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MAGAZINE



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THE CONTENT IN THIS MAGAZINE IS SOLELY THE OPINION OF THE AUTHORS AND NOT NECESSARILY OF THE EDITORS.

2 WHAT'S NEWS

8 HARD TIMES ON CAVENDISH ROW Karen Fricker reports on the rising and falling fortunes of the Gate Theatre.

17 WHAT A DIFFERENCE A DAY MAKES This June, Semper Fi made four plays in 24 hours. Peter Crawley watched from start to finish.

NORTHERN FOCUS

22 BUSINESS AS USUAL? Susan Conley and Karen Fricker report on the Lyric Theatre, which is picking itself up after hard times.

28 ART FOR A NEW ERA David Grant looks at Northern theatre in the context of the ACNI's new strategy document.

37 POSTCARD FROM DOWN UNDER Paul Meade went to Tasmania with *Alone it Stands* to perform in a festival of art from island cultures — and sent back this report.

43 DECODING THE 'D' WORD In the second of two articles on new play development, Rosy Barnes defines dramaturgy in an Irish context.

52 ACTOR-IN-CHARGE Susan Conley meets new Equity president Kathleen Barrington.

55 BOHEMIAN RHAPSODY Translator Michael West talks to director Christian Schiaretti about *Death and the Ploughman*.

62 ENTRANCES AND EXITS Kelly Smith reports on comings and goings behind the scenes of Irish theatre.

64 A STRANGER AT THE TABLE Roddy Doyle offers an excerpt from his new play *Guess Who's Coming for the Dinner*.

67 REVIEWS Our critics on 32 productions.

ON THE COVER: *Photograph of Gate Theatre director Michael Colgan by Colm Henry*

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REACHING OUT, LOOKING IN

T'S BEEN AN AMAZING YEAR FOR VISITS from international theatrical dignitaries, hasn't it? It started in January, this being an "on" year for the Pan Pan Symposium, which hosted, among others, Forced Entertainment from England and Teatr Ósmego Dnia from Poland. Project have been at the forefront of these visits: In association with the UCD Drama Studies Centre they brought over Dutch director Ivo von Hove and visionary English playwrights Edward Bond and Howard Barker in the first half of the year. On the occasion of Bond's visit Crooked House presented the Irish premiere of his play *Crime of the 21st Century*, and Iomhá Ildánach collaborated with Project to bring Barker back later in the summer for the Irish premieres of two of his plays. Also at Project, Rough Magic brought over an impressive slate of international playwrights, including Michael Frayn, in the second of their play reading series this May.

In April the Abbey brought us the Schaubühne doing Brecht — and the theatre's artistic director Thomas Ostermeier leading a strikingly well-attended workshop for Irish actors on Meyerhold technique. In October Irish Modern Dance Theatre will host a visit from iconic American composer/performer Meredith Monk, including performance workshops and her debut Irish concert.

In the summer Loose Canon hosted Eugenio Barba for a weekend-long visit



PETER BROOK

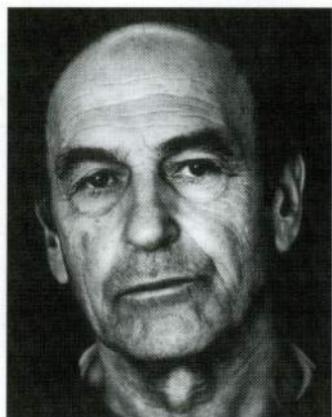
of workshops and public events including a talk co-sponsored by Critical Voices, an Arts Council programme designed to up the ante of discourse about the arts in Ireland. Critical Voices will help bring over a number of leading lights in the remaining months of the year, including the grandaddy of contemporary theatrical icons, Peter Brook, who will give a public interview and meet with young Irish directors during the *eircom* Dublin Theatre Festival. Critical Voices will also host the eternally maverick American theatre/opera director Peter Sellars later in the year.

We at *itm* are working with Critical Voices on two live events — our second annual international theatre critics' forum during the Dublin Festivals, and, in November as part of the Belfast Festival at Queen's, a discussion about new play development featuring leading literary managers from around the world.

Clearly there is a growing hunger in the Irish sector for contact with and knowledge from outside sources which is reaching some sort of critical mass. This casts a new light on what, many people have noted, feels like a fairly quiet and low-key time in the sector as a whole. There seems relatively little activity on the surface of the scene, but underneath, perhaps, there's a regrouping going on, a searching for new inspiration, connections, and material. And given the number of ideas and influences that have been introduced to the sector recently, who knows what strange and wonderful hybrids will result in the years to come? It will be exciting to find out.

THE MAN OF THE MOMENT

THE TOM MURPHY SEASON AT THE ABBEY AND PEACOCK AS PART OF the *eircom* Dublin Theatre Festival is shaping up to be the theatre event of the season. The programme is a hit list of Murphy's most admired plays: *A Whistle in the Dark* (directed by Conall Morrison), *The Gigli Concert* (dir. Ben Barnes), *The Morning After Optimism* (dir. Gerry Stembridge), *The Sanctuary Lamp* (dir. Lynne Parker), *Bailegangaire* (directed by the playwright), and a reading of *Famine* directed by Patrick Mason. Talks, concerts, panels — all the fun Festival go-withs — will be laid on in the 2-week celebration running throughout the eDTF from 1-13 Oct. The productions of *A Whistle in the Dark* and *The Gigli Concert* will continue in rep on the Abbey mainstage into early December.

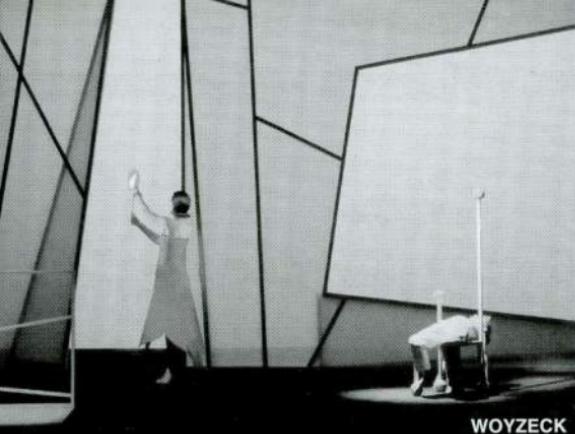


OTHER FESTIVAL HIGHLIGHTS

Headline international events in the eDTF this year (1-13 Oct.) include a Robert Wilson/Tom Waits *Woyzeck*; Peter Brook's first visit to Ireland with *Le Costume; Rose Rage*, a two-part staging of Shakespeare's *Henry VI* trilogy; and one-man shows featuring Simon Callow and Pete Postelthwaite. Domestically, the Festival will present the acclaimed Blue Raincoat staging of *Macbeth* (see review p. 102) and Roddy Doyle's *Guess Who's Coming for the Dinner*, which is excerpted in this issue on page 64.

AND IN THE FRINGE...

Eclecticism and errant outrageousness reign as usual in this year's Fringe programme, which includes over 300 performances of theatre, performance, live art, dance, and comedy (24 Sept.-13 Oct.). Internationally, highlights include Abi Morgan's *Tiny Dynamite*, a co-production of Frantic Assembly and Paines Plough, which blew the critics away in Edinburgh; a new staging of John Cage's *Alphabet* in association with the Cage Trust; new work from Scots company Suspect Culture; and Angela Carter's



WOYZECK

The Magic Toyshop as interpreted by Shared Experience. The Fringe Irish programme represents nothing less than a comprehensive overview of the independent scene: Bewley's Café Theatre, Calipo, Common Currency, Faustroll, Gare St Lazare Players, Gúna Nua, Inis, Loose Canon, Meridian, Pan Pan, Rattlebag, Red Kettle, Rough Magic, Semper Fi, Temenos Project, Upstate... Where to begin?!

AND IF THAT'S NOT ENOUGH

... Festival season continues as the Belfast Festival at Queen's — Stella Hall's first as festival director — runs from 26th Oct.-11 Nov. The full BFQ programme will be announced in early Sept., but released theatre highlights at press time include *A Midsummer Night's Dream* directed by Lithuanian hotshot Oskaras Korsunovas; and the Australian/Indonesian co-production *The Theft of Sita*, which blends gamelan music, shadow puppetry, multi-media, and original music... check their website at www.belfastfestival.com in Sept. for more details.

CROOKED HOUSE MOVES HOUSE

Crooked House Theatre Company is now in residence at the Riverbank Arts

Centre, Newbridge, Co. Kildare for the next three years. The company is launching a number of initiatives: a free scriptwriting forum every second Monday from 1 Oct. at the Riverbank; a community theatre training forum starting in Oct.; and their third annual actors training workshop coming up soon. Details

for all can be obtained on (087) 275-9420. Crooked House is also producing two plays as a single evening this autumn: *Bending Spoons* by Peter Hussey and *Revelations* by Darren Donohue. They play the Riverbank from 24 Sept.-2 Oct. and the Crypt, Dublin from 12 Nov.-1 Dec.

UPSTATE COMES DOWNTOWN

Drogheda's Upstate Theatre Project is

MARK YOUR DIARIES

The second annual *Irish theatre magazine* international theatre critics' forum will be held 8th Oct. at 5:15 pm in Andrews Lane Theatre. This year's panellists are Helen Meany (*The Irish Times*), Joyce McMillan (*The Scotsman*), Benedict Nightingale (*The Times/London*), and Linda Winer (*Newsday/New York*). And in Nov. *itm* will present a panel discussion on The Writer and the Theatre during the Belfast Festival at Queen's — email us on info@irishthemagazine.com for details as they become available! Both talks are in association with the Arts Council's Critical Voices programme.

setting up shop in City Arts Centre for a number of productions and activities during the Dublin Fringe. "Interstate conneXions ...the links" will run 2-12 Oct. and will include workshops, talks, a book launch, and performances of two plays: *Epic*, written and directed by

Declan Gorman for Upstage Live (running 21 Sept.-6 Oct.); and *Zoo Station*, written and performed by members of Macra na Feirme from Termonfeckin, Co. Louth and directed by Gorman and Declan Mallon, playing 11-13 Oct.

THE IRISH TAKE EDINBURGH

The Irish descended in force on the Edinburgh Festivals this late summer. The Dublin Theatre Festival production of Enda Walsh's *bedbound* wowed the critics at the Traverse: "an uncomfortable, unforgettable tour-de-force," raved *The Daily Telegraph's* Charles Spencer; the production won a *Scotsman* Fringe First. *The Guardian's* Michael Billington went nuts for Michael West's *Foley*, also at the Traverse, calling it "quite outstanding... exquisitely written" and awarding it five stars. And the third Irish play in the Traverse, Morna Regan's *Midden*, was hailed as an "immensely promising first play" by *The Guardian* and also won a Fringe First. Other Irish work at Edinburgh includes a new production of Tom Murphy's 1989 play *Too Late for Logic*, directed by Patrick Mason for the Royal Lyceum Theatre Company as part of the Edinburgh International Festival, and a variety of other productions are appearing in the Fringe, including three from Cork — Asylum Theatre Company's *The Bald Prima Donna*, Grendel Productions' *Beowulf* (see review p. 72), and Granary Productions' devised piece *Innocent (When You Dream)*.

THE GERMANS WANT YOU!

Theatreszene Europa is a theatre festival based in Cologne, Germany, which invites four to six theatre companies from a different country every two years to perform at the University of Köln (Cologne). In March 2002 it's Ireland's turn, and the festival organisers are looking for Irish companies who might be interested in coming over. There's a questionnaire for interested groups on the web — go to www.studiobuehne-koeln.de and click on "Theatreszene Europa."

THE LYRIC IN LONDON... AND BELFAST

The Tricycle Theatre is presenting the Lyric Theatre production of Gary Mitchell's *As the Beast Sleeps*, directed by former executive producer John Sheehan, from 18 Sept.-13 Oct. And the Lyric's autumn season in their Laganside headquarters will include *The Importance of Being Earnest*, directed by Dan Gordon and running 21 Sept.-13 Oct.; a new play, *Wedding, Weeins and Wakes*, from the award-winning duo behind *Stones in his Pockets*, writer Marie Jones and director Ian McElhinney, from 2-24 Nov.; and *Red Riding Hood* with new book, lyrics, and music by Paul Boyd, directed by Zoe Seaton, from 30 Nov. - 5 Jan.

SEEDLINGS II

The Dublin Fringe and Rough Magic have put together an impressive list of mentors to work with the six early-career playwrights in their Seeds



MIDDEN

scheme. Seeds playwright Ioanna Anderson is working with the Traverse Theatre's artistic director Philip Howard; Mark Doherty with director Conall Morrison; Aidan Harney with director Wilson Milam; Oonagh Kearney with Out of Joint artistic director Max Stafford-Clark; Gerard Murphy with Bush Theatre artistic director Mike Bradwell; and Raymond Scannell with playwright Jim Nolan. Jammy buggers all!

KELLY IN RESIDENCE

Speaking of jammy... Nick Kelly is the new Dublin Corporation/Project playwright-in-residence, a bursary that lasts a whopping two years — the longest such award in the country. The position is also unique in that there is no end "product" required from Kelly; this is purely to provide him the means to live and write for the next 24 months.

THE DICEMAN REMEMBERED

Dublin Corporation is sponsoring its second annual free training workshop for actors this September, which is

named after the late Thom McGinty, better known as the beloved street performer The Diceman. This year's international visitors leading the training are Grzegorz Bral and Anna Zubrzycka of Teatr Piesn Kozla in Poland. Actors with a particular interest or experience in physical performance are invited to apply for the limited places in the workshop which run 22-26 Oct (application due date 7th Sept.) Contact Jack Gilligan on arts@dubc.iol.ie or on (01) 872-2816.

WHAT'S AN IETM?

Good question. The Informal European Theatre Meeting is a biannual international networking event for theatre professionals, and this Nov. for the first time it'll be held in Ireland. Over the weekend of Nov. 8-11, some 300 theatre professionals — primarily from Europe, but some from as far afield as Canada, South America, and South Africa — will descend on Galway for a weekend of workshops, discussions, panels. Look for a report in *itm* 11.

CHAIR



FILLING THE TROUBLED GAP

The arts in Northern Ireland are under-documented at the best of times, and the last 30 years, dominated as they were by political turmoil, have been particularly neglected. Thus *Stepping Stones: The Arts in Ulster 1971-2001* will be a welcome addition to our bookshelves; it's being published by Blackstaff Press and will hit bookstores in October. Mark Carruthers and Stephen Douds edit the volume, which includes articles on theatre by David Grant and Ophelia Byrne.

FAITH HEALING AT THE ALMEIDA

Though acclaimed as one of his greatest plays, Brian Friel's *Faith Healer* is rarely performed, in part because the principal role of Frank Hardy is powerfully difficult to cast, so great is the shadow cast by the actor who created the role, the late Donal McCann. All eyes will be on

London's Almeida Theatre (or rather its temporary home in King's Cross) this late November, as Ken Stott plays Frank in a new production directed by the Almeida's co-artistic director Jonathan Kent. Geraldine James and Ian McDiarmid (the theatre's other artistic leader) complete the cast. Look for a review in *itm* 11!

UPCOMING PRODUCTIONS

Following its world premiere at the Traverse, Edinburgh, the Rough Magic production of Morna Regan's *Midden* plays Derry (29 Aug.-1 Sept.), Cork (4-8 Sept.), Galway (11-15 Sept.), and ends up at Draiocht in Blanchardstown during the Dublin Fringe (8-13 Oct.)...Town Hall Productions are touring Little John Nee's *The Derry Boat* all over the island from Aug.-Nov. — check out www.derryboat.com for details... The New Theatre's latest is Steinbeck's *Of Mice and*

ANNELA STEIN

Men, directed by Tim O'Donnell and playing 7 Aug.-1 Sept... Barnstorm are taking their successful production of *Kevin's Story* (see review, page 94) back on the road this Oct./Nov., heading to venues in Castlebar, Tralee, Monaghan, Waterford, Galway, and Eniskillen.... Storytellers are re-touring Mary Elizabeth Burke-Kennedy's adaptation of *The Star Child and Other Stories*; it opens on 23 Oct. at the Civic, Tallaght, and continues on a four-venue tour through Christmas...

Galglass are undertaking a fascinating project this autumn: an evening of two plays under the umbrella title *A Prime Location: The Changing Fortunes and Comic Histories of a Georgian House*. The evening pairs Sean O'Casey's little known comedy *Bedtime Story* with *Previous Relations* by 19th century Viennese writer Johann Nestroy, which will be translated and adapted by Thomas Kilroy. The tour opens mid-Oct. in Clonmel and plays venues ending at the Civic, Tallaght in Nov.

Ben Barnes' production of *Translations* has returned for a second run in the Abbey on its way to dates in late Sept. and Oct. in Barcelona, St. Etienne, Ludwigshafen, Prague, and Budapest.

A Grand Day Out

Theatre Shop's 8th annual conference takes place on Friday 5 October at the Irish Film Centre. As usual, presenters and programmers will be flying in from all corners of the island and the globe to meet, talk theatre, and see the latest productions during the Dublin Theatre and Fringe Festivals. Call Theatre Shop on (01) 872-3233 or check out www.theatreshop.ie for further details.

In the Peacock after the Murphy season, Operating Theatre, as part of a Peacock Partnership, will present *Chair*, co-written by Olwen Fouere, Johnny Hanrahan, and Roger Doyle, with Fouere performing and Doyle accompanying with original compositions. The Peacock Christmas show will be the world premiere of Billy Roche's much-awaited *On Such as We,* directed by Wilson Milam.

Upcoming at the Civic Theatre, Tallaght: Myles Dungan's adaptation of Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*, directed by Joe Devlin for Rattlebag Theatre Co., runs at the Civic from 31 Oct.-24 Nov... TEAM are touring Frances Kay's *Burning Dreams*, directed by Martin Murphy, to Dublin-area schools for eight weeks beginning 19th Sept. The company point out that for the first time in at least ten years they will not be able to travel outside Dublin city with their work because

they received a standstill grant from the Arts Council this year, which has meant cutting down their weeks of touring from 13 to 8... Theatreworks are presenting Shakespeare's *Richard III* from 5-22 Sept. in the Beckett Centre, Dublin, directed by Michael Caven and featuring Denis Conway in the title role.



HARD TIMES ON CAVENDISH ROW

The Gate Theatre's last 24 months have truly been anni horribiles, but its success in New York this summer added a new twist to the ongoing saga of its rising and falling fortunes. itm editor **KAREN FRICKER** reviews the ongoing Gate crisis, and ponders the future of the theatre and its high-profile director, **MICHAEL COLGAN**.

THIS SUMMER, THE MOST GRIPPING DRAMA IN THE IRISH arts world took a plot twist so perfectly timed, and so perfectly ironic, that master producer Michael Colgan — the impresario at the heart of this saga — couldn't have programmed it better himself. ■ Even as the Gate Theatre's ongoing row with the

Arts Council over funding and organisational issues grew increasingly acrid and public, the theatre headed off to New York for the Pinter Festival at Lincoln Center, a nine-play event curated by Colgan, the Gate's director; four of the Festival's plays were produced by the Gate itself, the others by London's Royal Court and Almeida Theatres.

And, following on the success of the Lincoln Center Beckett Festival in 1996, the Gate is once again the toast of New York. Gotham's critics fell over themselves with superlatives for the Gate's productions of *The Homecoming* ("electri-

fying," said *The New York Times*; "riveting" raved *Newsday* and *One for the Road* ("crisp and chilling" — *Variety*). Celebrities like Lauren Bacall and Jim Carrey came along. Lincoln Center Festival director Nigel Reddin declared the Gate "one of the world's theatrical treasures," on RTÉ's "Morning Ireland" on 30 July.

Among the Arts Council's principal complaints against the Gate has been the theatre's focus on international touring at the expense, the Council argues, of domestic activity. And now, here was the Gate triumphing in an international arena; the theatre's success in New York



THE TOAST OF NEW YORK:
Lia Williams in The Homecoming

would certainly seem like fuel for Colgan's argument that, as he told on RTÉ's "News at One" on 29 June, "we are valued all over the world, but we are not valued by this Arts Council."

But the most significant garland handed to the Gate during its New York triumph was from Arts Minister Síle de Valera, who diverted from a trip to Boston especially to attend the opening of *The Homecoming*. In a speech after the performance the minister praised the Gate as a "beacon of excellence" which "managed so often to find the magical formula for success." De Valera's comments run counter to the Arts Council's assessment of the Gate's programming as "neither adventurous nor groundbreaking," and it's hard not to see her words as a challenge to the Arts Council's position towards the theatre. The Minister's statements certainly add to a growing sense of an lack of unity in the policies and attitudes emanating from the Council and the Minister's office.

De Valera further weighed in behind the Gate in August, when her Department awarded the Gate £1.7 million out of its total £36 million in ACCESS (Arts and Culture Enhancement Support Scheme) grants for capital building projects. Colgan told *The Irish Times* that the Gate's grant, one of the largest the Department gave, would be applied towards the building of a new rehearsal space and improved backstage facilities, and heralded the grant as a "great morale boost after a difficult time."

For *The Irish Times*, the Minister's grant, plus the announcement that the Gate had added two high-profile directors to its controversial board — which the Arts Council had criticised as too small, too static in membership, and highly unusual in that Colgan himself sits on it — seemed to indicate that the theatre's problems were well on the way to

being over. "Ms de Valera's un-Scrooge-like generosity has helped ensure a happy ending," wrote Frank McNally in an 11 August article, one of many articles with a pro-Gate slant that *The Irish Times* have printed in sections other than its Arts page throughout the crisis.

