

***Idealism, Nationalism, and the Betrayal of Children: Language of the Mute, The New Theatre, Temple Bar.***

My job is to research historical child sexual abuse in Ireland. It's a job that can be heartbreaking, frustrating, and (still, after eight years) shocking. I think these feelings are shared by the Irish public, who are still reeling from decades of official reports and scandals about the widespread scale of child sexual abuse over years. People feel angry and confused. How did the abuse happen? Why didn't victims come forward sooner? Why – how- were so many men allowed to continue raping children for so long? These are questions I seek to explore in my research, but the answers are slow to emerge from the mists of time and pain.

As we try to reckon with the past and its legacy, a new play opens up an important space in which we can think about these questions. From the first explosive scene of *Language of the Mute*, in which a school teacher is tied up and gagged by two of his former pupils, this play has something new to say about sexual abuse in Ireland. *The Language of the Mute* deals with three victims' search for justice for the rapes perpetrated on them by their former Irish language school teacher in the 1970s. They hold a so-called 'kangaroo court' to speak the truth of what happened to each other and to the teacher, who for much of the play is bound and unable to speak. There are flashbacks to the 1970s, allowing the audience to witness the two faces of 'Donie'. At times, he is the charismatic Gaeilgóir who inspires his students to hope for an Ireland of Pearse's dreams. Donie is the teacher we all loved at school, the adult who made us believe we could be anyone, do anything and go anywhere, if we just tried hard enough. But the other side of Donie is much darker than many of us could ever imagine. The unpredictable flashes of temper, the shouting and the overbearing stares at the children only hint at his evil. Through the 'testimony' in the present, of his victims, Kathy, Dandy and Alan, we learn that he used his position as a schoolteacher to rape children and to lock them into years of silence.

*Language of the Mute* carefully unpicks the threads of nationalism, religion and cultural identity that are woven in to the 'Máistear's' techniques of domination over the children. In this way, the play opens up a space in which we can think about Irish society's role in the abuse that took place in our institutions. Kathy and Alan explore the myth of the charismatic teacher who is almost a saviour to these deprived children, whose parents worship him as a symbol of escape from poverty. They also explore the nationalist 'blood sacrifice' at the foundation of our State, and the brutality, and unquestioning acceptance of the legitimacy of a certain brand of so-called republicanism that has engendered in Irish society.

At the heart of the play is, as the title suggest, communication and, as Jack Harte puts it in his preface, the irony of language:

*"Despite the students being engrossed in the mastery of their national language, they were simultaneously being groomed in the language of silence."*

*(Language of the Mute (Dublin: Scotus Press) at 9-10)*

This play's message is even more powerful because the audience knows that the character of Donie is based on a real life child rapist, Domhnall Ó Lubhlaí. Ó Lubhlaí was a [national figure](#), who regularly appeared on RTE television, including the show *Trom agus Éadtrom*. He founded Irish summer colleges in the Gaeltacht and initiated projects all over this island to foster the Irish language. His involvement with the so-called Republican movement was well known. Allegations of raping children came to light in the 1990s.

Ó Lubhlaí was successful in having his trial on charges of sexual assault prohibited by claiming that he could not get a fair trial due to the passage of time. The man dubbed Ireland's Jimmy Savile never faced any kind of State justice; nor did his victims ever have the chance to have their voices heard by the courts. Indeed, despite the investigations and allegations, for two years [he toured Irish speaking schools promoting his book on teaching Irish](#).

The play suggests that Donie/Ó Lubhlaí may have been allowed to continue raping children in exchange for providing information to the gardaí on activities of republicans in his circle. An internal garda review of the investigations into Ó Lubhlaí has been conducted but the Department of Justice refuses to make it public. According to the Department the report contains "[sensitive personal information which it would not be appropriate to disclose to third parties.](#)" This response appears at best to be inadequate, and at worst to be a continuation of the silencing of victims that was a part of the abuser's techniques. Questions of continued State complicity in abusing and silencing victims obviously arise. Unfortunately the political response has been one of mud-slinging between political parties- most recently in November, between Joan Burton and Mary Lou MacDonald. The people whose lives have been so badly damaged by this man deserve more. As we approach the centenary of 1916, surely the Irish people deserve to know what abuses have been silenced by the State. If we as a society are ever to understand how people like Ó Lubhlaí were in a position to hurt and exploit children for years, and if we are ever to prevent history being repeated, we need to start exploring these difficult questions.

Jack Harte has created a play for our times, for our nation. If you can at all, make it your business to see it.

*Language of the Mute* by Jack Harte is directed by Liam Halligan. It is at the [New Theatre, Temple Bar](#) until 5<sup>th</sup> September. See [here](#) for further details and to book tickets.