

YES SO I SAID YES
BY DAVID IRELAND DECEMBER 2021
AT THE FINBOROUGH THEATRE
DIRECTED BY MAX ELTON

ABOUT THE PLAY

Ulster Loyalist Alan Black is kept awake every night by his neighbour McCorrick's dog barking. To add to his difficulties, McCorrick refuses to acknowledge that he even owns a dog, let alone one that is creating a disturbance.

In a Northern Ireland he barely recognises, where politics has proved just to be the continuation of war by other means, a disconsolate Alan sets out to rid himself of the incessant noise.

As he seeks help from authority figures, he finally – as a very last resort – turns to the only voice he can really trust, Eammon Holmes...

Coinciding with the 100th anniversary of the partition of Ireland and the foundation of Northern Ireland, *Yes So I Said Yes* is a blackly comic, ferocious, dystopian satire about what it's like to feel alone in a place where everyone else is conspiring to erase you and your history.

PRESS RESPONSES

The Guardian
Mark Lawson
★★★★

Prepare to be appalled - David Ireland's provocative, surreal, intensely brutal farce finds a former loyalist paramilitary seeking mediation from Eamonn Holmes for a dispute with his neighbour

With much current fiction seeking ticks for sensitivity and positive representation, the work of David Ireland is a spectacular defence of free speech and the right to offend. In *Cyprus Avenue* (2016), an Ulster unionist enacts a massacre after becoming convinced his baby grandchild is an IRA sympathiser, while *Ulster American* (2018) shows an Irish Protestant playwright driven to murder by Hollywood's depiction of Irish history.

However, an early work, *Yes So I Said Yes* (2011), belatedly receiving what is billed as its "Great Britain premiere", suggests that the writer subsequently mellowed. Even a partial trigger warning for this script would have to cite rape,

bestiality, priestly paedophilia and mental illness. These occur within a scabrous, surreal comedy also incorporating a possibly transexual talking dog.

In dispute with a neighbour over night noise, Alan “Snuffy” Black, a former loyalist paramilitary made redundant by the peace process, goes to BBC Ulster to seek the mediation of Eamonn Holmes. (That broadcaster has been substituted for Stephen Nolan in the original script because, Ireland notes in the programme, Nolan is little known in England – a view that may depress BBC 5 Live, for whom he presents nine live hours a week.)

With racial stereotyping rightly a serious concern in theatre, Ireland’s repeated presentation of Northern Irish Protestants as psychopaths whom Hannibal Lecter might hesitate to dine with could be problematic, except that the playwright identified in a recent Guardian interview as a “proud unionist”. He dramatises through exaggeration the abandonment and confusion that some in his community feel because of solutions to the Troubles and Brexit, which they see as nationalist victories. Daringly even by this writer’s standards, *Yes So I Said Yes* uses terrible acts of sexual violence as a metaphor for modern Northern Ireland from the loyalist perspective.

On the cramped patch of the Finborough stage, director Max Elton marshals a marvellous cast of six with the quick fluidity vital to farce. Go prepared to be appalled and challenged. But, with Martin McDonagh now lost to movies, Ireland is the only British writer using theatre for extreme physical and intellectual provocation of audiences in the manner of recent American plays such as Suzan-Lori Parks’ *White Noise* and Aleshea Harris’s *Is God Is*.

The Observer
Susannah Clapp

★★★★

An angry dogs life - this crackling production of David Ireland’s caustic portrait of a troubled former gunman is close up and in your face.

Hurrah for the first London staging of this play by David Ireland, most mordant of contemporary dramatists. No one who saw Vicky Featherstone’s coruscating production of *Cyprus Avenue* five years ago will have forgotten the Ulster Protestant who thought his baby granddaughter was actually Gerry Adams, nor the jack-knifing from comedy to killing. Now the tiny Finborough is ignited by Max Elton’s spot-on direction of an earlier play, one that the author considers “deranged”, “unapologetic in its recklessness”.

Yes So I Said Yes, first performed in Belfast in 2011, features a troubled soul, a former loyalist gunman who consults a doctor about the disturbing noise of a dog barking – which may be inside his head. The medic looks into his ears: his diagnosis is that they are very small. He pronounces that his patient has depression – and tells him not to be pessimistic about it. The man confronts a neighbour about the barking; the neighbour denies having a dog. He applies to

the BBC for assistance. He meets a dog, who is, mmm, extremely forthcoming: anyone in doubt about how to do it doggy style can learn here. He is visited by men in balaclavas.

When first staged 10 years ago in Omagh, the play caused outrage, mostly on grounds of bestiality. Audiences at the Finborough are confronted with closeup violence. It is worth the flinch: to see an all-round strong cast and a central sonorous performance from Daragh O'Malley, his jaw sagging with accumulated anger; for Ceci Calf's trim design; for the unusual foregrounding of the Unionist experience. Most of all, for the icy crackle of the dialogue. Caustic and comic, here is absurdity in the guise of logic: "I'll rape if it helps us find peace." A modest proposal in a direct line from Jonathan Swift.