But this assessment seems both simplistic and premature. While the Minister's capital grant is doubtless a huge boon to the theatre, its row with the Arts Council remains unresolved, and overall its financial problems have far from gone away, as Colgan himself acknowledges. "The theatre is struggling financially," he told "Morning Ireland" from New York, "I'm going to have to fundraise when I get back!" (It would have been interesting to hear how Colgan's international colleagues like Reddin would have responded to this complaint, as fundraising occupies, in America at least, at least half of every artistic director's calendar, and in Ireland's shifting economic and cultural climate, will doubtless begin to encroach significantly on every arts manager's life in upcoming years.)

Only a few weeks before the company's departure for America, Colgan and his board had accepted, after much dispute and unwillingly, a grant of £531,600 from the Arts Council, a figure which he has said is inadequate for the theatre's needs for 2001. In correspondence with the Arts Council, Colgan repeatedly stated that the Gate would have to close if the Arts Council could not better this figure — which the Council had already increased, after protest from the Gate, from an offer of £354,400 in revenue funding and £177,200 in a capital challenge grant, into the combined revenue grant of over half a million pounds.

But what the Gate was looking for was £900,000 — an improbably high figure, it



EMBATTLED: Michael Colgan

would seem, given that the theatre's grant had leveled out at £600,000 in 1998 and 1999 — even then the second highest grant to a theatre organisation in Ireland. How could the Gate have hoped for such a high level of funding in 2001, given that it had been embroiled in increasingly virulent disagreements with the Arts Council about every level of its activities for the past two years and had received a drastically reduced grant of £200,000 in 2000?

This was exactly the question that Arts Council director Patricia Quinn asked Colgan in a meeting in mid-May of this year, convened at the Gate's request. In that meeting (according to minutes obtained through the Freedom of Information Act [FOI]), a clearly incredulous Quinn asked "if the [Gate's] board had really planned with a confident expectation of funding of

more than £900,000 being available in 2001." Colgan's reply was yes, "based on signals received from Council members by members of [the Gate's] board."

Further minutes indicate that the Gate had budgeted its 2001 programme based on the assumption that its total grant for 2000 and 2001 combined would not be less than its combined total from 1998 and 1999, that is, £1.2 million; and thus had gone forward believing that having received £200,000 in 2000, it would not receive less than £900,000 in 2001.

This explains the maths, but the larger implications are still difficult to absorb. The idea that an embattled arts organisation would plan its most expensive and adventurous season in recent memory on the assurance of "signals" sent to its board from individual members of its funding body sounds positively Haughey-era; it sounds, in fact, like just the kind of nod-and-wink thinking that the Arts Council (or, as Colgan is now given to calling it, this Arts Council) has been trying to move its clients away from.

This one of the larger stories behind the entire Gate fracas: it highlights a major shift in approach by the Arts Council itself, which in turn reflects an overall move in government and social systems towards greater accountability and transparency. Since the launch of the second Arts Plan in July 1999, which stated the Council's desire to transform itself from a straightforward funding body to a "developmental agency," the Arts Council has begun to require more documentation, more accountability, and more forward planning from its clients.

Facilitating this ongoing changeover has not been without its hitches; it's resulted in huge delays in grant decisions and greater bureaucracy, and added to the woes of an understaffed and increasingly embattled Council

which has recently experienced some of the worst publicity of its 50-year existence, on the back of crises like the departure of three high-profile Councillors last year.

What the Council's policy shift meant for the Gate was an increased demand for communication with the Council; the theatre was asked to share forward plans, accounts, and inside information when it apparently had been allowed to basically run itself on its own terms before. The Gate is undoubtedly one of the most successful arts organisations in Ireland, and up until a few years ago there seems to have been a hands-off attitude by the Council (on which Colgan himself sat from 1989 to 1994) towards how the theatre actually ran itself.

The increased attention and requests for detailed information from the Council in recent years must have come as a surprise and perhaps an affront to the Gate, and contributed to the sense, communicated so often around this issue, that the Council was "penalising success" rather than, as it would doubtless argue, pursuing a new approach to policy with all of its clients.

THE RESULTING CRISIS HAS BROUGHT numerous issues to the surface about the way the Gate does business, which in turn raise larger questions about the overall Irish arts environment. Questions still remain unanswered about the Gate's reticence to provide the Council with accounts of its recent years' activities (its 1999 accounts have only recently been filed with the Companies Office), about its accounting procedures themselves, and about the purposes of a large cash reserve it had built up over the years — despite the fact that it had never informed the Council, as is a standard condition of accepting Council funds,

that it was transferring money into reserve accounts.

Another issue that is raised in the Arts Council's documentation on the Gate, which has barely been mentioned throughout this crisis, is the issue of Condition 19: "...No director, manager or employee, shall on that person's own behalf, or on behalf of any other organisation, acquire subsidiary rights in any work produced by the organisation, unless permission in writing has first been obtained from the Council." As *The Phoenix* pointed out early in the reporting of this story, Colgan is a director and shareholder in Blue Angel Films, the company that produced the Beckett on Film series, which grew out of the Beckett Festivals originally produced by the Gate.

An internal Arts Council memo written by former drama officer Phelim Donlon in December 2000 recommended that the Gate's board and auditors confirm formally that "no resources, whether financial, human, or artistic of the Gate have been applied to the current filming of the Beckett plays..." but so far no such assurances appear to have been sought or given; and one wonders if the wave of mainstream media goodwill the Gate is riding on the back of their New York success will eclipse such investigations.

There are also larger, thornier questions the Gate's situation raises about its responsibilities to the sector at large, and even more basically, as to what constitutes artistic quality and excellence. In the case of the Gate two key sticking points are risk and need.

Many in the theatre community would argue that the Gate is overly aloof from the sector, that it basically runs its own show and interacts too little with other Irish theatres and arts organisations. That's certainly the view of the Arts Council, which concluded in an



NEW TALENT: Justine Mitchell

internal document leading to the Gate's much-reduced 2000 grant that the Gate was renegeing on a responsibility to nurture the sector as a whole: "it is not clear," said the document, "that [the Gate] uses its considerable resources for ...building capacity in the sector..."

The Gate's record does show only perfunctory activity in the development of new work and new talent. The Gate Development Project, designed to nurture new writing and directing, withered on the vine in 2000 after less than a year in existence; between 1999 and the present the Gate produced only three new Irish plays, by relatively established writers (Conor McPherson and Bernard Farrell), and have only engaged two new Irish directors, McPherson and Michael Caven. Assistant directors work on some

projects, but are paid a modest stipend by the Arts Council, not the Gate itself. Designers are usually not Irish or Ireland-based. The most significant way that the Gate interacts with the sector is through the hiring of actors, and does have a strong record for identifying and consistently employing young acting talent, most recently Fiona O'Shaughnessy, Justine Mitchell, and Jason O'Mara.

So is greater engagement and leadership of the sector the Gate's responsibility? *Sotto voce* many in the community would probably argue that it is, but the fact that such a perception has not been communicated in any ongoing or collective way points to an overall lack of organisation and unity in the sector as a whole. Colgan might argue that the Gate leads the sector by simply keeping its doors open 52 weeks a year and laying on what he clearly views as high-quality productions — which leads us to the issue of excellence.

Is the Gate's work good? Those who argue yes point to consistently high production standards; to its occasional festivals of Beckett and Pinter's work, which attract high-profile artistic talent and international media interest; and to the presentation of a canon of modern and contemporary classics that might not be available to audiences elsewhere in Ireland. Those who don't rate the Gate's work point to generally safe artistic choices; an emphasis on aesthetic prettiness over innovative directorial choices; and a reliance, by and large, on a small stable of actors, directors, and designers who aren't apparently pushed to stretch their range from production to production. The Arts Council, again, makes its point of view clear in their internal correspondence which refers to the Gate's work as showing "limited evidence of artistic innovation and ambition..." and criticises the theatre for not

generating "consistently excellent or innovative artistic work."

At the centre of all these complaints is the issue of risk: it has long been noted that the Gate programming seems designed to avoid financial risk; that its artistic choices seem largely dictated by what will do well at the box office. The Gate does perceive itself to be under extreme pressure to achieve high income through ticket sales, but what became clear in the highly fraught contretemps between the Arts Council and the Gate about its accounting procedures is that this pressure is largely self-generated. The Arts Council has long disapproved of the Gate's practice, unique among subsidised Irish theatres, of using its grant exclusively to cover overheads rather than applying it to production expenses. In grant applications the theatre says that, because its overheads actually add up to more than the amount of its grant, this creates a "burden" which the theatre has to "subsidise" by "seeking (and achieving) cripplingly high box office levels which are not demanded of any other theatre on this island." But this "demand" was created by the Gate itself by choosing to structure its accounts as it did, and thus becomes a powerful justification for programming relatively safe fare.

There is a fascinating thread that runs through the Arts Council's file on the Gate, of the Council's evolving articulation of its position towards the issues of risk and need as they apply to the Gate's work and its applications for subsidy. The Arts Council's internal response to the Gate's 1999 grant proposal launches this line of thinking: "It is clear that the exceptional success of the Gate and its operations calls for a comprehensive review of the manner in which the Council assesses the company and determines the level of grant-aid for it." In an

internal e-mail in late 1999 then-Arts Council drama officer Phelim Donlon classes the Gate issue "a problem of success."

In a letter to Colgan in mid-2000, Council artform officer Dermot McLaughlin articulates as one concern about the Gate's situation "the extent to which the company can demonstrate a clear need for funding to the order requested by the Council." In its response to the Gate's 2001 funding application, the Council confidently states that "the kind of intervention implied by a simple deficit block grant appears to have reached the end of its useful life, and a new formula will need to take account of the kind of hybrid commercial/artistic international market environment in which the Gate operates today."

But Colgan is clearly opposed to such a new formula; in a meeting in mid-May 2001 he expressed his "dismay about the approach taken by the Arts Council towards the *needs* (italics mine) of the Gate Theatre." What we have here, to coin a phrase, is a failure to communicate; what we have here, clearly, is an arts organisation highly resistant to shifting its conception of itself or its relationship with its funder, despite strenuous and ongoing efforts by that funder to evolve that relationship.

UNTIL QUITE RECENTLY, BOTH THE Arts Council and the Gate have been circumspect towards the press about their disagreements. That the story has been covered as heavily as it has is the result of Freedom of Information — another byproduct of our new age of transparency; and one of the interesting subplots in the documents supplied by the Arts Council under FOI about the Gate is the growing awareness and alarm on the part of Colgan and his board as they realised that their funding applications, correspondence, meetings,



LAUDED: John Hurt in Krapp's Last Tape

and even phone calls were available for public scrutiny.

But it now seems that Colgan's policy of media silence is decidedly over. On 29 July, the day after the Arts Council announced that the Gate had accepted the 2001 grant of £531,600, Colgan took to the airwaves in the "News at One" interview, making clear his view that the Gate's problems were a result of a specific bias of this particular Council: "A Minister appoints an Arts Council and they make decisions. This Arts Council clearly doesn't value the work of the Gate. I would just prefer, instead of saying 'oh, we don't think your board is changed enough,' or 'you shouldn't be on the board,' or 'you should present your accounts in a different way'... it would be better for them to say 'we don't value the Gate,' and we would say that's your decision and that's fine."

What of the oft-threatened closure? Few seem to believe that Colgan actually means to shut the theatre down. Internal Arts Council documents class Colgan's wielding of the possibility of closure "histrionics." "You don't really believe it yourself, do you?" prodded "News at One" presenter Sean O'Rourke in the 29 June interview. "I don't want to close the Gate; it's the last thing we'd

do," Colgan replied, but further said that since the theatre's reserve had been whittled down due to its lowered grant levels, it might soon be in a position where it would be "trading recklessly."

For most working in the arts, it is hard to conceive of a half a million pound grant as hardship money. But again, looking at what we know of the maths, it does seem that the Gate's finances are now, or imminently going to be, in a parlous state. It has been confirmed that the Gate's reserve stood at £700,000 at the beginning of last year, £450,000 of which would have been used up filling the gap between its budgeted-for £600,000 grant and the £200,000 it actually received in 2000. If this year it was expecting £900,000 but received £370,000 less than that, that's its reserve eaten up plus a £120,000 shortfall, if the theatre is to deliver the season it has planned. Fundraising, indeed.

Add to this the fact that Colgan's not denying rumours that his days at the helm of the Gate are nearing their close — "I'm in theatre for the long run, but not at the Gate for the long run," he said in a recent interview — and the Gate does seem on shaky ground. For who, were Colgan to step down, would be his heir apparent? Given the difficulties of the last several years, it seems unlikely that Colgan's deputies Marie Rooney and Anne Clarke would relish stepping up to the plate. And who is out there in the sector at large with the experience, the vision, the desire, and the sheer welly necessary to take over one of Ireland's most high-profile, and commercially successful, producing theatres?

Put succinctly, at this point in time the

Gate Theatre is Michael Colgan; he has so successfully tied the organisation to his personality, style, and aesthetic that it's very hard to imagine what the theatre would be like without him. But it seems beyond time for that eventuality to be contemplated — first and foremost by the board of the Gate itself, for the responsibility for assuring the livelihood of the organisation beyond its current leadership resides with them.

Another of the pressing larger issues that the Gate's situation raises, in fact, is that of succession of leadership in the Irish arts: many arts organisations are run by managers of Colgan's generation who may be reaching the end of their tenures, and there seems little provision to ensure that continuous leadership will take place and that these institutions can achieve long-term stability when their current (often founding) management moves on. How are, and how should, arts leaders be trained? Should mentorship be required of arts organisations of a certain size? These seem questions of the utmost urgency for the Irish arts sector.

Another gaping outstanding issue that the Gate crisis raises is that of criteria for evaluation of artistic worth. What deserves to be funded? How are criteria like artistic excellence and risk actually assessed? The Irish arts world desperately needs articulation on these issues; the Arts Council acknowledged a need to "research and develop... better methods and clearer criteria for funding excellence and innovation" in *The Arts Plan 1999-2001*. But the fact that the Council have been unable to enumerate criteria for evaluating the pilot projects for their multi-annual funding plan, even though those projects have been underway for two years, indicates how far their aspiration continues to remain from their

achievement. This seems an issue of primary concern as the Council works towards its next Arts Plan.

Coming up with a language and systems to concretise such intangible concerns is a difficult business, to be sure. As far as the Gate is concerned, there have been some tangible changes in the way they've been doing business in recent months. The 2001 programme thus far has shown more innovation than in previous years, featuring edgier subject matter (*bash*), a little-seen play from the European repertoire (*Thérèse Raquin*), a new play (*Port Authority*), and a new look at a contemporary classic (*The Homecoming*). They've given Michael Caven his main-stage directing debut with *Thérèse Raquin*, and have engaged Caven to write a plan for the development of new talent at the Gate, the implementation of which is on hold pending resolution of funding issues. Both the Gate and the Arts Council have indicated that they are working towards a multi-annual funding plan, the holy grail that all arts organisations in Ireland must now pursue to assure survival. These moves, along with the new directors on its board, seem to indicate that the Gate, shaken by its last two years' experience, is adjusting itself to face the future.

Will and should that future include greater engagement with the sector as a whole? How long will that future include Michael Colgan? And what happens then? These are questions of considerable import, not just for the Gate but for the theatre community overall. The Gate is inarguably a linchpin in the Irish theatre world: it provides some 50-80 acting jobs per year, and some 115,000 seats per year for bums to sit on. Were it to seriously falter, the whole sector would be thrown off balance. Like it or not, the outcome of the Gate drama will affect us all.

WHAT A DIFFERENCE A DAY MAKES

Take four playwrights, four directors, a company of actors and technicians. Add 24 hours, and stir. Does the result threaten to destroy the normal boundaries of theatre-making? PETER CRAWLEY reports on Within 24 Hours, a wild experiment in insta-theatre that happened this June at Project in Dublin.

"WHAT TIME IS IT?" ASKS CATHY WHITE FROM A BLUE, GRAFFITI-COVERED bench in a space littered with clothing, loaves of bread, and pot noodles. ■ "Half past one," Steve Blount casually lies. ■ She steals a peek at his watch. "It's not!" she panics, "It's four o'clock!" ■ "No it's not," assures director Veronica Coburn, restoring order. "It's a malicious lie."

Despite this small group's efforts to challenge the clock, here in the gallery of Project, it really is, indisputably, four in the afternoon. And because Semper Fi

theatre company have boldly committed to create and perform four short works of theatre in the span of only 24 hours, time is running out. This is a countdown, and for this director and her cast, it is T-minus four hours to curtain.

Props are still being gathered, costumes selected, and the actors are not off script. As participating writer Michael West says, "the curtain will be down before the ink is dry."

Let's turn back the clock by two days to the moment when I made all of this happen. Yes, that's right — me. Because with flagrant disregard for my own credibility as a journalist and for the objectivity of my employers, I set this whole shebang into motion by pulling names out from four top hats (on loan from the Abbey) to decide which writers, directors, and actors would be involved in this mad undertaking. All right, my involvement didn't go much beyond handing a couple of scrunched-up pieces of paper to Karl Shiels and Paschal Friel, the project's organisers, but I feel responsible for the ensuing flurry of creative activity, in a very real and petty way.

Semper Fi's concept (albeit one imported by Shiels from New York) was terrifyingly simple. Assemble a large group of willing (and not so willing, it transpired) theatre practitioners and from them, choose four writers and directors at random (though with a predetermined even gender balance), select a potential cast of 20 actors, vote on a common theme for the pieces — and go create. Was this a statement against the theatre establishment, an attack on the traditional length of the process of putting a show together, or an unconventional exposition of under-appreciated young talent? Time would tell. Very soon.

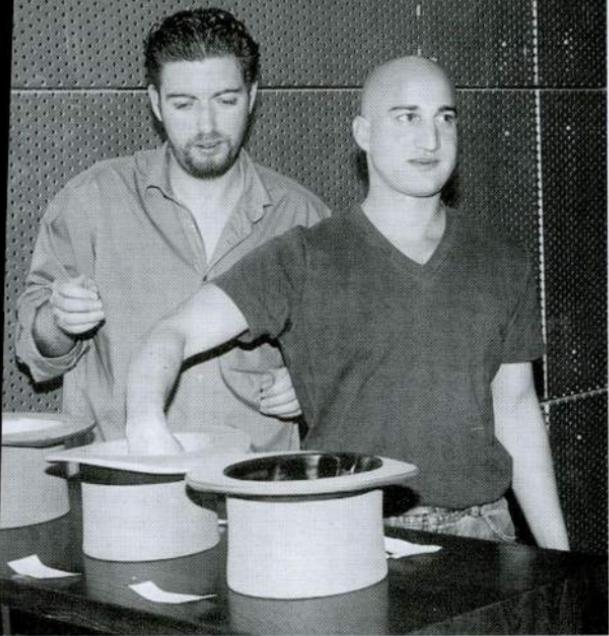
"It's so exciting I think I'm going to

bust my spleen," deadpans Karl Shiels as he methodically cuts a list of female writers into individual strips for the Top Hat Lotto. This may be the rather less riveting side of the process, but were the participants frightened by the challenge? "Everybody was frightened," says Shiels. "Everybody was shit-scared... They still said 'we'll do it'." Paschal Friel admits that nobody required much convincing — but then again, no one had yet received That Phone Call. Until now: Friel and Shiels go to work on the phones, letting the chosen ones know who they are.

The following night at 11 pm the clock starts ticking. Outside Project an audience in Meeting House Square watch Audrey Hepburn pretend to sing in *My Fair Lady*, while inside, an anti-globalisation party rages against the machine in the upstairs bar. But in the Cube, it's all business: Shiels briefs all present. The final line-up consists of four scribes, Deirdre Kinahan, Alice Barry, Michael West and Eugene O'Brien; four directors, Veronica Coburn, Maureen Collender, Charlie Bonner, and Jim Culleton; four stage managers; and 20 actors.

The rules are explained. The scripts must be no less than ten minutes long, no more than 20; written for at least two characters, no more than five. They must be written that night for collection the following morning at 7 am. Directors will choose blindly from four identical envelopes. Actors must be up and ready at 8 am. Yes, Shiels explains, 8 am... in the morning. At 8 pm the first show goes up, and the last comes down before 11pm. The potential themes are put up for vote: Hell On Earth, Blood and Water, and Love and Games. Love and Games wins the vote by a landslide.

The writers are all driven home and they work alone through the night. On



CHOOSY: Karl Shiels and Paschal Friel engaging in their highly scientific artist selection process.

Sunday morning Charlie Bonner, an actor, today turned director, draws Alice Barry's script: *Love Games*. "I was extremely surprised how good it was after only six or seven hours writing," says Bonner over lunch in Project. "Unbelievable. It's a well-balanced piece." Is he daunted by the time constraints? "You could say 'I need more time', but directors are executives — interpretive artists. Here, you have to make choices very quickly, be brave about them and be resolute." He does find it a fair challenge though: "When no one can anticipate what's coming next — that's drama. It's mad. You learn so much."

Alice Barry's script is so topical it could have been torn from the front page of the morning's tabloids. While the "sexy secrets" of *Big Brother*'s latest evictee plaster the newsstands, Barry's

Love Games draws a similar but comic scenario, where the main task is to bed a housemate. "It's like writing a play at fast-speed," reasons Barry. "The process is better for television writing, or for the fast turnover of a drama series." Will the results be a fair measure of her talents as a writer? "You hope people will take it in the spirit in which it was created."

