Coming off Rage? Angry Young Women at the Royal Court in Lucy Prebble's *The Sugar Syndrome*, Gary Mitchell's *Loyal Women*, and Stella Feehily's *Duck*

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1 After a number of plays focusing on issues of race, questions of gender are back on the stage of the Royal Court Theatre, where three new productions of the autumn/winter season feature angry female protagonists. While the debut plays by Lucy Prebble and Stella Feehily explore the (suppressed) rage of "ladettes" (thus offering a female alternative to the lads so popular in the dramatic New Writing of the 1990s), the established Irish dramatist Gary Mitchell tackles the female share of violence in the Northern Ireland conflict.

Lucy Prebble: *The Sugar Syndrome* (October 2003, RC Upstairs)

2 *The Sugar Syndrome*, first performed in October 2003 in the Court's smaller venue upstairs, is an impressive and witty debut by the twenty-two-year-old Lucy Prebble, who won the *Sunday Times Most Promising New Playwright Award* in 2002 and subsequently participated in the Court's Young Writers Programme. The play thematises sexual child abuse in an innovative way. In contrast to the Trauma Drama on paedophilia written during the 1990s, Prebble concentrates on the perpetrator rather than on the victim of child abuse, and she manages to create an ambiguous character, who oscillates between being a self-justifying perpetrator and a guilt-ridden, even somewhat pitiable, victim of his own urges and of social discrimination. Tim is introduced when the seventeen-year-old Danielle poses as eleven-year-old boy called Dani in a chatroom and sets up a date with Tim. The potential perpetrator thus becomes a victim of Dani's lie; he himself rather than the child he believes he talks to is seduced and tricked by the Internet communication. When Dani and Tim meet, Tim ironically apologises that he does not live up to Dani's (and possibly the audience's) stereotypical idea of a child abuser: "I'm sorry I'm not the freakshow you expected" (14). Through comments like these, *The Sugar Syndrome* constantly plays with the audience's preconceptions about child abuse, and questions and undermines them.

3 Despite their initial mutual disappointment, an unusual friendship develops between Dani and Tim who feel united through their common past of having been hospitalised in a mental institution and the psychiatric ward of a prison respectively. Just as Tim has not been "cured" from paedophilia, Dani has not yet fully overcome her bulimia, as her "Thinspiration" book, which contains images of slender models and celebrities, as well as her manic urge to

control herself and others show. Dani attempts to reform Tim according to her credo of self-control: "'That's just how you are.' How convenient. So what's the point of fighting it. That's binge mentality, I've started so I may as well finish […] Every day is a blank slate. And you are defined not by your pathetic emotions and urges, but by *what you do*" (31). The friendship between the damaged outsiders runs the risk of being melodramatic, but Prebble is constantly aware of her use of cliché and self-reflexively plays with the employed stereotypical notions. For instance, Dani resentfully points out, "Everyone makes me angry. Sometimes I think about just staying in bed for the whole of the day, if that didn't make me such a fucking cliché" (16) and Tim informs Dani, "You may be surprised to hear that I don't need another person calling me a pervert" (17). Prebble is not interested in simply deconstructing clichés, on the contrary, she manages to reveal the (crude) reality behind those stereotypes and demonstrates that the characters' awareness of their situation often enhances rather than alleviates their pain.

4 As the quotes already indicate, Prebble succeeds in combining the comic and the tragic, in making *The Sugar Syndrome* vacillate between (black) humour and utmost seriousness. This surprising combination of humour and horror is a common feature of plays dealing with child abuse, but Prebble manages the shifts particularly well. Despite the play's comic features, it remains a thoughtful and saddening analysis of both Tim's personal and explicit as well as society's general and latent paedophilia. It is Dani who suggests that Tim's "preference" is part of a social trend of eroticising the childlike and the youthful: "a thousand of grown ups pay fifteen quid to dress in school uniform and go dancing to 'love Shack'. […] At least you're honest about it. Not like all those blokes there drooling over little girls where it's safe, where it's allowed" (49). Despite the truth of Dani's statement, it remains one of her doubtful strategies to justify Tim's obsession. He himself argues that his sexual interest in children is not criminal per se by saying, "Just because a man fancies women doesn't make him a rapist" (15). Furthermore, he employs a pseudo-Foucauldian argument to defend himself, which Dani attempts to explain to her lover Lewis, who is horrified and disgusted by Dani's friendship with Tim: "He made a good point the other day. How in history, it's always the oppressed minorities who are made out to be sick and dangerous, blacks or gays or whatever. How we need to turn them into monsters. […] We can't see it cos we're on the inside" (25).

5 Arguments like these help to blur the boundaries of what is normal and what is not in this unusual friendship between the seventeen-year-old bulimic and the thirty-something paedophile. In this respect, *The Sugar Syndrome* appears to be a typical Generation X-

product, as the play itself self-reflexively announces: "I'm Generation X, we don't judge anything anyone does, only how it's reported" (14). However, the ending of the play re-introduces moral judgement. When Dani looks at the images and videos Tim has downloaded from the Internet (he claims that he has never even looked at them), the victims of child abuse are for the only time given an anonymous and inarticulate, but still touching and alarming voice: When Dani looks at the images she is "shocked but entranced. An audio file is opened. The sound of a young boy, eight or nine, screaming in terror and begging through tears for it to stop. It is chillingly real. Dani is appalled and deeply shaken by the monstrous sound. […] She is on the verge of tears" (70). Without explicitly discussing the issue of child abuse afterwards again, this short sound element highlights the power imbalance and cruelty of paedophilia, which stands in stark contrast to Tim's stories of mutual love and tender support. Watching those images, which the audience in the original production could not see, appears to transform Dani's world view; she later asks her mother "There *are* some things we *can't* help, aren't there?" (73), thus leaving behind her belief in complete (self-)control. The fact that Dani for the first time is able to talk to her mother about her bulimia and her stay in the hospital reinforces the impression that Dani starts to change, that she undergoes a process of maturing and of coming to terms with her past.

