MEMORANDUM

TO: Shirley Mullen  
FROM: Paul Delaney 
DATE: 14 September 2004  
RE: Sabbatical Report

I am happy to provide a report on my fall 2003 sabbatical. After the London Theatre Mayterm 2003, I stayed in London for a week and spent part of that time (as well as part of the time during Mayterm itself) gathering materials related to Marie Jones and Christina Reid, the two Northern Ireland women playwrights whose work I proposed to study.

I was very pleased to learn—that Marty Maguire’s version of A Night in November by Jones was going to be in Dublin while the group was there. Just a week before leaving London for Dublin, we were able to cancel a tentative reservation for another play so we could include A Night in November in our plans. That turned out to be a very fortunate decision. Students on Mayterm attended some marvelous productions of Shakespeare and Stoppard; they were able to see Ralph Fiennes in an Ibsen and Kristin Scott Thomas in a Chekhov. But asked to name the best production, all who made it to Dublin chose A Night in November. One student, an avid and experienced theatre-goer, was, for the first time in her life, moved to tears by a play. Jones’s play gets in under the radar with uproarious self-deprecating comedy and then confronts you point blank with the insidious nature of privilege. A decent, middle-class white Protestant is moved to confront a lifetime of unexamined prejudice—and it rings so true that those with ears to hear have to ponder their own unexamined prejudices.

Back in the U.S. with the sabbatical underway, I read all the plays ever published by Jones or Reid. Many were out of print and had to be obtained by interlibrary loan. But no other play by Jones raised the issue of prejudice as powerfully as A Night in November; and no other play by Reid dramatized the way family dynamics can mitigate prevailing prejudices as effectively as The Belle of the Belfast City. Somewhat reluctantly, I concluded that I should confine my focus to those two pivotal plays. I gathered reams of articles about, reviews of, and interviews with both playwrights. I gathered statistics and government reports on sectarianism and racism in Northern Ireland. And then I set out to write.

I don’t know why I found the actual writing so difficult. I filled five legal pads with notes, outlines and scribbled drafts. When I started transcribing this material, I compiled page after page of partial drafts with alternative versions of paragraphs and multiple alternative versions of individual sentences. After the first couple of weeks of the semester (when I was still spending about half time attending to departmental matters), I spent eight to ten hours each day reading, taking notes, compiling and transcribing drafts. On my computer
hard drive I have stored over 30 different drafts or partial drafts. I must have typed a few hundred pages trying to extract one coherent, polished, publishable article.

I emerged at last with what I think is a reasonable facsimile of what I was seeking. I have an article of 32 pages (plus a two-page list of works cited) with the working title of “Border Crossings in A Night in November and The Belle of the Belfast City.” I will be excerpting a briefer version from that material for presentation at the Western regional meeting of the Conference on Christianity and Literature that Cheri Larsen Hoeckley is organizing at Westmont in January. I will extract a paper with a somewhat different emphasis for next year’s meeting of the American Conference of Irish Studies. Then I will be submitting the full version of the article for publication.

I had originally debated whether to spend my sabbatical continuing to work on the plays of Tom Stoppard. Reading that the Professional Development Committee favored new projects, I set out to do something completely new. Maybe I underestimated the difficulty of starting from scratch on two new playwrights and trying to do justice to the sectarian issues and gender issues and racial issues of their particular milieu while also saying something meaningful about the plays’ implications for those outside that cultural moment. Or maybe I would have found it just as difficult to come to terms with the complexities of Stoppard’s recent plays. I found it daunting to think of the prodigious output that Marilyn McEntyre might have managed to produce in the same amount of time that it took me to craft one full-length scholarly article. And it sent me back to the classroom with a renewed appreciation of the joys of teaching Westmont undergraduates.

Teaching A Night in November and The Belle of the Belfast City in the Irish literature class last spring was a gratifying experience. The Northern Ireland context is sufficiently removed from our students’ background that they don’t get their guard up. A Night in November is not so much an angry denunciation of prejudice as a self-reflective exploration of privilege—both large and small—that one white, middle class group can exercise at the expense of others. Looking through that window on the world, students can be startled to catch a mirrored glimpse of their own culture of privilege. What the play dramatizes is, most fundamentally, a process of repentance. And that possibility of transformation offers hope. By contrast, The Belle of the Belfast City dramatizes a familial warmth that is inclusive and accepting as opposed to the exclusionary male-dominated world of right-wing political and sectarian bigotry. But even as the play celebrates greater racial and religious tolerance, it seems to despair of that transformation being tenable in Belfast. Taken together the two plays raise questions for students of how to be in the world but not of it.

I am grateful for the time, trust, and resources Westmont has invested in my continuing professional development. I wish I had more to show for it than the attached. But I can humbly and gratefully offer what I have.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Paul Delaney