"You hope you won't lose a gig because of it!" jokes Eugene O'Brien, "or lose the job to Alice Barry!" O'Brien's piece *Weekends* takes place in two beds, where a pair of couples discuss relationships — of others and their own — leading to different consequences. One couple are in what O'Brien calls the "safety zone," the other, in the throes of a burgeoning romance, would seem to be treading a minefield. "It's certainly a good exercise," O'Brien enthuses, "If I could work for that amount of time every day, I'd be flying."

The director of *Weekends*, Jim Culleton, was initially sceptical about the whole experiment. "I worried if it was undermining the process of creating," he says. His qualm seems quite justified — if, after radically telescoping the usual process, and particularly if these pieces come across as fully-fledged works of theatre, would people start asking questions? Could writers who take months to finish a script be deemed precious? Could weeks of rehearsals be considered a waste of time? But the director who

drew "Play D" this morning has seen his reservations quickly dissipate. "It's an experiment, and it's exciting to try to get the script to some finished state," Culleton concludes. "We have a few minor things to clear up." This proves to be the understatement of the day.

Lunch ends promptly at 2 pm and the writers are allowed half an hour with their productions. Upstairs in the Gaiety School of Acting, Eugene O'Brien is about to receive a grilling from the cast. Where is it set? "It's not important," he shrugs. 'She was a bit of a...' A what? Cow? O'Brien nods. He then hears last night's words read aloud for the first

each production. "It is now 5 o'clock. We have 1 hour left. God bless." Maureen Collender drops the memo and tells the cast of Michael West's *Ring* to take five. Outside the Gaiety School an outdoor performer concludes his act of catching vegetables on a skewer held in his mouth. Cleaners start sweeping Meeting House Square. "It's given people a buzz, an enthusiasm in the creative process that's imperative to drama," says Collender in the evening sunshine, "It's why we all started in the first place." Collender says she thinks this project provides the biggest challenge to the directors: "There's no time for development," she



**It is now 5 o'clock. We have one hour left.
God bless.**

time. Beginning at his temples, his fingers gradually crawl all over his face. "Yeah, it's cool," he says when they finish, "great reading". It's nine minutes long. "More pausing," he suggests.

"It's a bit rushed," Veronica Coburn cautions her actors. Back in Project's gallery, on the graffiti-tagged bench borrowed from Dublin Youth Theatre, Cathy White, Steve Blount, and the director tease out the subtleties in Deirdre Kinahan's script *Melody*. At first a charmingly tentative encounter between two painfully timid middle-aged people, *Melody*'s delicate comedy soon reveals its protagonists' concealed and slightly sordid layers. "What time is it?" asks Cathy White.

One hour later, four memos from Semper Fi are simultaneously delivered to

says. "But in the usual process, ideas you have go out the window anyway..." One of her actors, the affable Niall Shanahan, disagrees. "Actors have to be adaptable. The writers had the toughest job. They had to work alone. We have each other, which makes it easier."

At 7.20 pm, Karl Shiels calls out, "Okay. Let's open house!" So far everything has been determined by chance. All decisions have come courtesy of a hat or a roll of dice. This doesn't end with the productions. Two men in red sequined jackets and sunglasses (one of whom is co-producer David Pearse), invite punters to role two dice to determine their ticket price. Feasibly one can pay anything between two and 12 pounds. *irish theatre magazine* rolls an eight. *irish theatre magazine* suggests the best of three?

At 8 pm, the Space Upstairs is crammed full with luminaries from the Irish arts scene. If a bomb went off, it would take at least six years for Dublin theatre to recover. Before the shows begin the atmosphere is one of tremendous support, combined with an understandable desire for failure. Let's be clear. This is not a malicious yearning to empathise with Gore Vidal's maxim: "Whenever a friend succeeds a little something in me dies." Rather it feels like part of the contract. If this has been put together from start to finish with nary a telltale fray around the edges, then what's the point? As Deirdre Kinahan admits, "Theatre is about danger, of course." There is an expectation of minor grazes at least.

And they appear, in the form of one or two corpses per show. Barry's *Love Games* seems quite reminiscent of her *I Like Armadillos* of two years ago, where laddish sexual sparring and private girly chats gradually reveal a *Big Brother* game-show scenario. Played strictly for laughs, it's entertaining and disposable, with Jude Sweeney delivering the most amusingly energetic performance. The sole corpse comes late in the short piece when someone is wrong-footed by a scene transition. The audience seize upon the gaffe and nurture it into an out-loud laugh. It's a shared joke that depends on knowledge of how little preparation went into the devising and execution, an appreciation of both the content and the context.

O'Brien's *Weekends* seems to have come on quite a bit from this afternoon. Not as reliant on gags, it feels like more of a mood piece, or a brief character sketch. That is, until the biggest laugh of the night arrives courtesy of Robert Price's insuppressible grin as lights hit him during a freeze. The audience will it

into becoming a laugh, and Price duly obliges. Otherwise *Weekends* succeeds as an oddly heart-warming piece.

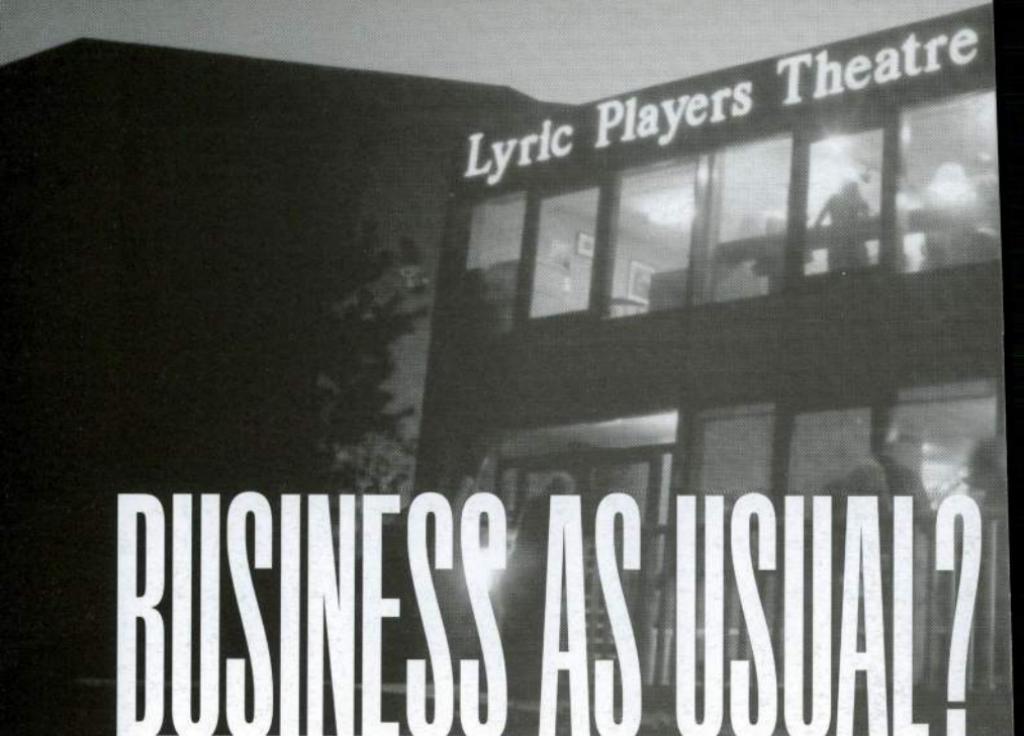
Ring, by Michael West, is the most farcical offering of the night, again concerning two couples. In the run-up to one marriage, another one falls apart, and things go haywire for the mismatched pairs. Collender makes the most of a minimal set, putting a ladder to good use, while Andrew Bennett and Mairead Devlin indulge in some shamelessly funny mugging.

Most impressive of all, though, is *Melody*, which is by far the most developed piece of the night. Kinahan's script is comic, clever, and involving, and Coburn has given it a refreshingly laid-back pace that belies its frantic assembly. Blount and White play the pauses and silences for all they're worth and draw as many sympathetic "ahs" as laughs. Fabulous.

Shiels, the diamond geezer who together with Friel made most of this possible, offers plaudits to everybody involved, not least to Project and most extravagantly to Paul Keegan who lit each performance. The whole thing ends with time to spare before 11 pm marks the earth's full revolution.

But was it revolutionary? The 20-minute lengths really only allowed for comic sketches, and hence it was an entertaining, stimulating experiment but it never felt that there was ever much at stake. The flippancy of the pieces masked the intensity of the commitment and so it felt that there was nothing to lose. Still, for Semper Fi and the capabilities of this predominantly young group, it was a point well made. After all, it took God a whole six days to make the earth. And even He took Sunday off.

Peter Crawley is completing an MA in journalism at DIT.



Lyric Players Theatre

BUSINESS AS USUAL?

Almost uniquely among Northern arts institutions, the **LYRIC THEATRE** kept its doors open even in the darkest days of the Troubles. As Northern Ireland's only building-based theatre company it holds a central place in the region's theatrical infrastructure. But the recent departure of executive producer **JOHN SHEEHAN**, along with the two other members of a newly-created executive structure, could have been a fatal blow to a theatre already dogged by financial insecurity. But, **SUSAN CONLEY** and **KAREN FRICKER** report, a newly revitalised board of directors are refocusing the theatre's vision and sending out a clear message: the Lyric may be down, but it's determined to make its way back up.



THINK ONE OF THE GREAT FORMS OF THEATRE IS TRAGEDY. AND one of the great lessons of tragedy is how, out of a confrontation with genuine difficulties, comes a new spirit, a will to carry on." So says David Johnston, new chairman of the board at Belfast's embattled Lyric Theatre. "I have no doubt that the

last 12 months have been painful, in all sorts of ways. But I think that there is a new, positive feeling about the Lyric. Tragedy constantly says to us, 'Keep your eyes open — there are always difficulties. But don't lose your ability to see beyond them....'"

If the story of the Lyric Theatre was a theatrical tragedy, which one would it be? It seems apt to choose a Chekhovian theme, something along the lines of *The Cherry Orchard*, except the Laganside big house contains not the hopes and

dreams of one spoiled, aristocratic family but rather those of many theatre practitioners, funders, and audiences for whom the theatre serves as a centre point. Like the dilemma of Chekhov's Ranevskyas, that of the Lyric has quite a bit to do with living beyond its means and with falling out of step with the rapidly changing society in which it exists. And the actions of John Sheehan, executive producer of the theatre from early 2000 to mid-2001, may have a parallel or two with those of the outsider,

Lopahkin, whose vision for the place ran counter to its history.

But life isn't like *The Cherry Orchard*, and in fact, the story of the Lyric points to a tenacity in the Ulster Way of Things that the aristocratic Ranevskyas certainly didn't possess. The new order did not replace the old: Sheehan has departed; a newly reconfigured board draws from highly placed industry insiders; and a well-respected artistic advisor, Paula McFetridge, has been brought in and has launched a new season.

It would seem that the theatre is about to be swept up in a new surge of energy; a tragic ending seems to have been averted for now. But as Johnston himself points out, "it's still not plain sailing at the Lyric at the moment." The theatre's difficulties, particularly its financial ones, are far from over, and the hard task of redefining exactly how the theatre sees itself and its brief — what role, if you will, it wants to play in the continually unfolding drama of the new Northern Ireland — still lies before the Lyric's board.

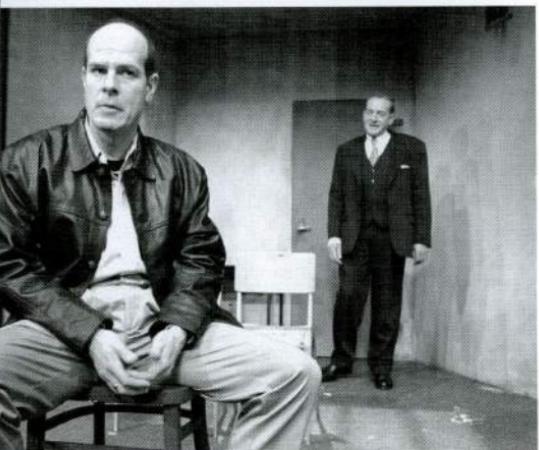
PART OF THE STRENGTH OF THE LYRIC in its earliest days was the clarity of founder Mary O'Malley's vision of what the theatre was there to do. O'Malley and her husband Pearse forwarded a broadly Irish, rather than strictly regional, programme for the Lyric Players Theatre, which opened in 1951, presenting international and poetic dramas and the occasional new play. The O'Malleys' viewpoint and their vision for the theatre was clearly nationalist, which delineated a particular stance and a particular audience for the privately-funded enterprise, run on the O'Malleys' own properties, first in Ulsterville Avenue and then the Lisburn Road.

In those early days the Lyric became a

haven for the best and the brightest Northern theatre talents. Success bred growth; in 1960 a board was brought in, and in 1968 the theatre moved into its current purpose-built headquarters in Ridgeway Street. But this expansion, and the acceptance of public money to facilitate it, brought immediate turmoil on political, financial, and artistic fronts. The O'Malleys resigned from the board when the U.K.'s National Anthem was played in the new building; the theatre hit a financial wall within a year of entering the new premises and had to lay off staff; and Christopher Fitz-Simon, its first artistic leader after Mary O'Malley, didn't last through 1969.

The Lyric endured this crisis, with the O'Malleys eventually rejoining the fold and Mary keeping a strong hold on artistic affairs well into the 1970s. During the Troubles, the Lyric was looked to as a civilising influence; current board chair Johnston speaks of the sense of hope that the Lyric, by staying open even in the darkest days, gave to his generation. "There was a sense that things were still going on there, which meant that the city was still hanging on to normality... a bomb would go off, and the next day there would still be a sign in the Lyric's window, 'Business as Usual.'"

As the Troubles wore on into the '80s, the Lyric's artistic remit gradually expanded to accommodate the differing visions of a series of artistic directors as well as changing trends in local arts and artistic policy. To a certain extent the Lyric was expected to, and attempted to, provide something for everyone: popular dramas as well as more "highbrow" fare; new writing from local voices as well as the Irish and international canon. Financially and organisationally, the theatre seemed to lurch from crisis to crisis, new regime to new regime, always barely



RECENT LYRIC PRODUCTIONS: Sleuth (top) and As the Beast Sleeps

scraping by. In the '90s, an increasingly rapid succession of artistic directors passed through, none really given a chance to make a mark.

The current crisis came to a head partly as a result of what was, ironically, an attempt to address some of the theatre's organisational problems once and for all.

In 1999, as part of a programme funded by the Northern Ireland Arts Council's Lottery fund, the Lyric underwent a high-level consultancy about its management structure, which resulted in the restructuring of its leadership into three positions: executive producer, executive administrator, and executive head of marketing. The three positions were filled by new hires: John Sheehan, Les McLean, and Mary Trainor.

Sheehan is an experienced director from New York who had spent the two years previous to his appointment at the Lyric as artistic director of Siamsa Tíre, the Irish Folk Theatre in Tralee. He took up the Lyric job in early 2000 and programmed an adventurous first autumn season of international work including Paula Vogel's Pulitzer Prize-winning *How I Learned to Drive*, which he directed himself; Lorca's *La Chunga*, in a new version by board member Johnston and directed by Michael Scott. But critical response to the work was uneven, with *La Chunga* greeted with particular savagery, and audiences started staying away in their droves. The the-

atre's financial problems worsened; staff morale dropped; a spring season of mostly rental productions was planned. Trainor was the first of the management team to bail out, in December 2000; by the middle of 2001 both McLean and Sheehan had also left the organisation.

Sheehan, now back in the States, com-

municated with *itm* for this article via e-mail. His measured responses to the questions put to him speak of an exit that is still fraught with controversy, and with the aura of bad blood. He saw his appointment by the board as an attempt to bring in someone who wasn't emotionally attached to the place, but many would point to his "outsider" status as part of the problem. He contends, "What the board said they wanted and what they really wanted are very different things... As the new man, moving ahead without a proper transition orientation, I had to discover what was really on their agenda, which they couldn't articulate: popular comfortable plays that they've seen before, that they know and love. That's all that will sell at the Lyric at this point in time."

"I think it was very difficult for [Sheehan] coming in and not knowing the arts infrastructure in the North," says McFetridge, "and I think he had a massive learning curve. And to have a learning curve running alongside the fact that the building needed redefinition, and the fact that there have been financial problems — and everyone's fully aware of that — I think it was too many things all in one basket. And his whole style of working was very different, and I think it is hard to inject a whole new feeling into a building when you're coming in from the outside."

"It wasn't all down to John," continues McFetridge. "There's no way. This has been going on, this has been coming for the last three, four years at least. It just went too far."

Johnston's view? "John's abilities were outstripped by circumstances."

Sheehan does seem to have walked into a no-win situation; in retrospect both McFetridge and Johnston agree that the overall restructuring was ill-advised. "I think that the management

structure was outsized as regards the scale of the building," opines McFetridge, "and too many resources were put into trying to achieve a more advanced management structure rather than going back to the core of what the theatre's about."

"The role of executive producer has been tried and tested in various theatres in Britain, and was imported into Northern Ireland just as the role was being discredited," says Johnston. "And I'm afraid that the Lyric appointed an executive producer when what it really needed was an artistic director. I have no doubt at all that good artistic directors are in their own way, good producers. But my wish would be to see a strong artistic director in place as soon as possible."

WITH THE DEPARTURE OF SHEEHAN, it seemed the Lyric had finally hit the wall. The theatre was carrying a significant deficit; many staff had left and those who remained were demoralised and carrying huge workloads; the prospect of the Lyric's closure seemed nearer than ever. The Northern theatre community became so disturbed about the Lyric's situation that a group of practitioners came together to create a paper proposing possible solutions to the theatre's problems, which it presented to the board.

One of the authors of this paper was actor/director/producer McFetridge, who was asked by the board to keep the theatre running while it considered its options, and, significantly, faced down the unfortunately timed prospect of its 50th anniversary season. McFetridge is widely respected within the theatre world, and the bumper attendance of theatre practitioners at the Lyric's season launch in late August seem to indicate that her attempts to mend links between the sector and the

Lyric are already paying off. The appointment of three new, theatre-savvy directors — broadcaster Mark Carruthers, director/actor Ian McElhinney, and arts administrator Chris Bailey — and the promotion of Queen's lecturer Johnston to board chair have also been broadly welcomed as positive moves.

AND YET, THE LARGER QUESTION REMAINS: Does Northern Ireland still need a Lyric Theatre? McFetridge certainly thinks so: "It's important. The Lyric has been here through one of the most turbulent times in any nation's history, and if it can withstand the 35 years of the hell that's been going on up here, then by God, it can withstand a bit of ripple in the water. It has a place in our history and we have a responsibility to mark that and sustain it... I think we need to get back to looking at who our audience is, and reconnecting with the people who used to come here on a regular basis and do feel strongly about it."

Sheehan agrees that the Lyric needs to look to its audience: "The Lyric is not taken seriously by most people in Belfast, even those who claim to love and cherish it. It is perceived as being insular and outdated. It needs to open the doors and include the people who want to work there and be involved, as well as young people who will discover for the first time why theatre is so important to the culture of a community."

In recent years the Lyric seems to have been defined, and its existence justified,

by its very endurance. But in post-millennial Northern Ireland, just staying open surely isn't enough anymore. An independent and commercial sector has blossomed which provides a healthy range of theatrical offerings for audiences; many other forms of entertainment and diversion, from cinema multiplexes to the Waterfront Hall to professional ice hockey, are now on offer in a newly cosmopolitan Belfast. Just what constitutes "business as usual" at the Lyric Theatre desperately needs redefinition.

For the board, the clock is ticking: McFetridge's contract is up in December, and it's stipulated as part of her job description that she is not eligible for the artistic director position. Who is out there



IN CHARGE : Paula McFetridge and David Johnston

to take up what could easily be portrayed at this stage as a poisoned chalice? A combination of the Ranevskyas' lineage and Lopahkin's vision seems the best bet to revitalize the struggling institution — an ideal combination that hopefully is not as fictional as a play penned by Chekhov.

ART FOR A NEW ERA

As the Republic's Arts Council works towards a new Arts Plan, the Arts Council of Northern Ireland recently published its own strategy document for the next five years. DAVID GRANT looks at the challenges facing Northern theatre in the context of funding strategies focused on participation, opening up new audiences, and greater community involvement. If the focus seems to be shifting away from art and artists, it's up to the sector itself to fight its corner in a new environment of "survival of the fittest," argues Grant.

AS REPORTED IN THE LAST EDITION OF THIS MAGAZINE, THE Arts Council of Northern Ireland's most recent round of funding decisions generated great controversy and an unprecedented level of media comment. The emphasis of the press coverage was on the perceived shift away from support for the traditional arts establishment towards the "community" sector. Expressed in percentage terms, the increases seemed more sensational than they were in reality. A "900% uplift" for Andersonstown Contemporary and Traditional Music School, for instance, was from a base figure of £1,500 up to £15,000 — still not enough to pay even one full-time worker. Kids in Control operate in a youth and community context. They consistently produce some of the most innovative theatre in Ireland and have pioneered imaginative international links with Amsterdam and Bosnia. With two full-time staff, they saw their grant rise from £5,000 to £15,000. The only significant cut within

"the establishment" was to the Grand Opera House, which now (to its credit) operates in a predominantly commercial environment. They should be applauded for their success in reducing their dependency on a questionable level of subsidy which dates back to the height of the Troubles. Given an £800,000 increase in available resources, it was clearly disheartening for the region's professional independent theatre companies to be left on standstill funding (i.e. a cut in real terms), but one senses that the funding revolution has some way to go yet.

