for the theatre since the days of Barrie and

James Bridie, as well as being a major contribution to modern Scottish letters. Its seriousness of theme, its keen sense of what is real and valuable, its insistence on the centrality of true art, shine through the grubby patina of everyday existence. We may see the point of Jack Hogg's remarks on Phil's refusal to compromise: "there's a real world out there. Some of us have to live in it" (p.68); but nearly everything in the adult world revealed by the plays is tawdry and fake, the only certainty being that it is calibrated for mediocrity and the doggedly second-rate are most likely to "succeed." Although the boys seem in full revolt against the timid conformism of Scottish lower-middle-class life, their own conformity to the youth cult seems little less of a surrender, and it emerges, as the later career of Spanky demonstrates, as utterly false in its promise. What one can become in this life seems severely restricted, and dreams of freedom and limitless self-expression are doomed from the outset. This appears the obvious implication of the iconic figure of James Dean mounted on the Slab Room wall, beautiful, charismatic—and dead, at the age of twenty four, with his promise largely unfulfilled.

These are plays of striking intellectual breadth, moving easily between high culture and low, and marked by seemingly effortless creative power. The flair with which they combine international with distinctively Scottish themes, and high aesthetic purpose with rumbunctiously demotic language, produces a fusion of realism and fantasy probably unmatched in Scotland since the heyday of Hugh MacDiarmid. Above all, one marvels at the tetralogy's superb verbal inventiveness and energy. There has seldom, if ever, been a more commanding demonstration of the excoriatingly destructive wit which distinguishes Scottish urban life, and which reaches, it would seem, a high degree of intensity in Byrne's native city. It was not for nothing that Paisley was known as "A Town called Malice."⁹

Byrne turned to the theatre when he began to find the sycophancy and bitter personal rivalries of the art world intolerable. In the theatre he found a cheerfully collaborative atmosphere where talent had scope but the pressures of competitive individualism were held in check, as well as a chance to speak to the audience directly, with a minimum of mediation. When Byrne arrived on the scene, Scottish theatre was entering an exciting new period of creativity and expansion. The abolition of

⁹ A mocking allusion to Nevil Shute's novel, *A Town Like Alice* (1950), later made into a blockbuster movie with the same title and starring Virginia McKenna and Peter Finch (1958).

ensorship in 1968 and enterprising Arts Council subsidy underpinned a new wave of radical theatre in Scotland. Here was a chance to create a new Scottish-centred and Scottish-controlled medium free from the constraints that had followed the centralisation of broadcasting and print media in London during World War II, and which had not subsequently been relaxed. Groups like the 7:84 Theatre Company and Wildcat Stage Productions were developing radical, bottom-up, politically committed theatre taking drama to the people, reaching out beyond the glossy city theatres to community spaces and village halls across Scotland. Dynamic new expressive possibilities were opening up. As Hewison remarks, “Theatre was one place where Scottish identity—literally, the Scottish voice—could be heard.”¹⁰

Byrne continued to work as a brilliant and eventually publicly honoured painter as we see in his 2014 retrospective “Sitting Ducks” at Scotland’s National Portrait Gallery.¹¹ His record of high achievement in two different art forms is difficult to parallel in Scottish, or perhaps any, tradition. We do not know whether he turned to the theatre in a polemical mood, because he could reach more people through this medium or because he wanted to unfold his visions on the larger canvas of the stage. But in the process he created a brilliant multi-dimensional oeuvre that we are only now beginning to unpack.

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¹⁰ Hewison, *John Byrne*, 60. For a wider view of the context sketched above, see also pp.59-65.

¹¹ See National Galleries Scotland, “What’s On—John Byrne | Sitting Ducks 14 June-19 October 2014,” <https://www.nationalgalleries.org/whatson/exhibitions/john-byrne>, accessed 10 July 2015.