11 Although for the most part of the play Brenda seems to have adopted a more traditional image of nurturing femininity, at the end of the play she is transformed back into the "raging bull" (40) she once was. She injures Heather with a knife and offers Gail, the local leader of the WUDA, an even more cruel war between women: "Because if you want to go to war with me; I'll give you a war and every single person that you ever loved, every friend you ever had and every member of your family will never ever be safe again" (104). Facing the brutalised and brutalising women, Adele's desperate argument "The point is that you are always saying that we are better than them, so how are we if we just do what they do?" (61), which actually refers to Catholics and Protestants, could also be applied to the men and women of Mitchell's universe. Instead of offering an alternative female way of dealing with private and political conflicts, Mitchell convincingly shows that Northern Irish women cannot escape the deforming effects of civil war and religious hatred.

Stella Feehily: *Duck* (November 2003, RC Upstairs)

12 Stella Feehily's *Duck* negotiates questions of violence and female coming of age, thus focusing on some of the same topics as those raised by Mitchell and Prebble. *Duck* is the first full-length play by the trained actress Feehily. As a co-production between Max Stafford-

Clark's *Out of Joint* and the Royal Court, it was first presented at the Jerwood Theatre Upstairs in November 2003 after a national tour including a run at the Traverse Theatre during the Edinburgh Festival in July/August 2003. Duck centres on two young women, Sophie, named "Gull" by her mother, and Cat, called "Duck" by her boyfriend Mark because of her large feet. The play starts with "a huge explosion. Sounds of running. Car alarms. Sirens in the distance" (3), which suggests Mitchell's Belfast as a more likely setting than Dublin, where it actually takes place. However, the explosion is not due to a political, but to a private act of protest: Cat alias Duck has blown up the new luxurious jeep of her boyfriend Mark. Starting with this outrageous act, the play slowly unravels Cat's complex and opaque motives for her deed, which appear to vary from attention seeking to revenge for Mark's recent negligent behaviour to provoking an end of their relationship.

13 Although Cat is unwilling to discuss the reasons and consequences of her act, Sophie repeatedly offers interpretations of it. She even writes a college-essay on the tradition of arson, and keeps reading out relevant passages to Cat: "In the seventeenth century (as at other times) arson was a common means of revenge. […] It required no great physical strength or financial means and could be concealed. […] Arson and scolding appeared to offer a dramatic form of protest to the poor and rejected. Enabling them to vent an inarticulate rage against the hopelessness of their condition" (57-59). The "hopelessness" of Cat's situation is rooted in Cat's dependence on Mark, as he is not only Cat's boyfriend but also her employer and the owner of the flat they live in. Hence Cat feels she has to endure his outbreaks of aggressive jealousy as well as his sexist conduct, which includes offering her sexual services to his mates: "What are friends for? […] She's a hole. She likes it hard" (19).

14 Feeling increasingly mistreated by Mark, Cat attempts to escape into an affair with the sixty-something novelist Jack, who turns out be less interested in taking care of Cat, or "Gina Lollobrigida" as he dubs her, than he first pretends to be. Confused by the chaos of her love life and her work, Cat moves back in with her parents, who do not even attempt to conceal how little they welcome the return of their lost daughter: "We've got used to that extra space now […] We cut the umbilical cord you know" (80-81). Cat's dysfunctional family life is shaped by the depression and alcoholism of her father, the miserable marriage of the parents based on the unwanted pregnancy of Cat's mother, and the mother's suspicion of Cat that even includes her fear that Cat might seduce her younger brother. Sophie's family background is similarly problematic, rendering the girlfriends without positive role models, as the advertisement for Duck points out: "you can't learn to be good when your elders are no longer your betters" (see book cover and the RC-Homepage.

15 Duck portrays the slow process of the girls' coming of age, which includes Cat's realisation that she cannot solve her problems by (financially and otherwise) relying on men and both girls' insights that they cannot keep on escaping from their dire present and similarly bleak future prospects with the help of alcohol, drugs and night life pleasures. It is again Sophie who researches the implications of their bird nicknames, finding out that "gull" connotes "an unfledged bird" (46), and thus a state of immaturity both Cat and Sophie attempt to overcome. At the end of the play, the girls renew their friendship after a quarrel about Cat's negligence of Sophie and after Sophie's fall out of a window, which was an accident according to Sophie but on purpose according to Cat. When Sophie decides to move out of her conflict-ridden parents' home, Cat supports her. In the final scene, the girls sit by a roadside with a pile of bags and boxes. Although they have been waiting for a taxi for a long time, they are unwilling to go back to Sophie's house to again call a cab. Their situation visualises the transition moment in their lives, and Cat laconically observes that their intended triumphant departure has gone slightly wrong: "The Great Escape this ain't" (109). Also the last words of the play ironically comment on their attempt at a new start, on the meaning of their nicknames, and on Sophie's recent "accident:" "Cat: Her first flight. / Cat and Sophie: Chirp chirp. / *They start to laugh*" (111).

16 The play's calm and serene ending stands in stark contrast to the loud, violent and hurried beginning, suggesting a process of maturing on the part of the girlfriends. Like *The Sugar Syndrome*, *Duck* is a female coming-of-age play. Slightly modifying this label, Prebble's and particularly Feehily's texts could also be dubbed plays about female "coming-off-rage," while the female protagonist's departure from rage and violence is less certain in Mitchell's *Loyal Women*.

Works Cited

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