"We are planning for an unpredictable future," says the Arts Council of Northern Ireland in its new five-year plan. And therein lies the real cause of the anxiety that many feel in the local theatre sector. The paternalistic and predictable nature of arts policy that so many of us grew up with under direct rule has given way to a fluid, changing environment in which only the fittest will survive. Accountability at local level is a new phenomenon, and one to which the community arts are well adapted. Theirs is an essentially political world and their greatest advocate, Martin Lynch, has long been a political animal. Of course, politics and theatre are familiar bedfellows. But whereas professional theatre companies have often embraced political themes in their work, they are less adept at taking the plunge out of their own world and into the rough and tumble of real-world politics.

A trawl through the minutes of the Northern Ireland Assembly's Committee for Culture, Arts and Leisure illustrates the point. There is currently an inquiry going on into cultural tourism that according to the Committee's website gave rise to 30 unspecified submissions.



HANG ON! *Replay's* One Night in February

sions. Over the last few months, the committee have met with representatives of various interest groups, most recently (at the time of writing) with the director and chair of Féile an Phobail (a.k.a. The West Belfast Festival) — the recent recipient of a 350% funding

increase (from £10,000 to £45,000). Looking back over the list of other delegations, theatre only features twice — in the form of the Lyric Theatre, and a new theatre company with a minimal track record.

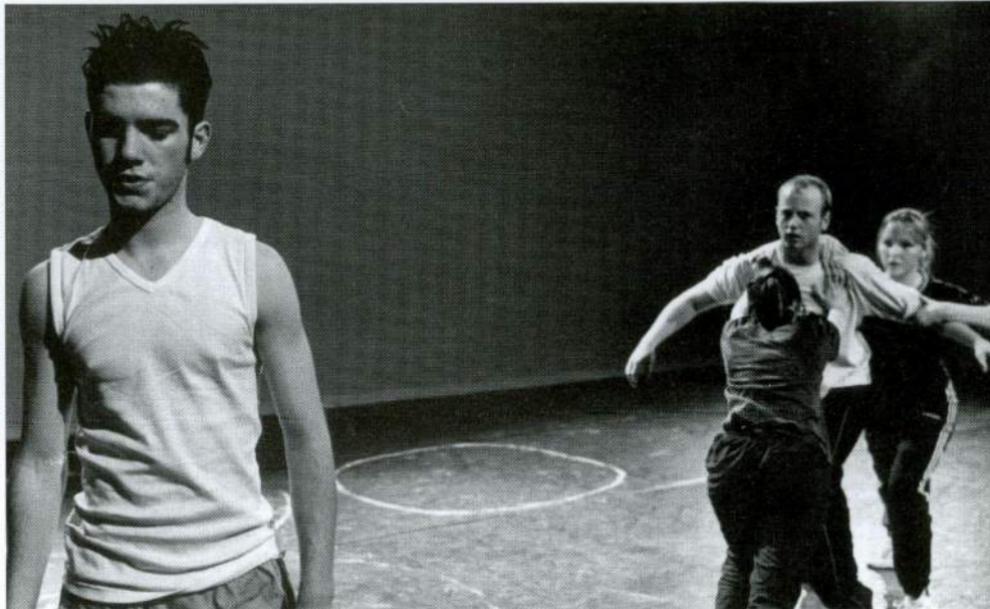
There may well be delegations from other theatre companies in the pipeline, but the picture painted by these minutes is consistent with experience to date. Compared to the "community arts" sector, the professional theatre sector in Northern Ireland has been bad at arguing its own case. We have managed to get by 'til now, but the need for a collective voice has been becoming ever clearer. There was an eleventh-hour attempt to establish a Professional Arts Lobby as the reality of devolution loomed close, but this fizzled out — not principally through apathy, but chiefly because most theatre companies are at best two-person operations and there simply hasn't seemed time to contribute to an effective lobby. The nature of community arts, by contrast, where much of the creative work takes place outside office hours, is more conducive to the process of lobbying.

The absence of representation of theatre was very apparent at the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL)'s Future Search conference in Cookstown last May. This was an inspirational experience, driven forward by the enthusiasm of DCAL's dynamic permanent secretary, Aideen McGinley, and led by two very slick American facilitators. ("Why are they always smiling?" muttered one delegate. "You should see what they're being paid," replied a knowing civil servant.) The aim of the conference was to brainstorm a new cultural policy for the Department, and the first principle of the Future Search approach was to "get the whole system

in the room." I know that I was not the only local theatre person invited. But I was the only one able to attend — and only then because I wasn't actually working in theatre at the time. Martin (no show without) Lynch was there and made some telling points in favour of the professional sector, but his main brief was understandably for the Community Arts Forum (CAF). Equity sent a representative from Glasgow. The bulk of delegates were employees of large organisations, who presumably could more easily spare staff for the week than could the average arts organisation. Libraries and museums were especially well represented. This was a healthy insight for me, broadening my understanding of the arts infrastructure. But the voices of more theatre people should have been heard.

In what has become a familiar pattern, art itself was not central to the discussion, but key themes were agreed which included access, education, and "the individual artist" (a concept which implicitly in my view excludes theatre artists who work collaboratively). I attached myself to the "infrastructure" group, since this seemed the only theme concerned with consolidating the work of under-resourced existing companies, and subsequently (as a university employee) attended as many follow-up meetings as I could. I saw no other theatre specialist at any of these meetings.

When Michael McGimpsey, the DCAL minister, recently announced £400,000 extra in funds for the arts, he justified it in terms of the social agenda that came out of Future Search. Compare the Assembly committee's preoccupation with cultural tourism. It would appear that social and economic arguments are politically cogent in a way that artistic arguments simply are not. But is this an



INNOVATIVE: Belfast-based youth and community theatre company *Kids in Control*

undeniable logic? Artistic issues are notoriously difficult to define, which may explain the failure of Future Search to engage with them, but artists and arts organisations are doing themselves a disservice if they make no attempt to argue their case in their own terms. Nor should the Arts Council be allowed to divest itself of its responsibility for artistic advocacy. Politicians may not find such discourse as easy to assimilate as that couched in terms of social need, but we fail in our duty to ourselves if we do not try hard to educate them. If the professional arts sector tries to play the community sector at its own game, it will quickly lose its identity.

The main consequences of the local professional theatre community's failure to assert its own case has been confu-

sion, hurt, and paranoia as strategy after strategy has seemed to squeeze them out. Even those arguing in their favour (notably Ian Hill in the *Belfast News Letter*) have ill-served them by their failure to be at all constructive about the new dispensation. Hill fails to acknowledge the importance of increased funding for Derry's Nerve Centre who have been in the forefront of reinventing our understanding of the arts through their work with emerging technologies, and rails against a 460% increase (percentages again) to a group "making community videos."

The group that Hill is talking about, Northern Visions, have a long record of challenging and creative innovation and were central to the process of preserving the Old Museum as an arts centre, with

all the implications that that has had for the development of Belfast theatre. Eyebrows have been raised that one of Northern Visions' directors is a member of the new Arts Council, but this interest is declared on the Council's website and is no more compromising than, for instance, the opera interests of previous Council members. The pendulum has swung, and Northern Ireland's professional theatre community must galvanise itself in response. It is undoubtedly disconcerting on reading the full declaration of interests of Council members to discover that the closest connection that any of them has with theatre is to be a "friend of the chair of" a theatre company. But the answer is to lobby DCAL as effectively before the next Council is appointed, as CAF did last time round to obvious positive effect.

That said, it was clearly a tactical error on the Arts Council's part, in the light of a major funding boost, not to offer existing theatre clients at least an inflationary increase. More could also have been done to explain the rationale behind the funding decisions. Imelda Foley, drama officer of the Arts Council, is disappointed at the apparent negativity with which the steps they have taken to free up Lottery funds for non-capital purposes has been greeted by the theatre community — or, more accurately, the way that the theatre community has ignored these steps. A number of new revenue streams have been devised and appear on the Arts Council's website.

But from the soundings I have taken, the opportunities represented by this have yet to be fully understood by the local theatre community. There is also anxiety about the amount of administration that a typical Lottery application entails, and the length of the application process. New simplified procedures

have now been introduced, however, and Lottery funding is to be integrated into the main Arts Council operation. There are also fears that Lottery funding represents an insecure source of revenue funding, but these fears seem misplaced. Traditional voted funds are no less intrinsically reliable, if government policy (whether local or central) were to change. The precedent of the "Cultural Traditions" funding in the 1990s should encourage us to see the creation of new revenue streams as an imaginative way of releasing more funds for the arts. This view becomes easier if we try to overcome our natural suspicions and encourage the Arts Council to see itself as the artists' champion rather than a lackey of the government.

A more legitimate anxiety about the new Lottery schemes concerns the strings attached. While the potential rewards are great (up to £100,000 per year over three years), the money will be closely tied to audience development and access agendas. In practice, this has tended to result in conditions being attached with minimum consultation to bring projects into line with policy priorities. While it would be hard to argue against the drive for wider access and broader audiences, there is a real danger that the basic creative impulse that gives rise to most professional theatre initiatives will be overwhelmed by all the attendant social agendas. The requirement for matching funding and the complex relationship between Lottery and core Arts Council funds can also be perplexing. Very often the Lottery regime reflects central government thinking in London, and does not always seem suited to local conditions. Matching funding makes more sense in the context of a developed economy, and it seems, ironically enough, that the impact of "indi-

rect rule" in this respect is greater than the pre-existing "laissez-faire" approach of rule direct from Westminster.

It is fashionable to argue that the old distinction between community arts and non-community arts is largely irrelevant. What I think persists, however, is a difference based on primary intention. There are arts activities where the principal motivation is social and others where it is artistic. All arts activities will combine these interests, but the emphasis on one or the other is what defines

drawn to work in the community sector. In part, this reflects our connection with Belfast Institute's Higher National Diploma in Performing Arts. Queen's, like the Arts Council, is concerned with issues of access, and there is no doubt that the opportunity to convert the HND into an Honours degree through a "top-up" year at university has attracted students to Queen's who would not otherwise have gone there. And very often, the life experiences of these students predispose them towards work in the



KEY PLAYERS: (l. to r.) Arts Minister Michael McGimpsey, DCAL permanent secretary Aideen McGinley, and Arts Council chairman Roisín McDonough.

them. If, as Damian Smyth of the Arts Council argues, "it is essential that the activities of the arts are reprofiled in order to draw out the social, cultural, economic and civic benefits which accrue to creative activity," it stands to reason that this will be easier where the impulse has been primarily social in the first place. But most theatre companies do not fall into this category.

Working as I do now in the new drama department at Queen's University, I can see things from the standpoint of our future graduates. This reveals two clear trends. Of those that want to work in the arts, many are ideologically

community sector. But there are as many other students whose motivation is more artistically driven. These are the kind of students who in the past have gone on to form independent companies like Tinderbox, Rough Magic, and Kabosh. The system needs to provide for the nurturing of both ambitions. The good news for aspiring theatre producers is the creation of the Awards for All scheme that holds out the prospect of grants up to £5,000. This is administered by the Lottery's charities board, but has money ring-fenced for the arts to replace the Arts Council's former project grants. By releasing £750,000 of Arts Lottery

funding into this scheme, the Arts Council has also freed up the £400,000 previously spent on small-scale projects from their voted funds.

We have had independent theatre companies in Northern Ireland long enough now to take their existence for granted. But in 1983, when Charabanc began, this was by no means a given. And yet in a way their development foreshadowed the present debate. The Arts Council then had no surplus to encourage such an initiative and, faced with mushrooming demand for which they saw no prospect of securing additional funding given the political climate of the time, showed little enthusiasm for encouraging the creation of further new companies, until creative use of the new Cultural Traditions funding gave them more scope for investment. Charabanc owed its existence to the unprecedented support of the Department of Economic Development to whom it made a case based on jobs, not art. In the same way, when Replay Theatre Company and Big Telly came on the scene, they had to jump through the hoops demanded by Cultural Traditions funding in order to survive. One of the unsung achievements of the last ACNI funding process was to move both companies to mainstream funding (at a cost of £140,000) thus freeing them from these constraints, while at the same time releasing Cultural Traditions funding to support work with an unequivocal relevance to improving community relations.

What theatre companies have been slow to understand is that Arts Council strategy is aimed at government, not at its own clients, and needs to be read as such. This may be unpalatable, but it is a political reality. Nevertheless, the new five-year plan gives considerable grounds for concern. It must surely have

been possible for it to have had greater regard for the concerns of artists. Much of the document is couched in such generalised terms as to give the impression of a template for government (insert "health," "industry," "education," etc. as appropriate). The style of writing is admirably straightforward, but is locked into the current jargon of accountability. How helpful is it, for instance, to tell arts organisations that they have been "pre-occupied by outputs rather than outcomes"? Such terminology seems alien in a creative context.

Of the stated strategic priorities, opportunities for artists and the capacity of arts organisations to deliver quality experiences of the arts come third and fourth respectively, after increasing opportunities for participation and developing new audiences. There is no acknowledgement of the fact that art is of its nature problematic, and that a sharpened "focus on the market" is not always compatible with artistic development and experiment. The issue of art itself is side-stepped in favour of references to "arts practice." The broadening of the definition of art is not unwelcome, and I am told by the Arts Council that it has given rise to a whole range of new kinds of inter-disciplinary application. But there is a danger that definitions become so diluted that the Arts Council loses its identity as a specialist agency.

There is also a danger that through a desire to redress the historical under-funding of the community sector, grants are not assessed with sufficient rigour. Funding should not primarily be about affirming the status and reputation of the recipients, as has seemed to be implied in some of the positive media coverage of the new grants. It should be clearly related to need. There has been a tendency for production budgets on

some community plays to be out of all proportion to what professional companies are able to spend, with professional fees in a community context often exceeding those available in the professional sphere itself. This cannot be right.

Payment to artists must also take account of their training and abilities.

theatre is that it creates jobs and I gather that the Chair of the Assembly's DCAL committee was shocked to discover the precarious nature of most local actors' professional lives. This message needs to be hammered home. Bursaries for individual artists have their place, but tend to favour painters and writers. In the

next funding round, some of the substantial resources (£500,000) allocated for "the individual artist" could usefully be redirected to independent theatre companies, who provide so much of the available work for actors here.

Above all, we must continue to argue for the validity of an artistic agenda alongside the prevailing social ones. Companies who do good work can stand up for themselves. Ten years ago, a leading company in the republic was told

by the Irish Arts Council that it would never receive funding unless it based itself in the local municipal theatre. It stood its ground, consolidated a formidable reputation for excellence (yesterday's word?), and recently received a substantial grant to refurbish its own space.

Speaking at the recent Northern Ireland Theatre Exchange, Roisin McDonough, the new chief executive of the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, who has already done much to revitalise it, threw down the gauntlet to local theatre producers. Quoting a recent report from the Arts Council of England which



EXCEPTIONAL: *Tinderbox's Convictions*

Untrained or inexperienced actors, for instance, should be eligible for training allowances, but should not be diverting unreasonable resources away from established professionals who depend on acting for their livelihoods. Similarly, while the development of professional Irish language theatre is highly desirable, this has to be allowed to develop over a realistic timescale. Initiatives like the Lottery-funded Irish language youth theatre are important steps towards this, but in the meantime, the semi-amateur nature of such work needs to be reflected in funding decisions.

The principal economic argument for

focused on the attitudes to the arts of ethnic minorities, she noted that they found them to be for "middle/upper class, well-off, well-educated over 35s... passively received in a seated position for two hours [taking place] in spaces which are off-putting, cliquey, alien and expensive." She might have added that Tinderbox's *Convictions* at Crumlin Road Courthouse was the exception that proved the rule.

On a more positive note, she articulated a clear determination to make resources available within the Arts Council to support client organisations to fulfil the shared goals of achieving greater access to the arts and audience development. The reference to touring in the Audience Development scheme is of obvious benefit to theatre companies, provided it is not interpreted too strictly. It will also help provide much-needed "product" for the growing regional touring network, as established venues in Coleraine and Enniskillen are joined by new Lottery-funded theatres in Cookstown, Armagh, Lisburn, and Derry. But the need for streamlined procedures will be of paramount importance in this case. Touring is difficult enough to coordinate without the constant stream of follow-up enquiries that has been the key characteristic of most Lottery applications.

Theatre companies in Northern Ireland have much to boast of. And real opportunities exist in the new funding packages for significant development. But we need to make our case. We need to assert the need for core funding for art itself as well as outreach, or we will have nothing to reach out from. We need to make the point loudly that the community sector has access to a range of other socially oriented funds from which professional theatre companies are excluded. And we need to argue against the

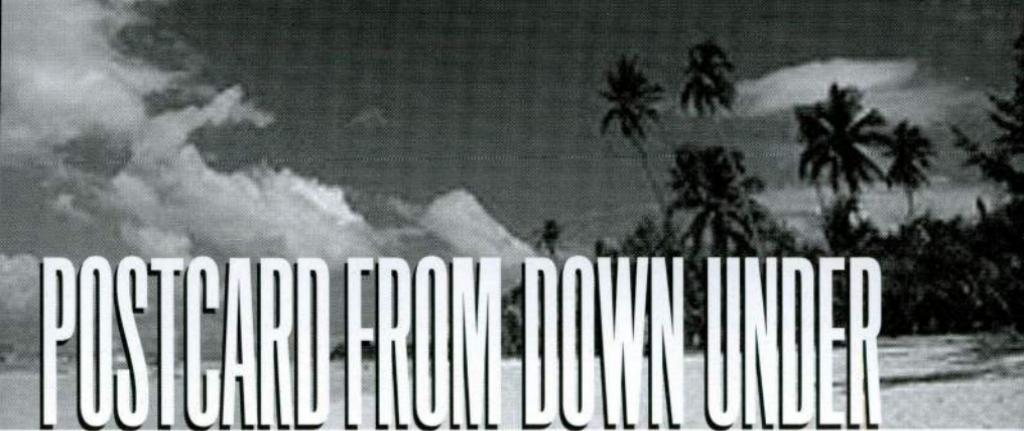
trend for all funders to conform to the same criteria, with the result that Belfast City Council, for instance, will only fund the Lyric's education and outreach programme, at the same time as the theatre is coming under similar pressure from the Arts Council. Part of DCAL's negotiations with local authorities could usefully be to encourage them to take more responsibility for supporting bricks and mortar, freeing Arts Council money up for art. And the Arts Council, for its part, needs to acknowledge that it is the only funding agency with a specific responsibility for the arts and insist on the right to make artistic considerations a clear priority.

In particular, we need to subject the idea of "participation" as enshrined in the Arts Council's five-year plan to detailed scrutiny. The emphasis seems to be on DIY arts, but is the act of watching theatre not also participatory? Why else do we talk of a "shared experience"? It is surely the very essence of live theatre that the relationship between performers and audience is central to the event. The performance of a play is defined by this relationship to the extent that a play is reinvented anew each night. This is quite different to the way, say, that an audience consumes a film. Furthermore, the level of participation in the arts by someone who derives their livelihood from them is of a different order to that of the casual amateur and should carry proportionately greater weight in the funding-decision process.

Faced with a strategy document from the Arts Council that marginalises the artist, we should find a collective voice to get those who make art at the highest level back at the centre of things in the next five-year plan.

David Grant is head of Drama at Queen's University, Belfast.

POSTCARD FROM DOWN UNDER



PAUL MEADE went to the *Ten Days on the Island Festival* in Tasmania to perform in *Alone It Stands* — one of two Irish productions at this unique celebration of performing arts from island communities. Here's his report.

WEDNESDAY 28TH MARCH

ADRIVE IN HOBART, CAPITAL OF TASMANIA, AN ISLAND OFF THE coast of Australia and the country's smallest state. Tired and dishevelled from 36 hours in the air, the last thing we expected was to be met by Robyn Archer and Daryl Peebles, the artistic director and executive officer of Tasmania's first international cultural festival.

Accustomed to booking our own transport and accommodation on tour, we were wholly unprepared for this friendly, hands-on approach. Robyn Archer is considered something of a phenomenon in Australian cultural circles: she's been artistic director of no less than three international theatre festivals — Melbourne and Adelaide and now Tasmania. In the car on the way to our hotel the reason for Daryl Peebles' good spirits become clear. A middle-aged civil ser-

vant and amateur theatre enthusiast who was seconded to Ten Days on the Island, he never wants to return to his old job in accounts. He entertains us with some unbelievably blue humour all the way to the five star Hotel Grand Chancellor.

The large bed looks inviting but I've been warned not to sleep until nightfall to combat jetlag, so I get stuck into our welcome packs instead. It becomes clear that this festival bears little or no resemblance to the Dublin or Edinburgh festi-

vals I'm familiar with. Archer has themed her festival around Tasmania's identity as an island and invited performers from other islands with a shared history or identity. There are shows from Ireland, New Zealand, Madagascar, the Shetland Islands, Reunion Island, Stradbroke Island, and many more. The festival includes theatre, music, dance, circus, community theatre, street theatre, film, visual art, and poetry. I've only just read the brochure and I'm exhausted. Before bed we meet some of the festival staff in a really trendy bar by the harbour (did I mention that Hobart is the last stopping off point before the Antarctic?).

