

## **Flags & Emblems Press Release**

### **Logline/Elevator Pitch:**

In modern-day Belfast, an art student attempts to stop the painting of a paramilitary mural on the wall of his house, while keeping his Catholic background hidden.

### **Synopsis:**

Having moved “behind enemy lines” into a loyalist housing estate, art student Liam is having the time of his life, partying through the night and romancing the local girls. One morning though the fun stops, as he is awakened from his latest hangover by a sharp knock at the door. Head of the local “community association”, Bob, invites himself inside and presents his plans to paint a new paramilitary mural on the wall of Liam’s end-terrace house. Not only that, Bob claims that they like to consult the residents in the process and Liam is given a choice from a list of progressively more violent and controversial designs. Equal parts offended and terrified, Liam tries his best to veto each concept on its artistic merits alone, all the while struggling to keep his Catholic heritage hidden from an increasingly suspicious Bob.

Through a darkly comedic lens, *Flags & Emblems* explores the legacy of conflict in Northern Ireland, contrasting the experiences of those who lived through it and those born in its aftermath, as well as how the glorification of violence continues to linger in plain sight.

### **WRITER’S STATEMENT- Andrew McNeill**

Although the conflict in Northern Ireland officially ended twenty-seven years ago, paramilitary organisations continue to exert significant control in their respective communities. On the surface, they still hold onto their founding principles, be that the foundation of a United Ireland, preservation of Northern Ireland’s place within the United Kingdom, or more broadly, the protection of their community from sectarian violence. In reality, these groups are now little more than criminal gangs, draping themselves in flags to conceal their drug trafficking and racketeering operations. Maybe they always have been.

This is the Belfast that I grew up in. Much more peaceful than that of my parents, but still a Belfast in which the threat of violence loomed large. Looming largest of all were the vast array of paramilitary murals emblazoned on the walls of both Ulster unionist and Irish nationalist housing estates. Some of these murals are great examples of open-air, working-class history, depicting famous sports stars or artists from the area (George Best, C.S. Lewis, to name a few), but a great many continue to depict masked men with guns, glaring menacingly at those who pass, bearing militaristic slogans such as “Prepared for peace. Ready for war.”

Living in unionist areas my entire life and seeing these murals on a daily basis is what inspired me to write *Flags and Emblems*. My issue lies less with a community wishing to commemorate its past and celebrate its culture, but more so what I consider to be a glorification of violence, a justification of terrorism and, ultimately, a warning to individuals not to step out of line, lest they suffer the consequences. Bold statements perhaps. Some might even call them hyperbolic. But this is precisely my point. These images and the ideas

they represent have become so normalised within our society that it is rarely questioned where we might be if we finally moved fully from under the shadow of the gun.

In spite of my strong feelings on the subject, I was inspired by playwrights Martin McDonagh and fellow Belfast-man, David Ireland, and immediately drawn to the genre of dark-comedy as the means to examine this theme. These organisations and the individuals that run them are worthy of mockery, and through humour I aim to expose the hypocrisy of those who claim to protect the communities that they paralyse with fear. Some jokes and images may be considered extreme but I am adamant that I have not included anything which does not hold some basis in fact.

### **Actor's Statement - Saorlaoith Brady**

Flags & Emblems is a story of past and present worlds colliding. A mix of hilarious confrontations, chaotic outbursts and emotional realisations. I play the character of Sharon and, without giving away too much, let's just say she is more of a modern thinker, with past divisions weighing on her shoulders. Sharon is an open-minded, fun party girl that cares deeply about the people she loves, including boyfriend Liam. But identity realisations soon drive a wedge between them and they have to make a decision about what matters most?

Working alongside Richard McFerran as Bob and Andrew McNeill as Liam, we have had an absolute ball rehearsing this play. From tears of laughter to more dramatic moments, where we see the true emotions behind some of the characters in moving monologues. They are both so talented and the way they bring the work to life from the script is just class, I never get sick of watching them perform!

I really have mixed opinions on how people will react to seeing this play. I'm both scared and excited because I know that no matter what the audience feel, they are certainly going to talk about it. It's a bit bloody mental in the most romantic Belfast way and one of the best writings I have read about our wee city. Some themes covered in the play include identity, culture, relationships and artistic expression- themes which are timeless, and I know everyone in the audience will relate to some part of it. It's just so real. It literally is real life with a lot of what Andrew has written being life experiences from himself or people he knows! I just can't wait for people to see it. Be prepared for all the laughs with this one, it's a proper geg!