The Telegraph
Dzifa Benson

★★★★

Coinciding with the 100th anniversary of the partition of Ireland and receiving a belated "Great Britain premiere" at the Finborough Theatre a decade after it first opened in Belfast's Crescent Arts Centre, David Ireland's provocative satire *Yes So I Said Yes* isn't for the faint of heart. Rape, bestiality, homophobia, PTSD, Eamonn Holmes and a randy dog are all deployed to the extremities of absurdity in this blackly comic tale.

But Ireland doesn't push the envelope on taboo themes merely to elicit laughs. The playwright also has salient points to make about the legacy of the Troubles in Northern Ireland and the post-conflict reality for its many traumatised individuals. In Ireland's ferocious hands, the Troubles aren't receding into the distant past so much as festering as open wounds whose scab keeps being peeled off.

Given the uptick in violence in the region earlier this year, driven by Brexit negotiations and Downing Street's seemingly cavalier attitude towards the Unionists (who believe Boris Johnson's Government has betrayed them by prioritising the interests of Irish nationalists), the play is as prescient as ever. It's a stark reminder that divisions along ideological and cultural lines continue to simmer in Northern Ireland long after the Good Friday Agreement.

Ceci Calf's bullet-hole riddled set design is a visual indication that the Troubles are a living memory for many people. These include the protagonist Alan "Snuffy" Black, portrayed with shambling bewilderment by sixty-seven-year-old Irish actor Daragh O'Malley, who is old enough to have experienced the Troubles firsthand.

In a Northern Ireland that he barely recognises any more, former paramilitary loyalist Black has been made redundant by the peace process and is being kept awake every night by the barking of his neighbour McCorrick's dog. The trouble is McCorrick won't even admit that he owns a dog, let alone one that is incessantly disturbing Black's peace.

In a bid to get help from various authority figures, including Kevin Trainor's very jocular Doctor O'Hara, Black ends up at BBC Ulster to seek out the only man he can trust, Eamonn Holmes. It isn't necessary to know about Eamonn Holmes's charitable concerns to be amused by this addition, specifically for the Finborough's production, but it provides added frissons of humour to the farce if you do.

From there, we tumble along with Black into a rabbit hole of depravity born of sexual repression, loneliness and the anxiety that Protestants are being steadily diminished and silenced in a modern Ireland. Black is damned if he does and damned if he doesn't and we are never sure what is real and what is a figment of his imagination.

Ireland's dexterous playwriting dovetails his political, ideological and humorous considerations seamlessly while Max Elton's fluid and surefooted direction steers the uniformly excellent performances from all of the cast, ensuring the excesses of Ireland's imagination are dramatised convincingly, uproariously and daringly.

The Stage

Frey Kwa Hawking

★★★★

Alan 'Snuffy' Black can't sleep. He can't sleep because his neighbour's dog won't stop barking. But his neighbour doesn't have a dog. What can be done about a dog that doesn't exist if it won't stop barking?

Opening in London a decade after it was written, this feels like the odd, older sibling to David Ireland's 2016 play *Cyprus Avenue*. Containing everything from homophobic slurs to bestiality, it's a mercifully short but brutally effective piece of writing, crueller than some of Ireland's other work, but also more poetic and sad.

Daragh O'Malley plays Snuffy, an Ulster loyalist who admits without blinking that he has killed people to his doctor. Feeling like the only Protestant in Northern Ireland, he has no friends. O'Malley's voice is powerfully rumbling even as he staggers and shakes his way through a series of dreamlike interrogations.

Though Ireland's writing is as subtle as a slap, it is hilarious. He is clear-eyed when it comes to the yearning, disgusted obsession that militaristic men have with gay sex, and the way guilt and paranoia distend a life. Under Max Elton's direction, O'Malley mutters the titles of scenes to himself before beginning them, as if he's bracing himself for what's coming.

Every performance is painstakingly funny, from the bullying paramilitary double act (Declan Rodgers and Kevin Murphy) to Snuffy's more taciturn neighbour (Owen O'Neill), who owns the dog. As both Doctor O'Hara and, especially, as the dog himself, Kevin Trainor finds the sinister middle ground between obsequious,

childish and flirtatious. Laura Dos Santos' counsellor Aine is deceptively coherent at first, but no character can be on Snuffy's side here.

Writer Ireland again has his sights on the identity crisis of, and feeling of stalking doom for, unionists. He's concerned with questions of consent and control in Northern Ireland's future, and the administering of justice. The closing lines make this explicit, but slightly overstate what to that point is already apparent.

To be clear, this is a play that presents rape as metaphor, and for some that understandably crosses a line. But Ireland does have a sober sense of the severity of rape. The circuitous way dialogue and action end up back there without fail expresses the repressive, cankered logic dictating this world.

Among the shot-through wooden slats and corrugated iron of Ceci Calf's dirty set, Elton's direction commands every inch of the Finborough's tiny space and places us squarely in Snuffy's head. Arnim Friess' lighting, supported by Jack Baxter's barking sound design, leans into the absurdism of the text. At one moment of violence, the bullet holes abruptly shine out like stars, almost the only light by which to see.