THURS 29TH MARCH

John Breen, the writer and director of *Alone It Stands*, drags me and fellow actor Garret Lombard out of bed early to perform an excerpt from the play on radio. We go for breakfast (Tasmanian sausages are terrible) and he assures us that there is loads of time. Back at the hotel we meet the festival publicist, Sue Douglas, who is frantic but incredibly polite. She informs us that we are late and that she'll try to reschedule for tomorrow. Like many Tasmanians, Sue moved here to escape the rat race on the mainland and found herself embroiled in the conflict that divides the 500,000 people who live on this island. For most of the year Sue works as a publicist for the local environmental lobby that is trying to call a halt to one of Tasmania's largest industries, logging. In some ways *Ten Days*, which has Tasmania's premier (who doubles as the state's minister for the arts) as its chairman could be seen as the government signalling a move toward culture and tourism as new industrial bases for Tasmania — or, in other words, as a sop to environmental interests.

This particular pawn in that game

takes a trip to the local museum where I find Ireland and Tasmania's savage shared history as provider and receiver of convicts laid out in a series of disturbing exhibits. Tasmania, once Van Diemen's Land and the most feared of 19th century British prison colonies, still holds a grip on the Irish consciousness as the destination for Irish convicts, from political prisoners to petty thieves. Back on the street, I encountered the Hobart Fringe Festival for the first time in the persons of the T-Funk Allstars. A warning: Never look at street theatre on your own and never stand near the front. I did both and ended up with a juggling contortionist Aussie on my shoulders. Hobart's Fringe has been in existence for ten years, just waiting for the mother ship to arrive, which it did in the shape of *Ten Days*.

FRIDAY 30TH MARCH

This morning the radio interview goes ahead as planned and we drive out to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's Tasmanian headquarters. There we meet with Tim Wilson, DJ and rugby fanatic. Tim and John Breen discuss the play and the latest rugby scandal affecting Australia, which involves fingers being stuck in all the wrong places. This fits in nicely with the excerpt we perform which is known as "the bollock grabbing scene."

That evening we visited our venue, the Playhouse, an old church lovingly converted into a 300-seat theatre by a local amateur company. Our technical rehearsal ends after about an hour of wandering around (one of the benefits of a show without set or props) and we make our way to the Theatre Royal and CoisCéim's production of David Bolger's dance-theatre piece *Ballads* — the opening performance of the festival. A band plays a few tunes and then we enter this 1837 theatre that looks like a scaled-down



OH BEHAVE! *The Alone It Stands* company recruits a furry native

Gaiety. The "other Irish company at the festival" does us all proud with their sensitive dance-song for the Irish famine. In the foyer a camera crew looking for my reaction to *Ballads* accosts me. I mutter something about being a bit biased and make for Salamanca Square and the opening night party.

Outside Salamanca, a series of dock-side warehouses redeveloped as a trendy square with restaurants, apartments, shops and indoor and outdoor performance spaces, we encounter *Strange Fruit*. This street theatre experience features eight performers, in evening wear, balancing atop ten-foot high bendy poles, and swaying gently. They utter sounds and

interact as they meet mid-air to create surreal and colourful stories. In the square itself about two thousand people have gathered to hear Te Vaka, a ten-piece folk group from the South Pacific Islands. Their powerful tribal dancing puts the Haka that we perform in *Alone It Stands* to shame. About halfway through the show, and in the middle of some microphone trouble, Robyn Archer addresses the crowd through a megaphone, welcoming us all and announcing, "let the party begin." She clearly enjoys her moment in front of a couple thousand people — I'm looking forward to Fergus Linehan pulling a similar stunt in October!

SATURDAY 31ST MARCH

OPENING NIGHT

We spend most of today performing excerpts from the play and doing interviews for an ABC television crew. They want to see the Irish actors make complete fools of themselves and we oblige them. I caught the soundman wiping tears of laughter from his eyes after one take where Niamh McGrath did an impromptu audition for *Neighbours*. At 6 pm John, Niamh, and I catch a show called *Krishnan's Dairy* at the Peacock Theatre in the Salamanca arts centre. Written and performed by Jacob Rajan, a New Zealander of Indian descent, and directed by Justin Lewis for their Indian Ink theatre company, this one-man show won a Fringe First at Edinburgh two years ago. Using masks, song and ingenious sound effects, Rajan interweaves the story of a young Indian couple struggling with a new life in a corner shop in New Zealand, with the epic tale of the Taj Mahal. Rajan's winning stage presence and expert technique allow him to move deftly from portray-

ing the industrious Krishnan to his homesick wife Zina, from the commonplace of life in the dairy to the grandeur of court life in 17th century India, and from gentle comedy to dark tragedy. From the beautiful patchwork backdrop of Indian silks to the little bell that rings everytime Rajan mimes opening the shop door, this show exuded a charm and confidence that had us wild with jealousy as we raced back to the Playhouse for our warm-up.

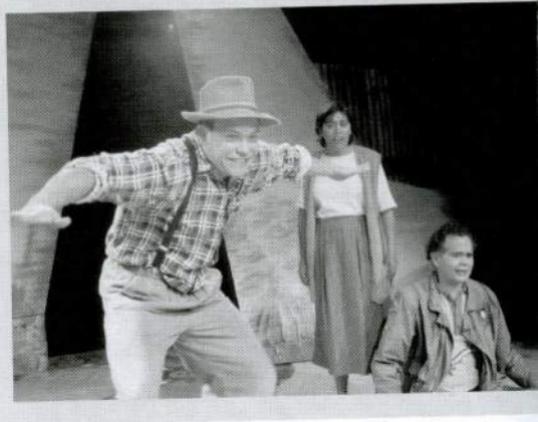
Robyn Archer comes backstage to wish us luck before our first performance. On Dublin Fringe Festival director Ali Curran's advice she saw *Alone It Stands* in Dublin and is on record as saying that this was the find that she is most proud of in her Festival. We do our best to live up to our billing and the packed house gives us a great reception.

SUNDAY 1ST APRIL

Tonight I won the cast's "tumbleweed" prize, which goes to the actor who receives the most deafening silence from an audience. It's John's fault really — all my gags are based around Irish brand names. After the show we go to the end of Fringe party and play pool with the Krishnan's Dairy crew.

MONDAY 2ND OF APRIL

"John Breen creates a thoroughly compelling world through the complex interweaving of storylines which could easily be confusing were it not for the consummate craft of his writing and directing and the thrilling expertise of his cast." *The Mercury*, Hobart's daily paper, prove themselves shameless in accepting bribes.



FESTIVAL FARE: Goin' to the Island from Stradbroke (above) and street theatre company Strange Fruit (right)

We spend our day off amid the tallest hardwood trees in the world at Mountfield National Park, and get back just in time to watch the first of ABC's daily half-hour reports on the festival. The programme features clips from the shows, interviews with the artists, and audience reactions. It holds its own with Edinburgh's "Festival Nights" and stands up well to... what does RTÉ do for the Dublin Theatre Festival again?

TUESDAY 3RD APRIL

Arrive back early from looking at Tasmanian Devils (hilariously savage marsupials who really do exist and yes, they do sound a bit like the Warner Bros. cartoon) and swimming at a perfectly white beach, to see *Leif The Lucky One* at the Peacock Theatre. Presented by the Icelandic Ten Fingers puppet theatre, this retelling of the saga of Leif Erikson's journey to America is inseparable from the personality of its writer/performer, Helga Arnalds. Arnalds uses the fram-



ing device of a woman hanging out her washing and listening to her favourite radio program about Vikings to tell Leif's story. The wet clothes become the puppet that represents Leif, and the washing line and sheets become his ship. Where Jacob Rajan of *Krishnan's Dairy* was charming and extremely skilful, Arnalds is charming and extremely eccentric. Her odd angle on things brings moments of sheer joy, as when Leif drinks a can of Coke and dances to "Grease is the Word" on arriving in America, but it also results in a lack of polish and some very slow transitions between scenes. Despite its roughness though, this show won me over with its loopy personality and unique vision.

THURSDAY 5TH APRIL

John drove me to Launceston today to see *Goin' to The Island*, presented by Kooemba Jarra Indigenous Performing Arts of Stradbroke Island (an island off the Queensland coast). After two hours in the car we reach Tasmania's north coast and its other major city just in time to catch the show. This play, written by Therese Collie and directed by Nadine McDonald, must have looked good on paper (it's set on an island, it deals with the struggle of an indigenous people, it

features indigenous performers, and combines dance, music and theatre), and yet it fails to deliver a convincing theatrical experience. *Goin' to the Island* tells the story of TJ, a young hothead who returns home to Stradbroke Island after seven years on the mainland and struggles to discover a new understanding of his cultural identity as a member of the indigenous community. Collie draws on the issues, traditions, and stories of Stradbroke Island to tell TJ's story

but these different elements feel tacked on to the central plot line. An unfocussed production highlights *Goin' to the Island's* problems and it ends up as an issue-based play that hasn't become a successful piece of theatre.

FRIDAY 6TH APRIL

Our lovely, tattooed, surfer-lady stage manager Tora arranged to get us four pieces of gold dust — that is, tickets for the matinee of Circus Oz. We devise an increasingly complex series of systems to divide the tickets fairly, but fortunately they don't work and I'm in the group that head off to the Theatre Royal. From the moment that the Circus Oz cast run screaming in through the stalls and a burly man in a tutu sits on my knee and kissed me, I knew this was going to be fun. Irreverent, punky, and funny, this rock-circus contrasted perfectly with the Theatre Royal's faded 19th century grandeur. Circus Oz covered a lot of ground in this hour-long show — plate-spinning, tight-rope walking, juggling, acrobatics, clowning — always giving these traditional skills an irreverent twist.

SATURDAY 7TH APRIL

It's our last day in Hobart and we are trying to pack as much in as possible. We

get up early and meet Meri Robson for breakfast in Salamanca Square. Meri was special events co-ordinator for the festival and just one of the many amazing people that worked for Ten Days who looked after us so well.

On the way to the theatre for our matinee performance we pass through the Salamanca Saturday market, a huge,



WHIRLIGIG: Festival offering Spinout

bustling, colourful affair, and in a park I see some people practising Tai Chi. I'm homesick for Tasmania already. After the matinee I just have time to catch *Lovely Lovely Days* at Backspace at the Theatre Royal. Backspace is a small venue with a bar behind the main auditorium and its intimacy suits this dance/comedy piece for two performers. Devised, choreographed, and performed by Jonathan Rees-Osborne and David O'Neile for their own company (called Osborne and O'Neile), this 40-minute piece follows the fortunes of two cartoon-like eastern Europeans as they find their way in the

west. This loose narrative just about holds a series of sketches together but they are neither funny enough to work as a comedy nor abstract enough to work as a dance and the production falls between the two stools.

I've seen enough shows by now that an overall sense of what this Festival accomplished — that is, what Island art is all about — is starting to take shape for me. All the shows I saw did share some broad characteristics. Generally the theatre on show was a "poor" theatre that relied on few resources but used them well. Multiple role playing counterbalanced the small cast sizes which led to an increased physicality that blurred the lines between dance and drama. Most shows identified with the underdog, be it a pair of immigrants, a mad explorer, or a weaker rugby team, and sought to reaffirm their country's identity by creating legends (as in *Alone It Stands*) or retelling old ones (as in *Leif The Lucky One*). As Munster found in 1978, on a small island every little victory or success resonates for a long time.

After our last performance we go to the Salamanca Arts Centre for Ten Days' last night party. This has been the unofficial festival club and the scene of some unbelievably bad cabaret and spoken-word nights (I thought that died out in the '70s — sadly no one told the Australians), so we are hoping for better tonight. Luckily Fiddler's Bid from the Shetlands are playing — an excellent traditional, fiddle-based band who have been one of the hits of the festival. A few Hoags beers later and I find myself talking to a very butch New Zealander — who was the guy in the tutu from Circus Oz who sat in my lap. It's time to go home.

Paul Meade is an actor and founder member of Gúna Nua Theatre Company.

DEFINING THE DRAMATURG

In our last issue ROSY BARNES explored the boom in new writing — and jobs created to facilitate it — in Irish theatre. Now she turns her investigative eye to that nebulous creature that's hovering around the edges of Irish theatre and looks set to become an intrinsic part of our process. So what, asks Barnes, is a dramaturg anyway?

AS WE SAW IN THE LAST ISSUE, new funding initiatives and a general rise in interest in new writing has led to new jobs in literary management and dramaturgy being created across the island. This is doubtless an extremely positive development in Irish theatre, but there is an overall lack of understanding about what dramaturgs are and what they're there to do. The dictionary definition of "dramaturg" is "a member of a theatrical company who selects the repertoire and may assist in the arranging and production of the plays, compiling notes for the production, etc." However, the position and definition of the role varies from country to country according to the different theatrical frameworks in which they operate.

How should the role be defined within the unique context of Irish theatre? In order to begin to think about this question, it is necessary to examine the role of the dramaturg through her three main relationships: with the director, with the writer, and with the theatre itself.

DRAMATURGS AND DIRECTORS

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE dramaturg and the director is potentially one of the most creative — and one of the most problematic — in theatre.

"In something as hierarchical as theatre, everyone is concerned with their role..." says critic-turned-dramaturg Jocelyn Clarke. "But where the dramaturg fits is difficult, because on one level the dramaturg will help shape the interpretation of the text, and provide research for that interpretation. In some cases if she's a production dramaturg she'll become the third eye of the director — which means where is the authority?"

Louise Drumm, freelance director and former staff director of the Abbey Theatre, recently attended a directors' lab at Lincoln Center in New York. She was amazed at the power and influence of American dramaturgs, who are often involved before and during the rehearsal process. However, despite this power, she observed little tension between collaborating directors and dramaturgs.

"It seems to me that the role is very defined in America," she says. "It is perceived to be somebody who will get into the nitty-gritty of textual analysis on quite an academic level and then that is fed into the production process through communication with the director."

Whilst some might perceive this textual analysis should be the sole responsibility of the director, Drumm explains that the American system allows on

average three weeks of rehearsal. Time is of the essence. "Within the American system people are very heavily streamlined in terms of what their role is so that the director directs and is not a textual analyser. That work is done by the dramaturg."

Contrary to the notion of the dramaturg disputing the director's authority, Drumm found there to be a very strict definition of roles and an even stricter code of conduct to preserve the power relationships in the American rehearsal room (to talk to the dramaturg without the director being present, for example, is a definite no-no).

Director Conall Morrison believes there need be no great distinction between the dramaturg and the director, and sees the recent growth in dramaturgical jobs in Ireland as merely putting a name on a kind of work that has long been an informal part of Ireland's theatrical process, that in the past has often been conducted by directors themselves. "I wouldn't see a demarcation in my role between working with a writer to develop the script to its full potential, and... working on what's fully theatrical about it, what are the qualities I will exploit as a director with my cast," says Morrison. "For me, it's all of a one."

However, one of the advantages of formalising and defining the role of dramaturgy in relation to directing, as Drumm observed, is the greater possibility of discussion without this being deemed threatening to power relationships within an artistic team. "What impressed me most [about America] was that there is actually debate about text and that is a given," she says. "I don't think there is a forum for debate about that within theatrical production here."

The American model is interesting, not just because of the fixed position of



LOOKING AT SPACE: Will Bond in SITI's *Bob*

the dramaturg within the theatrical culture, but because it is a role not just used for new plays, but for old, classic, and even devised and physical theatre — in which case the dramaturg will work on a production rather than a text. Using production dramaturgs has not been common practice in Ireland, but is gaining purchase. However, in the case of production dramaturgs, the divide between director and dramaturg is even more ambiguous.

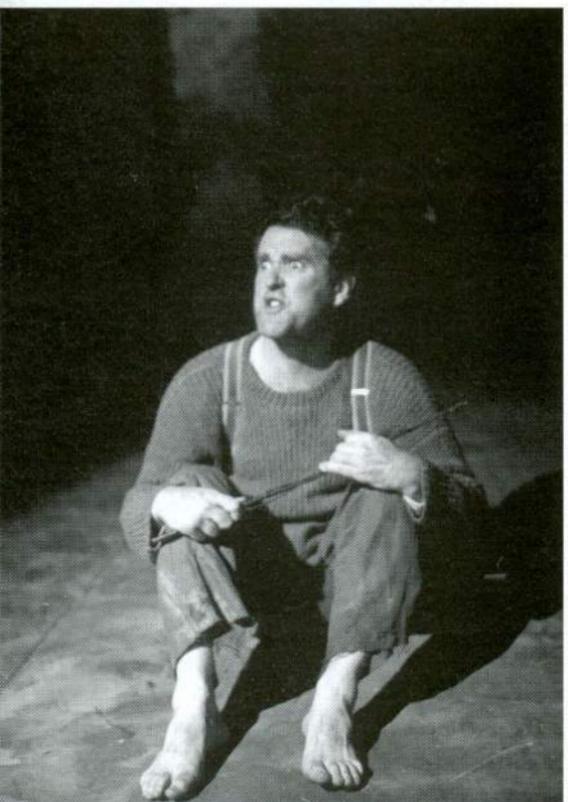
Indeed, at the time he was interviewed for this article, Clarke, former theatre critic of *The Sunday Tribune* and now commissioning manager-designate of the Abbey, was choosing the music that would be used in Niall Henry's Peacock Theatre production of *Playboy of the Western World* — something that would ordinarily be the job of the director. Clarke served as dramaturg for this production, as he has for much of the work recently directed by Henry for Blue

Raincoat Theatre Company. He has also worked as dramaturg for New York-based director Anne Bogart and her SITI company. Both Blue Raincoat and SITI work in a very process-oriented, collaborative way, leaving even greater potential for fluidity between the role of director and dramaturg. "You're actually looking at space," says Clarke, "... you're watching music, you're watching architecture, you're watching relationships between all of that...The text becomes just one more element."

But in this context, how do we distinguish between a dramaturg and a director at all? Isn't a process requiring two people to look at all the directorial elements rather — well — self-indulgent? Clarke doesn't think so. He sees the role as critical rather than directorial: "a critical presence in the benign sense of a critical presence."

At the moment, production dramaturgs remain a predominantly Amer-

ican idea, where dramaturgs of all types are seen as a fundamental part of the theatrical culture, and there is intense training there for both directors and dramaturgs. In Ireland, most theatre training presently available is for actors, leading to a lack of understanding among audiences and practitioners alike as to who's responsible for what, and what the relationships are between directing, design, text, and performance. It is a debate that the likes of Clarke and Drumm believe we must have.



NEW APPROACH: Niall Henry's *Playboy*

"It's about artistic teamwork with the text," says Drumm, "that actually the director and dramaturg have dialogue in relation to the text, which can only be a healthy thing."

DRAMATURGS AND WRITERS

LOTS OF DIFFERENT VIEWPOINTS CAN drive you nuts..." says writer Liz Kuti. "There's one writer and one play and there's maybe six or more people giving you opinions on it... you can't take on board everything those six people say to you."

It is clear that if dramaturgy during the writing process is to work, the dramaturg must create a specific and respectful relationship with the writer, because there are often many cooks weighing in on any one theatrical broth. After all, according to Clarke, "Anyone can take on the dramaturgical function." And that "anyone" can range from the director and actors to your Auntie Nellie.

"If they're a halfway decent writer, i.e. interested in the collaborative art, then they will have to be open to the dramaturgical process whether they know it or not, or whether they like it or not," says Morrison unequivocally.

As Kuti explains, dramaturgy can be very simple ("You said Weetabix on page 45 and Readibrek on page 16") or more complex, looking at structural, intellectual, or narrative issues.

However, for dramaturgy to be fruitful, Clarke believes it is important for a dramaturg to build up a relationship of trust with the writer, perhaps over a number of plays. "As a dramaturg there is one very simple rule: I don't write it... The bad side of dramaturgy is when a dramaturg acts as a script editor. A script editor says, 'This is wrong'... But what you're doing there is casting the playwright in a passive role. If you are inter-

rogating and communicating with the playwright you place him or her in an active role... Interrogating in terms of asking questions makes the playwright become aware of his or her own dramaturgy as a writer."

Kuti agrees. "Questioning is always good... Straight suggestions are the most difficult to respond to. There may be several ways of solving a problem and I suppose you need to find the one solution that you want."

A play will, eventually, be subjected to the dramaturgical questioning of director, actors — and audience. A dramaturg is just the tip of the iceberg, both a conduit and a filter of this information to the writer, as necessary. Both Clarke and Kuti mention that the dramaturg may also usefully act as a buffer between the writer and director, diverting problems and defusing any criticisms that the writer might take personally.

However, again, this ambiguous identity of the dramaturg can be problematic for writers. "It's good to officialise the function of the dramaturg, to try and get more regulated — to get some resources and some money behind it," says Morrison, who is himself currently working as a playwright's mentor in the Rough Magic/Dublin Fringe Seeds initiative. "But at the same time that can scare writers as if there's yet another layer of middle men who are there to interfere...."

In the U.S., where not only is dramaturgy taught, but those dramaturgical "rules" are closely adhered to, those "middle men" could, potentially, lack flexibility and openness to new or idiosyncratic forms. This is in fact one of the



MEMORY PLAY: *Liz Kuti's Treehouses*

major arguments against the American system, where "workshop culture" reigns, and the talk is of plays going through the "dramaturgical mill." Rather like the producer-culture of the Hollywood film industry (or BBC drama) you can expect a certain watchable standard — but so what? At worst, individuality is excised, rough bits dutifully smoothed, and bumps ironed out by the variety of dramaturgical processes (workshops, readings, etc) that a play must be subjected to before it is produced.

