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2806A US 22/12/87



British Consulate General
33 North Dearborn Street
Chicago, IL 60602

Ref: 293/19

14 December 1987

Sherard Cowper-Coles Esq
British Embassy
Washington DC

Mr Wilson: I understand that Noel Cornick has
taken some action on pot of this letter. Would
you p. follow up with him.

29/12/8

Dear Sherard

NORTHERN IRELAND: CHARABANC THEATRE COMPANY TO PERFORM
"SOMEWHERE OVER THE BALCONY" IN THE USA

1. I understand that the NIO has given consideration to the production of this play in Boston, San Francisco and St Paul, Minnesota and that Chancery have been consulted. I also note from the papers recently made available here that the Department of Foreign Affairs in Dublin have agreed to provide £3,000. That poses the "jointery" point: it is of course a good thing for the British Council to make the exercise a joint one of support for, evidently, a good theatre company.

2. I have read the play. I found it funny, and in parts very funny. My other impressions include that however hard the actors try to slow down their delivery (short of ruining the pace) it will mostly be very difficult for a Minnesota audience to understand. Yet one constant theme that I believe will be understood is the portrayal of the "Brits" and specifically the British Army as a sort of swooping GRU-cum-colonial oppressor. That message is clear and easy to comprehend because it is simple, often repeated, emphasized by powerful sound effects, and superficial (the more sophisticated underlying messages and fun are more hidden and will be hard to understand because of the accent and language).

3. The timing proposed for St Paul is unfortunate in that it will precede public attention being focussed on draft MacBride legislation by just under a month. I therefore see a need for some damage-limitation and, better, some damage-preemption.

/ 4. I note that

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4. I note that Paddy Devlin and Terry Carlin are Patrons of the Charabanc Theatre Company. The NIO might like to consider whether to ask if Paddy would like to talk to the company about the MacBride scene here. Another specific and, I think, important suggestion is that someone in Belfast who knows both company and the MacBride issue should talk to members of the Theatre Company most likely to be interviewed by reporters or PR companies in Minnesota. The object would be to ensure that the play is explained in St Paul in terms of realities of the political situation in Belfast, rather than in terms of the play's grim scenario focussed on Divis, and of the emotion that word conjures up, driven home by the repeated sound effects. There is some good stuff in the Charabanc's own PR piece about the play (whose text begins "When outsiders ask us what it is like to live in Northern Ireland..."), but it would be helpful if a simpler message of fun and laughter as a defence mechanism against the effects of hard times could be got across, along with perhaps the most important message that "life in Northern Ireland... is quite normal really". This will not be an easy message to deliver when talking about this black comedy, but anything that can be done to press it home will be useful - notwithstanding the implication of that message that the play is therefore something of an aberration or a black comedy about only one limited aspect and view of life in Belfast.

5. No doubt it was right in all the circumstances not to seek to prevent or inhibit the production of this play in the USA. It is equally right that we should do all that we can to limit the deleterious effects which I believe the play could have here on HMG's interests.

Yours ever

Roger

R J Carrick

cc: HMCG's Boston, San Francisco
✓ Clive Gowdy Esq, DED
R Wilson Esq, DED
Irvine Devitt Esq, IDB
Mark Elliot Esq, NIO Belfast
NAD, FCO
Ms Carmel McGill, British Council, Washington

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Northern Ireland Office
Stormont House
Belfast BT4 3ST
Telephone Belfast (0232) 63255

Main.

Sherard Cowper Coles Esq
British Embassy
Washington DC

PAB/3515/DP

4 January 1988

Ian Sherard,

CHARABANC THEATRE COMPANY

In the light of Roger Carrick's helpful letter of 14 December and our subsequent telephone conversations I spoke to Paddy Devlin before Christmas along the lines suggested. Paddy was typically relaxed about the affair. He took note of our concerns, and agreed to brief the Theatre Company's leading members about the perils of becoming involved in MacBride. He told me however, that Company was made up primarily of people whose position were, rather like his own, more socialist than nationalist and who were sufficiently bright to avoid being drawn into acrimonious discussion of the involved issues of Northern Ireland.

I am not sure that we can be quite as sanguine as Mr Devlin, but I hope that we have managed to send the Players off to the USA a little better prepared than might otherwise have been the case.

*All good wishes for 1988
Yours ever,
Noel Cornick*

NOEL CORNICK

cc HMCG's Chicago, Boston, San Francisco
NAD, FCO
Ms McGill, British Council, Washington

Mr Gowdy, DED
Mr Wilson, DED
Mr Devitt, IDB

*in 90 min
to see file
hml/1/88*

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