

## ***A CurtainUp Los Angeles Review*** ***The Force of Change***

By Laura Hitchcock

The three most chilling words in Gary Mitchell's powerful play are "our traditional enemies." They're fiercely tossed off by David, a Royal Ulster Constabulary policeman in a Belfast jail, referring to the Catholics who've been enemies of the Protestants in this internecine war for generations. He's distressed because the forces of change which now include women in authority, the Good Friday agreement and Catholics in the police force distract them from the tribal rivalry that seems embedded in this part of the world.

We read every day about similar rivalry in Iraq and the Middle East. It's scathing to be reminded that it's also rampant in the western world, particularly in Northern Ireland. We have to counterbalance by reminding ourselves that some of the greatest writers in the English language represent this country -- Seamus Haney, Brian Friel, William Butler Yeats and, farther south, George Bernard Shaw and Oscar Wilde. We don't have to keep saying those names like rosary beads. We just have to listen to the rhythms and verbal swordplay in Mitchell's ferocious dialogue.

Two young mobsters, members of the Ulster Defense Association, are being interrogated in separate rooms on criminal charges. The team of detectives assigned to the prime suspect Stanley Brown are Caroline, an ambitious fast-track careerist, and her subordinate, a sergeant, Bill, who has had 30 years on the force. Brown's underling, a youth called Rabbit, is grilled by David, a traditional RUC man, and Mark, who tries to bring a balanced view to all sides.

As the play opens, Caroline is on the phone with her husband and son, trying to make domestic arrangements, decisions and arbitrations. She has a friendly relationship with Mark but she and Bill despise each other. Stanley refuses to talk in her presence but the expressions on his handsome youthful face speak volumes. Confidence, contempt, a stoic certainty that this will pass and he'll be released.

The crux of the play turns on the discovery that Bill is in debt and in thrall to the UDA and has given Stanley Caroline's home address, which is an invitation to assault. The police rush her family to a safe house and tensions escalate as they debate what to do with Bill, one of the old boy network, and whether to use force to extract a confession from Rabbit.

Caroline is written as an imperious moralist and Peggy Goss never lets her deviate from that. Although the moral center of the play, she's an unlikeable woman. Mark, on the other hand, is likeable though he lets us down at the end and John Montana makes us feel sorry for him. David, despite his old boy prejudices, may be the most perceptive of the lot and Kevin Kearns finds those facets without lapsing into sentimentality. Brandon Halpin's Rabbit is hapless, naïve and touchingly, tragically boyish. As Stanley Brown, top thug, Rick Crawford projects the implacability that makes his cause so irrational and the aura of a boy who was born what the Irish mafia call "a hard man." The versatile Barry Lynch makes Bill a lumbering aging sergeant trapped by desperation. His male colleagues' compassion for one of their own motivates them to trounce justice for the truly horrendous crime he has committed in betraying Caroline.

Director John Swanbeck beats out Mitchell's rhythms with the assurance of a symphony conductor and keeps the tempo taut. Mitchell has a sure ear for the everyday speech of his home town, interspersed with its rough humor. Gary Mitchell and his family are now in hiding from threats by the UDA. Despite this appalling consequence, there's hope for Northern Ireland in the fact that writers like Mitchell have raised the curtain of silence on this fractured land.

For a review of this play during its London run six years ago [go here](#)

### THE FORCE OF CHANGE

Playwright: Gary Mitchell

Director: John Swanbeck

Cast: Barry Lynch (Bill), Peggy Goss (Caroline), John Montana (Mark), Kevin Kearns (David), Rick Crawford (Stanley), Brandon Halpin (Rabbit)

Scenic and Lighting Design: Russ Borski

Costume Design: Karen Murk

Running Time: Two hours fifteen minutes, with one intermission

Running Dates: March 30-May 7, 2006, Thursdays through Saturdays at 8:00 PM, Sundays at 2:00 PM

Where: The McCadden Place Theatre, 1157 N. McCadden Place, Hollywood. Reservations: (818) 7800-0661

Reviewed by Laura Hitchcock on April 8.