Certainly there has been no training for Irish dramaturgs and literary managers so far, and thus there are no official systems in place to create a uniform profession. Presumably there will be a fair

amount of trial and error — as well as personal taste — in the mix in the next few years.

That may create inconsistency, but where creativity is involved, inconsistency can sometimes be a very good thing.

DRAMTURGS AND THEATRES

PERHAPS THE MOST FUNDAMENTAL relationship of all is that between the dramaturg and the theatre.

So far we've been using the word "dramaturg" rather loosely to refer to any official post that takes on the "dramaturgical function." It is now necessary to look at a few definitions and delineations in relation to the term "dramaturg" and "literary manager."

Broadly speaking, according to Clarke, literary management tends to be attached to institutions, or what Clarke terms "corporate structures" that can afford literary departments — usually theatres. A literary manager will do everything from writing programme notes to commissioning plays. Literary managers may or may not take on the dramaturgical role in relation to new plays. In America and Germany, Clarke says, the role is more proactive and includes an involvement in programming and an influence over theatre identity and policy, with the dramaturg working specifically on an individual text or production.

However in Britain, both roles are often merged under the title "literary manager." And in Ireland, a whole host of other titles — literary officer, new writing officer, new writing manager — reflect the lack of strict definition between these roles. In a sense, the most important relationship between the dramaturg and the theatre exists within the very role of the literary manager itself.

Graham Whybrow, literary manager of London's Royal Court Theatre, sees the theatre and the literary manager as being inextricably linked. The literary manager is an essential link-point between the writer who provides the text and the theatre that provides the production. As such, the literary manager has an extremely influential role in terms of shaping policy. By developing relationships with writers, working on commissions, and developing new talent, the literary manager is at the forefront of the theatre's future.

Whybrow defines the duties of the role as advising "the artistic director on programming, and offering a bridge between the theatre and the writing community..." and providing "a ladder" to potential and emerging writers, so that they will "climb." The theatre, the centrality of the writer within that theatre and the ability to produce is, for Whybrow, a vital combination.

Whybrow also raises other issues. For example, that a literary manager must have a sure grasp on theatre's remit, history, and artistic policy to "overcome errant subjectivism." For Whybrow, the good literary manager "is responding to the present and anticipating the future. The future is sometimes strange. It's crucial to grasp that new writers are searching for a form for their sensibility or the specific material they're writing. The role is at once creative and critical."

It is hard to assess the potential effect of Ireland's unique situation in this regard. Abbey and Peacock aside, recent developments in the world of Irish dramaturgy find literary managers attached to non-venue-based companies, rather than theatres and venues. This is because in Ireland it is such companies that produce the bulk of the theatre productions.



IRELAND'S NEW BREED OF WRITER/DRAMATURGS: (l. to r.) Bedrock's Alex Johnston, Rough Magic's Loughlin Deegan, and Fishamble's Gavin Kostick

It is interesting that the area in which dramaturgy is gaining a foothold in Ireland is specifically in relation to new writing, and largely within the structure of companies dependent on touring for revenue. It is also interesting that most of the individuals taking on new roles as dramaturgs/literary managers with Irish companies are writers (rather than, as in America, directors) like Loughlin Deegan (Rough Magic), Gavin Kostick (Fishamble), and Alex Johnston (Bedrock).

In the past, this could have been a way of shoring up the connection between companies and writers who worked for them. However, it can also be argued that as dramaturgy has not had a particularly high status in Ireland (in the words of Clarke: "being a dramaturg isn't sexy unless you're in Germany") maybe it's not surprising that the people now implementing it at the first opportunity are those who are particularly interested in the role, being writers themselves. However, one of the problems for the literary managers attached to companies rather than buildings is that there will be fewer production opportunities available to them.

Rough Magic and the Fringe Festival are lowering a ladder to younger writers in the form of the Seeds new writing initiative. Yet, while undoubtedly a few Seeds plays may receive eventual productions from the company, it doesn't take a genius to work out that with six Seeds writers, Rough Magic — which stages one to two productions a year and has pre-existing relationships with other writers and doubtless some outstanding commissions — cannot produce them all. And couldn't possibly be expected to.

However, without a theatre to provide the context for the finished production, where are these new plays aiming (and aimed) for? Without a theatre to provide the concrete objective, how can the dramaturgical process aim to improve these plays for a chance of production elsewhere? Can a play developed for Rough Magic (a justified aim) be easily accommodated by another theatre company if Rough Magic does not wish to produce it?

Perhaps it is true to say that this would be the case with any commission. However, it is a question that is perhaps more pressing in the case of Project's embryonic script development pro-

gramme. Project's remit is experimental, and artistic director Kathy McArdle is particularly interested in developing unconventional scripts that challenge the relation of the performer and the audience. But McArdle is the first to admit that Project itself cannot afford to produce such work. She suggests that plays workshopped and undergoing dramaturgical processes at Project could perhaps find productions elsewhere, with small theatre companies. However, given the high price of theatre rental, small companies are even less able to take risks than Project.

Meanwhile theatres are being built all over the country, often in areas which struggle to find audiences at all, let alone for structurally experimental forms. Plays that undergo a dramaturgical process along more experimental lines may end up with literally nowhere to go.

In the U.S. an abundance of dramaturgy and dramaturgs in tandem to a reluctance to commit to productions has lead to a self-perpetuating norm of workshops and readings that tour — particularly from academic institution to academic institution. A person can earn a living as a playwright in the U.S. without having a single play produced.

Ireland is not America, but as Conall Morrison says, "People are afraid of getting locked into a workshop limbo, with plays being workshopped to death so that they never actually see the light of day in a full production."

Whilst dramaturgs within companies are achieving great strides with these new writing initiatives and policies, providing encouragement and financial support to enable young writers to develop their talents, it is imperative that the network of writers be linked effectively to those who can produce, not just those who can help with the writing process.

Loughlin Deegan is keen to see a situation where writers can enter into a world of greater possibilities. Seeds uses "mentors," (many of whom are directors from new writing theatres in Britain) which introduces the writer to other possible outlets for her work. Deegan also hopes that better communication between companies could also allow for a greater exchange of information and ideas: a writer who does not suit Company A, may be recommended to Company B, and so forth.

It is imperative that Irish venues also get involved in this process and the Arts Council's overall funding policy looks to build those essential bridges between process and product.

A WAY FORWARD?

THE GROWTH OF DRAMATURGY CAN only be seen as a positive thing for Irish theatre and Irish writers.

This is an exciting time for Irish theatre. There have been huge changes in both the funding, allowing companies greater scope to look to the future and create exciting new opportunities for writers to test their work. However, if there are more dramaturgs than can express themselves in productions, we run the danger of diverting resources away from production and into process, without the structures or resources to link the two.

Ireland is not America or Germany — it has its own unique theatrical culture and is unlikely to replicate the same problems. However, for dramaturgy to be a proper and effective tool for Irish theatre, we need to define what exactly it is there for, what its role is, and where exactly it fits in the wider context of Irish theatre. Then we can begin to see its full potential.

Rosy Barnes is a writer/critic and reporter.



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ACTOR-IN-CHARGE

In the last two issues of irish theatre magazine, news editor Mark Phelan outlined the dire circumstances in which Irish actors are currently working, in terms of rates of pay and interactions with the social welfare system. In both articles Irish Actors' Equity emerged as a weak and ineffective representative of its members' interests. Here reporter SUSAN CONLEY goes face-to-face with newly named Equity president KATHLEEN BARRINGTON to see what she's bringing to the table.

EQUITY'S NEW PRESIDENT KATHLEEN BARRINGTON IS MORE than prepared to meet with the representative of a magazine that she considers "hard-hitting": armed with documents, not defenses, she's read Mark Phelan's reports in *itm* outlining some of the troubling issues currently facing Irish actors.

The words "social welfare" have barely hit the ether, and Barrington is right in there with a ready, thorough response.

"After [Phelan's] report, we did actually meet with [Minister of Social, Community and Family Affairs] Dermot Ahern. We met with his officials first, and they seemed to be on our wavelength, and seemed understanding about the particular problems of actors.

Then the minister arrived... and it was as if all doors were closed. He absolutely did not want to make any concessions whatsoever for actors. As far as he was concerned, he said to us that in fact he would then have lollipop ladies looking for concessions."

Ouch. "After that, we decided we would go to Des Geraghty, the president of SIPTU, and report to him the difficult-

ties we were having. He suggested that we should look into the Arts Acts, and see what the provisions were, what the aspirations were, for performing artists, and also see what the Social Welfare rules cover — and to have a look at the issue internationally as well. As well as that, we decided we'd send a questionnaire to all our members, asking them if they've had problems with social welfare, to name the bureau, name the person, name the difficulty, and how it was resolved. Also, did they come to Equity, was Equity helpful to them, and did it actually go further and go to a rights commissioner. So we sent those out, and we had a fair response. We have 1,500 members and to date we have 60 or 70 responses. Which in terms of survey I suppose isn't bad — but it's not what we were looking for."

This seems a very gentle response to what, to an outside eye, is a pretty woeful response to an industry survey, but after all, Barrington is a former actor herself and doubtless doesn't want to alienate her community so soon into her tenure. A long-time member of Equity who worked for 40 years at the Abbey, she has also served regularly on the Equity executive, and stood successfully for president last year. "I'm learning all kinds of things, and meeting people that I've never met before," says Barrington. "Because I was at the Abbey, I wasn't a freelancer, so I wasn't as aware of some of the problems that freelance people have."



ACTING HEAD: Barrington

Another sore spot for Ireland's acting community (as detailed in *itm*'s issue 8) is rate of pay. Freelance and house actor alike have been working for little better than "fast-food service" wages (an abysmal £201.76/week, as per the May 2001 Equity newsletter), and the issue was recently addressed by Barrington, the executive, and the general membership. "We had a resolution at our last AGM to raise the minimum to £300. The majority of

people said that [the current minimum] is ridiculous; if we have spent two years training full time to be actors, to work for less than £300 a week is wrong. So that will be from February next — that's when the current agreement finishes. So we'll send letters to everyone informing them that that's what the new Equity agreement is."

The new fee has been accepted by the membership; it is, of course, up to the producing houses to actually pay it. Barrington expresses a "wait and see" attitude, but what about the possibility of an actors' strike if the constituency remains discontented with standards of pay and employ (an eventuality posited by Phelan in issue 7)? Interestingly, Barrington doesn't dismiss the possibility of an American-style work stoppage: "We'll go through the channels, we'll talk to the ministers, we'll explore ways of doing it, so that it will be a collaboration rather than a confrontation. But if that collaboration doesn't happen, then I could see that people would be incensed

enough to say, yes, there's only so far we can go, and we simply can't contain it anymore."

If it all sounds terribly bureaucratic — it is. A union is a union, and Equity's offices, smack in the middle of Liberty Hall, are part of the huge machine that governs work and work grievances in this country. There's no getting around the managerial song-and-dance that is required, and while Barrington's artistic background creates the feeling that she is an informed ally, it will be her grasp of the politics involved that will make or

have to address. Yes, it is a vocation. Yes, you have to be mad to want to be an actor. Most actors don't make money out of it." She leans forward intently. "Actors just want to work. And we're starting to get a sense of ourselves as people who should be valued."

Barrington's interview with *itm* was only one in a string of meetings, with producers, theatre organisations, and representatives of her membership, that would put her all over town that day. Again, she's aware that there's only so much that one person can do well, and

"Yes, you have to be mad to want to be an actor. Most actors don't make money out of it. Actors just want to work. And we're starting to get a sense of ourselves as people who should be valued."

break her reign. She's keen to bring the plight of Irish actors to international attention, and is pitching for several high-profile conferences to be held on this island next year, including that of the International Federation of Actors, an organisation that links world-wide performing artists' unions together, and works towards improving and protecting the rights of affiliated unions including Irish Actors' Equity.

"Listen, people pay lip service to the idea that actors are so important to the life of a culture, but they actually haven't sat down and said how do we pay them back? It's the same trap the nurses got into, because it was a vocation — so you don't have to pay people if they have a vocation. This is what we

doesn't seem to be letting her position as president go to her head. On the contrary: "We had a bad system before — the presidents were allowed to go on forever and ever and ever, and I don't think it's healthy for any organisation. I don't intend to stay long. Maybe three years. You lose your hunger for it, I think, after a few years. And you're no good to anybody, really."

Barrington gives the impression that she will strive to be nothing but good for the Irish acting community; the natural sympathy that she has as a fellow artist, combined with an air of accessibility and — most importantly — tenacity bodes well as the acting community works to address pressing issues that threaten to break more than one career.

BOHEMIAN RHAPSODY

This July, Dublin's Project, La Comedie de Reims from France, and the Corn Exchange undertook a unique collaboration on a 600-year-old Bohemian text, Death and the Ploughman.

Translator MICHAEL WEST spoke to director CHRISTIAN SCHIARETTI the day after rehearsals had begun.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY TOM LAWRENCE

Christian Schiaretti has been artistic director of La Comedie de Reims since 1991; he has recently been appointed Director of the Théâtre Nationale Populaire (TNP), where he will begin his tenure in 2002. *Death and the Ploughman*, an extended meditation on death and loss, was written in 1401 by Johannes von Saaz, a minor court figure in Prague. It is something of a signature piece for Schiaretti; he has directed several productions in French and recently one in Spanish. This Irish production was its English-language premiere.

MICHAEL WEST: We could begin with *Death and the Ploughman* itself. Why this piece? How did you find it?

CHRISTIAN SCHIARETTI: When I was part of a young company in Paris, I did a lot of work on the contemporary German

repertoire. I met with various writers, practitioners... and I met Dieter Welke, who was a poet, dramaturg, musician, actor, aviator — and it was he who said that I absolutely had to work on *Der Ackermann und der Tod*, that it was one of the key texts of Western thought.

So it was a German that brought me to it, and it had never been translated [from the German] in almost 600 years. So I read the text. Actually, I listened to it. Dieter made a recording of a literal translation in one night, and since he is a



THE MAN HIMSELF: Lalor Roddy as Death

man who speaks slowly and exactly, forever searching for the right word, it took six hours. So I listened to it for six hours in Lille, in the north of France, and in the small hours of the morning I decided I wanted to do it, that I would do it. That's the background.

And this happened about 11 years ago.

Even earlier; this was in the beginning of 1989. And so the two of us worked on the adaptation. And as we worked, we realized that this text marked a specific moment in the history of Western thought, a hinge between the Black Death and the Reformation. It could be seen in some ways as the beginning of a proprietary way of thinking — a claim to ownership of the world, ownership of the body, ownership of the Universe. Out of this anxiety is created the figure of Death, in a fight against the natural order, the order of nature.

You staged it first in Paris?

We did, and then we went on to stage it at Reims. I was invited to bring my company, just before I became director there. It's the piece for which I am perhaps best known in France. It has its own... mythology built up around it.

And did you tour it?

After Reims and the Théâtre Gérard Philippe in Paris — its first run — there was a major tour of the Eastern bloc. About three months. Moscow, Kiev, Warsaw, Krakow, Prague — I can't remember them all — Sofia, Budapest. All the countries of Eastern Europe. Right around the fall of the Berlin Wall. Anyway, after the tour of the East, the show had great success in France. Success is a vulgar word, certainly for this text. It had a profound influence.

In what sense?

It was a European show [from the beginning]. The costume designer was Italian, the designer and director were French, the translator was German, the actor playing the Ploughman was Swiss and Death was an Italian. From the beginning the international dimension was integral to the piece. The air it breathed was never parochial; it was not linked solely to any one place. And even in the original text this was the case since Johann von Saaz, a Czech, wrote in the administrative language of the Empire [Middle High German], a language that almost certainly wasn't his. And as with Luther's Vulgate Bible, this was in order to speak to the greatest number.

Even though the text itself is so intimate.

Yes, and this ambiguity is what gives it its power — what's interesting is this double movement, this contrary impulse. The choice and use of the universal tongue, the language of empire, which tends to the general statement... and on the other hand an emotional impact — very strong, very intimate — the realization of which stabs home with the Ploughman's revelation that it was written the day after the death of his wife. Because when this is said it implies the text was written in a single night, which means driven by extreme emotion. Which is not the case, since in reality it's an enormously elaborate intellectual argument. But it's a moment we feel is authentic... It gives form to the idea that the international, the universal, is the self without walls. The piece, as it were, is his house without walls.

You recently staged a Spanish version in Uruguay. Why South America?

Both Dieter and myself have strong connections with Latin America, and we both

always wanted to bring it there — particularly because of the legacy of the Conquistadores, who brought Christianity and Western beliefs contemporaneous with the text to the New World, to paradise, and when paradise failed them they destroyed it. It was amazing to perform it there.

And Ireland...?

For personal reasons. By which I mean [my wife] Clara Simpson, who is Irish. She saw a play of mine about Joan of Arc, [*La Fille du Ciel et de la Terre*] in Avignon. At her invitation we came and played it here [in Trinity Players, Dublin Fringe 96] — although at that time there was no question that Clara and I would end up married with children... But when I first arrived here... It's difficult to explain, but when I set foot in Ireland I felt that here the ravages of modernity could still be witnessed, they were still in progress. What you see is an active struggle. There is a culture of the land. And not simply the land in the agricultural sense, but deeper than that, a place, a site of spiritual identity. And at the same time you could see the arrival of a type of modernity — loud, brash, pretentious. Vulgar and ridiculous — the epitome of vanity.

In Europe, this struggle can be found in the provinces, but in France, for example, it no longer exists. Everything is settled and tending to homogeneity. There is no more countryside in France, it's finished. There's no more tension, there's no more Paris, the ravage is complete. Here I sensed that struggle still kicking. I felt the echo of the text was strong.

And when we first made the piece, one of the tensions in it could be defined as that between a Catholic and a Protestant sensibility. More than a theology, an aesthetic sensibility. And from this point of view as well it had a relevance — has a relevance. And this too made me think

I would like to do it here.

When this text is performed in Latin countries, whether you're dealing with Spanish, French, Italian, there is an aspect to it that is spiritual, a rapport that is still ritualised, and extremely Catholic, communicated in languages that can... how can I put this... err on the side of too great a respect... that are too sacred. Anglophones, however, respond to the other side of the text; they are much more closely aligned to the German ethos than we are. In other words there are more... shall we call them Shakespearean possibilities. And as I said, this is a text which needs that double movement; it needs both transcendence and reality. It's a text which is very much in the mud and the stars. And the Latins are usually the ones in the stars...

Tell us a little about the Théâtre National Populaire, and the structure of French theatre.

There are several ways of looking at French theatre. One is in terms of administration... In France there are five National Theatres, four in Paris and one in Strasbourg; the TNP is not among these. Down a level there are several National Centres of Drama, of which the Comédie de Reims is one; however since Centres Dramatiques are civic institutions as opposed to exclusively state bodies, several of the Centres Dramatiques are more beautiful than some of the National Theatres. This is certainly the case with Reims, which is one of the more important Centres Dramatiques in the country.

Another way of reading French theatre is symbolic. There are two theatres which stand in direct opposition to each other. On one side there is the Comédie Française, representing the aristocratic republic... all the temptations of monarchist France — and France is by far the



LES MECS: Christian Schiaretti (left) and Michael West

most monarchic country in Europe. And on the other side you have the TNP, standing for the great tradition of French popular republicanism.

The Théâtre National Populaire was founded in the early 1900s as a national touring theatre. The idea from the start was to tour, and it did but on a massive scale, with tractors, the works, all over France. The tractors were English, though, and didn't work; they were too heavy and couldn't cross the bridges.

And then this national touring theatre was given a base on the colline de Chaillet, [in Paris]. And after some time Jean Vilar became the director and it moved to Avignon. And so the TNP is part of the grand history of French national theatre. After Vilar there was Roger Planchon, and with him the theatre moved to Ville Urbaine in the suburbs of Lyon.

So Planchon and Lyon are inextricably linked...

Yes, and I will be going to Ville Urbaine to take over from him early next year.

And what does the TNP signify now?

Absolutely nothing.

Just an empty theatre?

Not exactly. The post is a mythic one. For example when I meet people and tell them I am the director of the Comédie de Reims, they ask me what I want from them; when I meet the same people as the next director of the TNP, they ask what they can do for me.

It's the perfect calling card. It is almost magical, and this applies in France as well... That is to say that the public goes to the TNP in the way it goes to the Comédie Française; there is a mythic

glow that comes from an association with Jeanne Moreau, Gerard Philippe, Philippe Noiret — practitioners of a golden age of French theatre.

Today, in the face of a destructive Europe, of a Europe for the rich, what appeals to me is to interrogate the very idea of public theatre, of nation, of the people. Can we believe in these things without laughing? There isn't a politician who is able to talk seriously about it. And when one speaks of 'The People' in France, one is ashamed; the very idea is treated as something vulgar, politically incorrect, and so the idea is laid to one side...

To the right.

It's the same with the idea of public theatre. It's challenging to have something that is actually called the National Popular Theatre, because it might be the case that it should be closed. It may all be a terrible mistake.

I am succeeding a monster. That is to say, Roger Planchon, who has been at the helm for 50 years. Fifty years as director. Thirty of those at the Ville Urbaine. A truly gargantuan predecessor...

And it's you who's going to kill it off?

It depends on the weapons. It won't be a violent death. But there is a touch of that, because if you look at the directors who have worked there under Planchon... There's Georges Lavaudant, director of the Odeon; there's Patrice Chereau who is a big visual director in the tradition of Visconti, who has revived a theatre of luxury in effect; and there's Roger Planchon himself. Whereas I am a director of texts, of poetry, of minimalist staging. And I believe that public theatre in France derives from this poetic sense. So it's clear that I am in conflict with them....

This is interesting because in your own

60 irishtheatre MAGAZINE

work there is a tension between literary texts — the classical repertoire — many of which would be seen as texts of the right, on the one hand; and populist political pieces on the other. What do you look for in a text? Language [*la langue*] — the potential for transcendence of the soul through language. That's the first thing I look for. The second thing follows from that, and that's a spiritual resonance, the capacity for a poetic text to bind a human community in a spiritual gesture — which is not necessarily religious, but spiritual.

Above all I love the prayer in theatre, because there's nothing you can do with it. There can be no discussion. And usually this is the problem with actors, the tendency to anchor themselves in realism, the need to justify their actions through psychological process. And if you say to them, act a prayer... If an actor peels potatoes, heats water, scratches himself, he is busy but he is not in prayer.

A prayer is concrete. And from the theatrical perspective, when someone prays he is the abstract made concrete as it were, and this is why the prayer interests me, because the prayer allows you to make pure theatre. It's as simple as that.

And religious theatre and its heritage fascinate me, because it's a paradox that the secular world, the rationalist tradition if you like, has not produced great theatre of transcendent, literary, poetical worth. I mean there are certain texts, there's Brecht... but it is beyond the majority. I find myself in a perpetually difficult relationship with Pirandello, for example, and with Chekhov, I admire them, but this kind of work does not, for me, define itself as great poetic theatre.

And that's why I like interrogating these texts of Peguy, Claudel, or the Golden Age of Spanish Theatre. It's a search for elevation, transcendence.

Afterwards I may work on texts that



INTERVENTION: Clara Simpson as the Angel

are less... sacred. For example, farce. Farce interests me greatly.

And what is the spiritual attraction of farce?

Its exertion. Farce interests me... it's different of course... but what is appealing is its critique of society, and farce creates out of immanence something in the order of spiritual revelation.

With fart jokes. So your definition of farce is fixed in political critique and satire?

Yes, but by farce I don't mean simply Feydeau et al; I mean burlesque, commedia, maskwork. Farce interests me because there is a determination to bear witness to convention, and this points up the spiritual dimension. There is something that reaches across, that is transformed through the use of the mask. An actor is supported, borne aloft. If he's any good, which is not always the case, but when he is, something happens which is... magical.

But I would say that the theatre we make is neither purely a theatre of spiri-

tuality, nor a theatre of farce, there's other kinds, it's about creating a repertoire. Above all I believe that the best theatre is that in the school. [The Comédie de Reims has a three-year training program.] Theatre must always remain a school; it must always be a place of training.

So there's the thought process behind it. But I also remain an artisan, a working professional. I don't possess the truth. So I direct many things. I have staged Pirandello, Brecht and others who are not exactly spiritual authors.

Last question. What's your method of casting? When you cast this production you'd seen neither actor actually perform.

No. But with this play, *Death and the Ploughman*, it is a case of intuition. It's a very intuitive piece. There is a métier, a craft of acting, but there is a danger in over-professionalising it. I find that when everything is scrupulously professional you have no guarantee that it will be any good at all.

Particularly when you are dealing with people outside of your native language, you must rely almost exclusively on intuition. You know nothing; you are reduced to the animal state. When you're in a country where you don't speak the language it's like viewing it from an airplane. Everyone you meet seems nice; everyone acts in good faith. As long as you don't stay too long, it's like looking at a sweetshop as a child.

And as long as I'm in that state an actor can't seem bad to me. They are all absolutely excellent. And that is a fantastic experience. To find yourself mute before people, your critical faculties temporarily paralysed.

This conversation was conducted in French and was both translated and edited by Michael West.

New Directions

KELLY SMITH charts comings and goings behind the scenes of Irish theatre.

ALI CURRAN will take up the new position as director of the Peacock Theatre in January 2002. The position of director of the Dublin Fringe Festival, which Curran has held since 1997, will be advertised in September. **JOCELYN CLARKE**, formerly theatre critic of *The Sunday Tribune*, will take up the new post of commissions manager at the National Theatre in October. Also in that month, **MARIE KELLY** will become casting director of the Abbey and Peacock; she moves to the position internally from her current job as executive PA to the artistic director. **ORLA FLANAGAN** has already commenced her work as literary officer; she has worked for a number of arts organisations including the National Concert Hall and the Dublin Fringe.

SCOTT WATSON has joined the Dublin Fringe Festival as executive producer, and **KERRY WEST** is the new Fringe administrator... **DAVID NOWLAN** has retired from his position as chief drama critic at *The Irish Times*. A replacement will be appointed in the near future.

PAULA MCFETRIDGE has been appointed artistic advisor to the Lyric Theatre, Belfast (see story, page 22). **ANNETTE CLANCY** has recently accepted an appointment as theatre consultant for the Theatre Forum. **ERIC FRAAD**, previously artistic director of Millennial Arts

Productions and Opera at the Academy in New York, has taken up his position as Director of The Ark in Temple Bar. **CIARÁN WALSH** left his job as managing director of Druid Theatre in August to work as line producer with *Riverdance*. His position will be advertised.

MAEVE O'BRIEN has left her job as manager of the Riverbank Theatre in Newbridge, Co. Kildare to return to England. She has been replaced by **DENNIS CLIFFORD**, formerly of the Hawk's Well, Sligo. **NICK McCALL** and **SORCHA CARROLL** have joined the team at the Hawk's Well as technical manager and press officer respectively.

RICHARD BROWN has joined Calypso Theatre Company as their education officer. **AOIFE CONROY** has left the company to further pursue a new career in homeopathy. **MUIREANN AHERN** is the new education officer of TEAM; an actress and teacher, her appointment is part-funded by the department of education. Dublin playwright **GAVIN KOSTICK** has recently taken the position of literary officer at Fishamble Theatre Company.

LIAM RELLIS has departed from Red Kettle to concentrate on running his own arts consultancy. No replacement for Rellis has been announced,



NEW AT THE NATIONAL THEATRE: (l. to r.) Marie Kelly, Orla Flanagan, Ali Curran, and Jocelyn Clarke

and the position will probably be advertised in the new year. **JOAN MALLON** has moved from the Civic Theatre in Tallaght to Storytellers Theatre Company, where she is company manager. **CIARA MCGLYNN** has taken over from Mallon as the Civic's general manager; her former position as administrator of Rough Magic will be advertised.

BRIDGET CLEARY has left Daghdha Dance to work with Meridian Theatre Company as development manager.

JIM MEYERS has recently joined the Theatre Royal in Waterford as administrator/theatre manager. Theatreworks has moved to new offices and has appointed a full-time company manager, **KEITH TROUGHTON**.

BERNICE TURNER, formerly manager of PACT@ Temple Bar is now working for Magahy & Co. The International Arts Festival for Children, Baboró, have appointed **LALI MORRIS** as their new executive director. Morris previously worked with the Sirius Arts Centre in Cobh. **GEOFF GOULD** is leaving his position as artistic director of the Everyman Palace in Cork to enroll in a trainee director's course in London; his position has been advertised.

KELLY SMITH is working in marketing and communications for the *eircom* Dublin Theatre Festival for 2001. She is also administrator of *irish theatre magazine*, and has taken over this column from **LOUGHLIN DEEGAN**.

A Stranger at the Table

RODDY DOYLE offers an excerpt from his play *Guess Who's Coming for the Dinner*, which has its world premiere this October in a Calypso production, as part of the eircom Dublin Theatre Festival.



RODDY DOYLE: In April last year I met Abel Ugba, who, with Chinedu Onyejekwu, had just brought out the first edition of *metro eireann*, a monthly multi-cultural newspaper. I wanted to write for the paper, but I didn't know what. I started thinking of the film, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, and the very simple idea of getting a white man to meet a black man. We agreed that I'd write a monthly chapter of this story for the paper.

Meanwhile, Bairbre Ní Chaoimh, at Calypso Productions, read Chapter One and suggested that I turn the story into a play. I wanted to do it, but I was really scared. The African was going to talk. What would he say? How would he say it? I left him out in the rain for a while. But he had to arrive. I was stuck. So eventually I let Ben into the house. And now he's

there in the play for people to see and hear.

One of the conceits of the play is that its main character, the father Larry Linnane, talks about himself in the third person, directly to the audience. In this extract he's waiting for Ben to arrive.

LARRY Now, he asked himself questions all the time. Where did I leave my keys? Will I have the last Hobnob or will I leave it for Mona? But it had been a long time since a question had made him squirm. And he's been squirming all week. He wasn't a racist. He was sure about that now, positive — he thought. When he watched a footballer, for exam-

ple, he didn't see skin. He saw skill. Paul McGrath, black and brilliant. Gary Breen, white and shite. And it was the same with music. Phil Lynott, absolutely brilliant. Neil Diamond, absolutely shite. And politics. Mandela, a hero. Ahern, a chancer. And women too. Naomi Campbell — Jaysis. There wasn't a racist bone or muscle in his body, nothing tugging at

him to change his mind about Stevie Wonder or Thierry Henri because they were black. And it worked the other way too, Gary Breen, black, still shite but no worse. Naomi Campbell, white, probably still gorgeous but better off black. Bertie Ahern, black — Larry laughed for the first time in a week. But, why then? What was his problem. Why didn't he want a refugee in the family? Well, there was AIDS for a start. Africa was riddled with it. That was a fact. And then there was — it wasn't the poverty exactly. It was the hugeness of it. The Live Aid pictures, the thousands and thousands of people, the flies on their faces, the dead kids. Heartbreaking, but — what sort of a society was that? What sort of people came out of a place like that? And all the civil wars — machetes and machine guns, and burning car tyres draped around people's necks. All the savagery. Fair enough, the man was an accountant, but that was the place he came from. And why had he left? What was the story there? What was wrong with Nigeria? Nothing that Larry knew about. This guy could be a criminal, like Al Pacino being thrown out of Cuba in *Scarface*. He could be one of those religious fanatics, or married already, two or three times for all they knew. And they'd never know. It was too far away. It was too different; that was it. Too unknowable, and too frightening for his daughter.

As he speaks, Larry prepares for Ben's visit. He shaves — nicks himself, dams the blood with toilet paper. He changes his clothes.

LARRY 'Ben,' he said quietly. 'Howyeh, Ben. Great weather. Must remind you of home.' Could he say

that? He didn't see why not. But he didn't want to hurt the lad's feelings, or get into trouble with the women. He'd be polite, fair. He'd like the lad — Ben. He'd shake his hand, and hold it long enough to prove that it wasn't about his skin. But, then, what was going to happen? He had his answers, his objections — AIDS, war, the works. But how could he list them off when they were having their dinner? And, more to the point, how could he do it if he wasn't certain, in his heart of hearts, that they were his real objections? Larry was an honest man, but it was a long time since he'd had to prove it. He looked at his watch. The time was crawling. And that suited Larry just fine. He was dreading the dinner, terrified of what was going to happen.

He examines the cut on his chin. He continues to dress.

LARRY Eminem, not bad, even though he's white. Michael Jackson, much better when he was black. Whitney Houston, an absolute —

The bell.

VANESSA (offstage) That was the bell.

Vanessa runs onstage, and calls 'upstairs.'

VANESSA Da!

She runs offstage.

LARRY Damn it, he had one leg in his underpants, the other one hanging over the floor. Larry had wanted to be down there to meet the black lad — Ben — at

play excerpt

the door. 'Hello, Ben' — not 'howyeh,' he'd decided — 'Great weather. Must remind you of home.' But here he was, up in the bedroom, fighting his knickers. This wasn't what he'd planned at all. He didn't want Mona and the girls thinking he was avoiding the lad —

MONA (*offstage*) Larry!

LARRY That he was being rude or just ignorant. 'Calm down, calm down' he told his fingers as he tried to button his shirt. Oprah Winfrey, a pain in the arse, even though she's black. Phil Babb, a pup — nothing to do with colour. He'd decided against the suit. The young fella would probably be in a tracksuit. So Larry was dressing himself up a bit from that, just enough to impose his authority — the older man, the citizen, the firm but fair father. So he'd chosen the good trousers and a clean shirt, no tie. And his black shoes — where were the stupid bloody things?

He gets down on his hunkers, looks under the 'bed.'

LARRY Under the bloody bed. Bang in the middle, just out of reach. For a second — less than a second — he imagined Mona down on her hunkers, shoving them in with the brush. Just for spite.

Mona walks onstage.

MONA Larry! What's keeping you?

She walks offstage.

LARRY But he shook himself. He was being stupid. He put on his runners. They were grand — nearly new, still white. He took a quick goo at himself in the wardrobe mirror. He'd do. He took the corner of toilet paper from just under his chin. The blood clot came with it. He was grand now, ready.

He goes down the stairs.

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irish theatre magazine
COMING IN NOVEMBER

opinions & overviews

BASH by Neil LaBute

and

MADE IN CHINA by Mark O'Rowe

The Gate Theatre and

the Peacock Theatre, Dublin

Bash reviewed 10 April 2001, and

Made in China reviewed 12 April

BY STEPHEN DI BENEDETTO

NON-CONSENSUAL RECTAL PENETRATION, electrocution, torture, paedophilia, misogyny . . . no, it's not a series of Jerry Springer episodes on tabloid television, but rather subject matter that recently graced the major theatres of Ireland. Not surprisingly, this outrageous violence, as seen through the writing of two young male playwrights, Neil LaBute and Mark O'Rowe, has proved popular with Dublin audiences, as their content is reminiscent of sensational popular entertainment. But what is going on in the Celtic Tiger that it simultaneously generated two productions that evoke extreme violence as their controlling metaphor?

This spring the Gate Theatre gave American writer and filmmaker LaBute the opportunity to direct his own play *bash*. Renowned for his popular cinematic black comedies, LaBute's plays offer the same focus on the immorality of the American middle-classes. In the film medium this style is successful, but the appropriateness of these themes and writing style to the live stage leaves something to be desired. The play is made up of three loosely connected one-act plays based on classical mythology — *Iphigenia in Orem*, *Medea Redux*, and *A Gaggle of Saints*. These plays attempt to make the mythic stories accessible to contemporary audiences by updating them and presenting them in realistic modes of acting and production. The designers, Joe Vanek (set), Lynette Meyer (costumes), and

Rupert Murray (lighting) created three gorgeous environments to denote the external environment of the plays.

Overall, the plays seem to want to ponder the reasons why people do horrible things in a so-called moral world. *Iphigenia* is a monologue by a forty-something businessman, Man (Jason Patric), who in a motel room recounts the events that led up to the death of his daughter. It is gradually revealed through stream-of-consciousness storytelling that Man mur-



HAUNTED: Flora Montgomery in *bash*

dered his newborn baby girl as a delusional sacrifice to God to spare him from losing his job. The structure of the monologue demands that the modulation and rhythm of the actor's technique create the suspense that gives depth to the writing, but Patric delivered a monotone portrayal of a neurotic man, leaving no

opinions & overviews

dynamic to the character and providing no entry into the significance of the subject matter to the myth.

Medea is the confession of Woman (Flora Montgomery) of the events that led to another infanticide. As a pre-adolescent, she became involved with her junior high school English teacher, who left her when she became pregnant. Fourteen years later, as revenge upon the paedophilic lover, she electrocutes their son by throwing a radio in his bath. As she chain-smoked behind a conference table in a room that had the antiseptic atmosphere of a hospital or prison, Montgomery delivered her confession into a tape recorder. She skillfully used her body posture and vocal inflection to give shape to the halting story. Again, LaBute manipulates the Greek myth to create a contemporary story of betrayal and revenge. Unfortunately, as with the first play, the updating essentialised the myth, diluting it of any socio-political context.

A Gaggle of Saints is slightly different in form — it is two monologues delivered in alternation. Set in the back of a ballroom, John (Jason O'Mara) and Sue (Justine Mitchell), a Mormon couple studying a northeastern Catholic university, reminisce about the events at a weekend dance in New York City. Their story begins at the time they started dating in high school and ends with their engagement after the big bash in the Plaza Hotel. That night turns sinister when John goes off with the boys and meets a few homosexuals in Central Park's Rambles, an event that results in a lethal gay-bashing. The pace and rhythm of the delivery of these stories was the most gripping of the trio of plays, thereby eliciting the most exciting of the performances from O'Mara and Mitchell.

Each of the three plays evokes an emotional response in the audience because of their gratuitous violence and melodramatic plots. While this triggers tears and gasps, it begs the question of why these stories need to be told on stage in a live environment. Are they not more suited to film or a television movie? These performances receive their power from emotional manipulation, thus pretending to have a deeper message. The three plays seem out of context because they are devoid of a social and political context to give them shape — how can one consider the social commentary when only one view of the world is presented?

As well, for this Irish airing, LaBute edited out all overt references to Mormonism and American culture from his scripts, and thus the world of the characters failed to find shape and definition on the stage. The settings and static monologue form told us of a plot and implied a context, but failed to show us or bring to life a rounded world that posed intellectual conundrums from multiple vantage points. LaBute, as both a director and writer, failed to exploit the expressive capabilities of the live stage to pose an in-depth examination of the loss of morals within contemporary society. He claims he is representing the world around him, but his representation is a single-sided, cynical portrayal of society's ills.

At the same time that *bash* was playing at the Gate, down the road at the Peacock, audiences could watch Mark O'Rowe's Dublin gangster play *Made in China*. Hughie (Anthony Brophy) and Kilby (Andrew Connolly) are seasoned footsoldiers in the Echelon gang. Young Paddy (Luke Griffin) wants to join the Echelons, even though Hughie urges him not to — following the death of his mother, Hughie is sick of gang life and looking to get out.

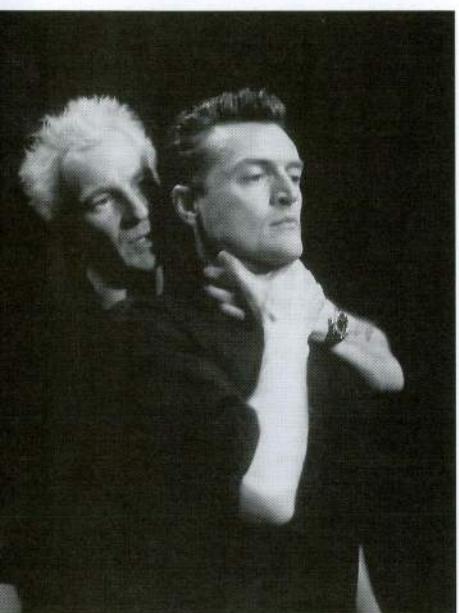
But Paddy is seduced by the macho posturing of the gang world, the access it provides to expensive John Rocha clothing and an inner sanctum of martial arts worship; and eventually finds himself caught in the crossfire in a death match between Hughie and Kilby.

O'Rowe created a vividly tragic-comic world where the naïve learn the hard way that violence is power and power is dead-

(costume), Bláithín Sheerin (sets), and Ben Ormerod (lighting) brought a vivid and dynamic world to life. The play is set in a loft apartment that is a mix of glitz and seed — a leather couch, flat screen TV, industrial windows, a card table, plastic chairs, and a personal lift. The setting both serves as denotation of the events of the play and becomes a motivating force in it: the lift is used to announce visitors and as the final moment is drawing close the suspense of whether the crime lord will arrive before Hughie escapes, skillfully brings the events to a climax. Both the production values and performances vividly evoked a colorful world of macho bonding and extreme violence.

Made in China is well-written — a situation is set up in a fixed location and then a few characters are mixed in. The despicably amoral characters are made charming through their witty banter and comic foibles; however, the audience also sees their more sinister side. Kilby is explosive, unpredictable, and dangerous. Hughie is philosophical and wants to recant for his violent ways. Paddy is a callow wannabe who does not realise the consequences of betraying his values and family. These characters collide and reveal a situation where extreme bodily harm in the form of a cue stick forcibly inserted into a victim's rectum is standard practice. Both the setting and performances work together to create a fast-paced gangster scenario, and the world created on stage was both believable and exciting.

The overall experience, however, was boring. What was O'Rowe ultimately trying to say — that you have to be loyal or you are dead? Violence doesn't pay, even though it is really cool to wear John Rocha shirts? The play suffers from its adherence to the gangster movie formula; while exciting to watch, it lacks an overall seri-



GRIPPING: Made in China

ly. Emblematic of this theme are recurring enactments and images of homosexual rape as power, punishment, and fantasy. Paddy finds through a frenzied sequence of events that he must choose between loyalty and family, or violence and prestige.

Gerard Stembridge's direction and designs by Eimer Ní Mhaoldomhnaigh

opinions & overviews

ousness that will stay with the audience as they leave. There is nothing to ponder: Paddy makes a tragic mistake and will pay for it with a gruesome death. There is no discernable social message, other than the rather dubiously original insight that tough guys can be sensitive too.

That both these plays were produced on the Dublin stage simultaneously indicates the huge influence that film is having on theatre. Their genre, plot and structure are directly borrowed from mass culture models. O'Rowe was more successful in showing action and revealing multiple points of view, yet like LeBute his plays fit more comfortably in the cinematic genre. On film the devices used here could be captivating because of the ability of the genre to capture reality; but here they fall flat. The liveness of theatre may contribute to a more powerful visceral reaction within an audience in close proximity to the violence or shocking material, but it also demands that the audience is rewarded for their participation in the event by having a range of ideas or themes opened up to them. We expect to be shown more than we are told. What remains in my memory after watching these plays is an awareness of the playwrights' rather juvenile fascination with deviant violence. As cultural objects the plays reflect the misogyny, homophobia, violence, and lack of morality that is brewing underneath American and Irish societies, which glorify the actions of murderers, thugs, and the mentally ill. That is far more frightening than the theatre's loss of its expressive capabilities through an ever-increasing absorption of the tropes of film.

Stephen Di Benedetto is assistant professor of theatre at the University of Houston, Texas.

BY THE BOG OF CATS by Marina Carr

Irish Repertory of Chicago

Victory Gardens Theatre

1-24 June 2001; reviewed 17 June

BY ENRICA CERQUONI

MARINA CARR'S ASTONISHING, COMPLEX play *By the Bog of Cats*, originally produced by the Abbey Theatre in 1998, has reached the North American stage in a production that shows accuracy and vigour.

In 1998, when Carr first wrote the play, she was undoubtedly commenting on our anti-heroic age, in which, as she remarked in an article in the *Irish University Review*, "the all-consuming intellectual pursuit seems to be that of de-mystification." The play journeys into the depths of the past, towards a hidden knowledge, a world-other, where memory and imagination are necessary companions. In an age in which materialism and consumerism are so often made the subject of drama, Carr bravely goes against the grain by writing about the poor — about a 40-year-old female itinerant wandering a Midlands bog. Her counter-culture anti-heroine, Hester Swane, boasts mythical ascendancy: literary references throughout the play relate her to Dido the wanderer, the archetypal figure of the outsider; and to the half-goddess/half human, uncontrollable Medea.

Only three years later, Carr's ability to take mythical and seemingly implausible situations and re-cast them in a contemporary context feels more striking and more necessary than ever. In post-millennium Ireland, the fear of the "other," of what is different, of what can threaten our "secure privileges," is clearly reflected in the result of the recent Nice Treaty referendum. Irish Rep here offers to an American audience an Irish play which unearths racism, marginalisation, physical abuse,

murder, and fratricide. Such an enterprise is both daring and innovative.

Like Medea and Dido, Hester is an outcast and a figure of extreme power, performing characteristically male actions while indicting the patriarchal order. Having been abandoned by her mother, Big Josie Swane, she is a woman lacking the most elemental of all relationships, that portrayed in its earliest form in the myth of Demeter and Persephone. The landscape on which the play is set is a Beckettian expanse of frozen turf, watery and misty, harsh and wild, which mirrors Hester's void as a deserted child. Faced with the necessity of imagining a vast open space for the action where the fusion of myth and reality could be fully grasped by the audience, director Kay Martinovich and set designer Michelle Habeck have created an adaptable, thrust-shaped space with three distinct playing areas, which effectively conveys the bog's changeability. Habeck's minimalist set conjures up rawness and primitiveness, but also captures the emotional geography of the landscape, its life principle as earth mother.

The sense of mutability and expansiveness of the playing space is enhanced by Jaymi Lee Smith's captivating lighting and Lindsay Jones's evocative arrangements of Liz Carroll's original music. If the low roof of the Victory Gardens Theatre sometimes seems to limit the production's imaginative extension into the invisible beyond, this is counteracted by the poetic rhythms of Carr's Midlands language, which the actors delivered passionately and with nearly impeccable pronunciation.

The opening scene is remarkably powerful, and establishes the play's conventions of bridging the real and the supernatural: after the otherworldly presence of a Charon-like Ghost Fancier (Ed Zeltner) departs, Hester (Tracy Michelle

Arnold) is left in this beautifully represented act of burying Blackwing, the black swan whose life and death unavoidably interweaves with hers. Arnold's well emphasized physicality as she cuts the frozen turf to make space for the broken body of the bird engenders an easy access to the character's supra-real possibilities.

Other particularly poignant moments are the act three rape scene — Hester's



BLEAK: By the Bog of Cats

defiant resistance to the brutal attempt of the devious land-grabber Xavier Cassidy (David Darlow) to threaten her through physical abuse — and the play's closure — Hester's final act of primal love. In these scenes, the cooperative work between the director, the cast, the playwright, and the dramaturg (Melissa Sihra)

comes to the fore. The actors engage in fearless performances which weave together with energy and power.

As a result of creative collaboration between playwright and director, Carr has made significant changes to the text from the original version, not all of which are satisfactory: while cuts in the exposition of Joseph Swane's character drive the action faster towards its tragic denouement, the decision to indicate that Hester is remorseful for having killed her brother, where she was unbending before, becomes problematic. Is Carr trying to make this character more likeable to a non-Irish audience or does the playwright now see it differently? Whatever the answer, and though the success of such a choice is disputable, Carr's willingness to re-explore a recent and acclaimed work is admirably adventurous.

There are some fine and touching performances, especially from Arnold as the tortured and defiant Hester, Mary Ann Thebus as the spectral and prophetic Catwoman, Marilynn Bogetich as the powerless neighbour Monica Murray, the terrific Kerry Darlow as little Josie Swane, and Darlow as Xavier Cassidy — a.k.a. the embodiment of the old patriarchal system. The ensemble of actors work less successfully in the farcical wedding scene, where the transgressive humour does not come across effectively. Hester's disruptive entrance as the illegitimate bride, so important to the changing perspective of the scene, comes from a side of the stage which is too close to the audience. Consequently, the spectator sees Hester too soon and the subversive power of her appearance is blunted.

At the performance I attended, the theatre hosted a post-show debate, and the admittedly baffled audience was eager to interact with the cast. Questions such as

"What does the Ghost Fancier represent?" "What could be his American equivalent?" "What does the black swan symbolise in Irish mythology?" "Are travellers in Ireland outsiders within their own culture?" reflect the audience's desire to understand Irish differences, its attempt to create cultural connections.

And, as Richard Foreman once said, "bafflement can... force you to refocus your vision." In transposing Carr's play from the Irish to the American stage, Irish Rep of Chicago has successfully made it a gateway for cultural dialogue.

Enrica Cerquoni is an occasional lecturer at the Drama Studies Centre, UCD and is writing a PhD on the works of Marina Carr and Anne Devlin.

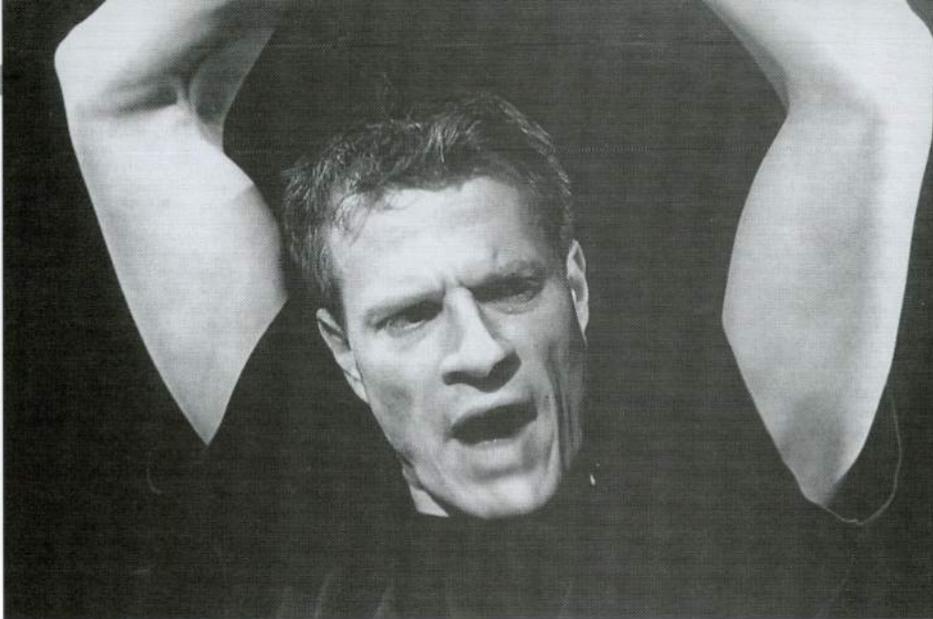
BEOWULF adapted by Felix Nobis

Grendel Productions
On tour; reviewed at City Arts Centre,
Dublin on 16 March 2001

BY PETER CRAWLEY

IT'S AMAZING WHAT PASSES FOR HEROIC these days. For three centuries a story of tribal honour, man-eating monsters, and derring-do was handed down along generations of Anglo-Saxon settlers. If tales grow with the telling, then at the time it was finally written down, in about 1000 AD, *Beowulf* was a story so tall it was ice-capped.

One millennium later, the journey of *Beowulf* has been reversed from evolution to excavation. Following centuries of oral-culture embellishment, *Beowulf* was frozen into text, and since the 19th century, subsequent retellings have become a case of academic reconstruction. While the translator's approach has certainly not lacked creativity, it has constantly struggled to resurrect *Beowulf* across the chasm of history — to make it something living and breathing.



HEROIC HYPERBOLE: Translator/performer Felix Nobis in Beowulf

After Seamus Heaney's lauded translation of the text pipped Felix Nobis' endeavors at the post, the Australian actor, poet, and academic approached his own translation with an agenda: to return to the performative roots of oral culture. On a simply adorned stage, littered with seemingly incidental props — a stool, a bucket, a candle, matches, bookmarks — the barefoot, square-jawed Nobis walks onstage, washes his hands with water from the pail, and begins to read from a leather-bound dusty volume in Old English. He then drops the book, eyes the audience, and launches into his translation. With director Thomas Conway, Nobis's efforts have yielded an intriguing performance, rich with heroic hyperbole, alliterative description and potent language, but which somehow doesn't settle snugly into a theatrical situation.

In Nobis's translation, the battles, feasting and sober ethics of the original are cap-

tured in a vibrant, but respectful, interpretation. The plot, honed down from the original poem's 3,182 lines, is lean and very mean. King Hrothgar's mead-hall is pillaged for juicy soldier-meat by the abominable monster Grendel. Along comes legendary warrior Beowulf of the Geats (Swedes), who puts an end to Grendel by tearing his arm off. No sooner has the rejoicing finished, however, before Grendel's monstrous mother arrives to seek vengeance. Beowulf pursues her into the watery depths of sea-dwelling monsters and resurfaces victorious some days later. After a long stint as ruler of his people, the aged king Beowulf takes on one last task, tackling a fire-breathing dragon (single-handedly, of course). And that, apart from frequent narrative digressions, philosophical musings on death, and the odd moralising sermon, is pretty much that.

Nobis' translation is great poetry itself. His sumptuous language of swash and

buckle remains faithful to the alliterative nature of the original, and retains its rich metaphors and antique word-play. Terms such as "whale-road" for the sea or "bone-house" for the body give a punchy lyricism to the tale. And as the sole performer, Nobis is as focused and concentrated as an espresso in human form. Taking the role of "scop," or storyteller, his every movement is alert and decisive, and his passion is undoubtedly. Conway's restrained direction cleverly extracts potent signification from scavenged visual aids. As Nobis sails a lit candle on top of his book slowly through the air, the Viking funeral of Scyld Scefing is presented in magnificently miniature glory. It announces a use of symbolism reiterated throughout the performance: a gold bookmark signifies a priceless treasure, a blue ribbon an expanse of ocean — even a matchbox can become a fire-breathing serpent!

Where this *Beowulf* starts to show its age, however, is not in translation (nor in the unquestioned nobility of its leaders!), but rather through the uncomfortable way this epic poem sits in a modern theatre setting. The audience-performer confrontation just doesn't suit Nobis and Conway's apparent intention, which is to recreate the relationship between the storyteller and his listeners. When Nobis frequently drops to one knee he disconcertingly disappears from view for everyone beyond the second row. The problem is exacerbated when, following Grendel's defeat, Nobis retreats to the rear of the auditorium, behind the audience. Disembodied words drifting upon an unadorned set do not hold the attention, and we feel abandoned. In fact, this was one of the few productions that would have benefited from being played in the round. With the performer as our only focus, an awareness of other listeners

would underscore the importance of the role model in a close-knit community. That aside, this is a heroic effort, fusing scholastics and stagecraft and boldly shaking the cobwebs from hero-worship.

BLACKWATER ANGEL by Jim Nolan

The Abbey Theatre
8 May-9 June 2001; reviewed on 20 May
BY EIBHLIN NI RUAIRC

WHAT A NAME FOR YOUR LEADING character... Valentine Greatrakes. Just repeat it to yourself over and over. Isn't it wonderful?

In fact the name sounds makey-uppy, but there was once a healer called Valentine Greatrakes who roamed the Waterford countryside in the 17th century, curing the common people of their ills and diseases, and it is this true life character that has inspired Jim Nolan's new play *Blackwater Angel*.

"Ah ha!" you say. A faith healer! This has been done before. Didn't Brian Friel give us the definitive faith healer play? Why do we need another one?

Well, yes, Friel did indeed tackle this theme most successfully, but that is where the comparisons between these two works end. While Friel presented a series of monologues with just three characters, Nolan has filled the stage with characters, action and atmosphere; perhaps the best part of the play was its sheer ambition and size.

Blackwater Angel is a fascinating, ambitious work, both entertaining and stimulating. That said, it had problems — many problems — but overall it is a welcome addition to the recent canon of Irish dramatic writing.

When we first meet Greatrakes, played by John Lynch, he is curing a young boy, Michael Maher, whose body is badly

scarred. The play then leaps forward ten years and we find ourselves in Greatrakes' home, where we meet his long-suffering wife Kate (Julia Lane), and the servants that share their world. Among them are the adult Michael Maher (Michael Hayes) and his sister Lizzie (Catherine Walsh) who work in the house, along with Valentine's manservant Thomas Wyvern (Chris McHale).

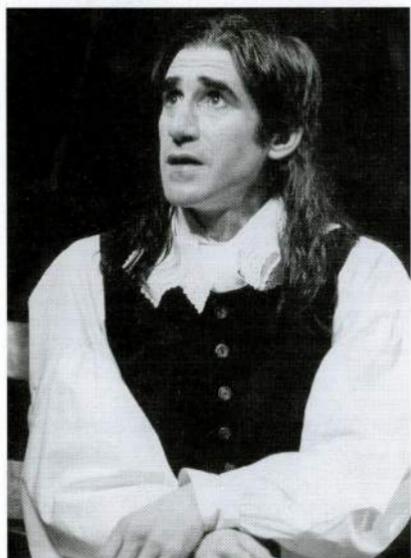
At this point, it is clear that Greatrakes is deeply unhappy. He is overwhelmed

forest — especially the young singer Angel Landy (Laura Rogers). He is convinced that through her, he will be reconnected with his gift. Greatrakes is devastated when the company depart, and when Angel is suddenly brought back to his home, having lost her voice, he takes her in; and the subsequent interaction with her helps him confront the importance of his gift.

The play is a complex and dense work, touching on themes of innocence and responsibility, loss and loyalty. Greatrakes is a fascinating character. The audience feels empathy for his dilemma, while simultaneously willing him to take responsibility for his unique gift. Lynch succeeds in conveying the character's loneliness, but he also gives an honest portrayal of a man whose ego and self absorption is frustrating to witness. It is an accomplished performance, though Lynch did seem unable at times to control his vocal expression, and it was distracting to watch his fellow performers shrink away from his frequent sprays of saliva.

Many of the other cast members impressed, particularly Walsh as the servant Lizzie. She is the only character to confront Greatrakes and her performance mixed credible deference with defiance. Lane, as the loyal wife, handled a rather thinly developed character with confidence and sympathy, and Hayes was charming, delivering some of the play's best lines with gusto.

At times director Ben Barnes' vision of the characters was not as clear as the writing may have suggested, and the penultimate sequence in which Greatrakes heals a blind man felt predictable and could have been reworked. The final scene in the play, where a naked Angel Landy wandered through the forest, was also highly questionable. Her reappearance demon-



HEALER: John Lynch in *Blackwater Angel*

by the burden of his ability to heal, and he cannot cope with the responsibility of being a healer. He quickly renounces his gift, leaving his wife and servants to deal with the ever-growing mob of lame and sick people descending on the house.

Greatrakes then becomes enchanted by a group of travelling players in the

strates that this young girl, originally found wandering in the forest by the English players, could never have settled into Greatrakes' world. Whether she is a ghost or an illusion is unimportant, as her presence serves as a necessary coda to the play's action. Greatrakes now knows that living in his house and sharing his life was never a possibility for her and that she, like him must be true to herself — in her case she must return to the heart of the forest.

This point was not lost on the audience; thus her nudity was unnecessary. A supposedly nostalgic and innocent image was spoiled by the exploitation of this young girl. By the end of the play the director had enveloped the audience in a unique world and suddenly shocked them out of it with this pointless, gratuitous decision.

That said, *Blackwater Angel* presented a difficult challenge to this Abbey company, and they did this new, brave, and complex play great justice.

Eibhlín Ní Ruairc is a reporter for RTÉ.

THE CHANGELING

by Thomas Middleton and
Anthony Rowley

Threefold Theatre Company
The Samuel Beckett Theatre, Dublin
20-24 March 2001; reviewed on 23 March

BY MARGARET HANNON

BEATRICE WANTS ALSEMERO BUT IS promised to another. She will stop at nothing to get her way. Thomas Middleton and Anthony Rowley's *The Changeling* is a tale of sex and subterfuge and, ultimately, as befits the game of revenge tragedy, a considerable body count. Alice Coughlan's production for Threefold Theatre Company is a simmering salsa for the

senses, a riot of sound, movement and colour, at times cluttered in presentation and ideology, but like its flawed heroine, compelling throughout.

Beatrice is the daughter of a nobleman. She is spoilt, wily, and very beautiful. She hires her ardent admirer, De Flores, whom she detests, to kill her fiancé, so she can marry Alsemoro, her true love. She assumes De Flores will take the money and run, but she assumes wrongly. De Flores will not obligingly flee. And she is as guilty as he. She is not entitled to protect herself through her modesty when she has flaunted that modesty as a restraint.

Laura Flynn's set looks like a bull ring overlooked by a small framed area at the back. This latter area generally houses the pomp, while the primal action takes place in the ring. Adrian Mullan uses subdued light, ominously folding through the wreathed air (dry ice, surprisingly effective). Christopher Singleton complements the mood perfectly with a sultry score redolent of Miles Davis. The protagonists move around each other in a stylised way; at times they seem ill at ease, but they grow more adept as the plot thickens. They are like doomed beasts pawing at the sand before the shaft strikes home.

Lucinda Warlock is mesmerising as Beatrice. She flaunts her dangerous sensuality like a red flag, yet is as naïve as a child. Kieran Gough is wonderfully self absorbed as her wounded lover, Alsemoro. Beatrice's adultery is infinitely more searing to him than her sanguinary acts. Patrick Stewart is a lizardlike De Flores, simultaneously odious, piteous, and cogent.

Threefold was formed by members of the drama societies of Trinity College, University College Dublin, and the National College of Art and Design, and aspires to work in a professional context. Doubtless one of the major challenges

they faced here, and failed to overcome, was casting — it is hard to accept twenty-something women as elderly men. Despite the director's assertion (in a programme note) that she used cross-casting to emphasize the "powerlessness of women," for this reviewer, she illustrates little more than the general paucity of males in Dramsoc and Players — or the surplus of talented women. "Powerlessness of women" is much more forcibly demonstrated by her decision to stage a graphic rape scene, which leads to a sympathetic relationship evolving between victim and perpetrator. But that's another story. In general the actors play well, but they do call the choice of play given the realities of actor availability into question.

Some speak indiscernibly at times, which makes following the action in such a text-driven play difficult. Seb Billings as Alsemoro's friend Jasperino, in particular, has a very strong and funny presence, and a pivotal role in plot exposition, but is often impossible to understand. It is to the ensemble's credit that they keep us drawn in. They maintain the pitch of tension to the last, and have obviously wholly engaged with the play and succeed in making it accessible and powerful.

There are some questionable directorial interventions. Coughlan has set the production in 1950s Argentina under Peron, and Kate Clarke's costumes are vaguely reminiscent of the period. But the inclusion of break dancing at one stage in the production irritates as an anachronism; one wishes choices made were followed through consistently. Dance is used throughout the production to mixed effect; the dancers are variously skilled and committed — some simply don't "get into" it. Nonetheless Katy Fitzpatrick and Megan Conway's choreography is in the main simple and effective, alternating sin-

uous and highly charged, pulsing movements.

The Changeling is a play about appearances and the lies they hide. It does not, however, relieve anyone of responsibility for his or her own acts. Monsters create themselves. Could the play's tragic outcome have been any different? Coughlan's production shows that it could. Beatrice softens towards De Flores; when she sees his constancy in adversity she no longer sees his scarred face. This is where beauty lies: in possibility. It is, alas, too late for these two, who might have been very happy, together or apart, if they'd really seen each other from the start. In the end the living demonstrate to us that what we distrust is not beauty alone, but the extremes of experience. What we are overwhelmingly, and often enfeeblingly, at home with is the banal, mere talk. As the two "baddies" lie dead in the sand, the rest do not have the sense to stay quiet and let that speak for itself. And so life goes on.

With this production, Threefold provoke debate. They also inspire insight. They may need to prune themselves in some directions, but they have a real sense of how to engage combatively with drama.

Margaret Hannon is an actor and a physician.

CRIME OF THE 21st CENTURY

by Edward Bond

Crooked House Theatre Company

THEatre Space at Henry Place

9 - 28 April 2001; reviewed 16 April

BY MARGARET IRISH

ALL HOPE IS DESTROYED AT THE END of Edward Bond's *Crime of the 21st Century*, when the social fabric finally rips apart. If this is a message we in the new century need to hear — and you get a strong sense of the didactic with Bond —

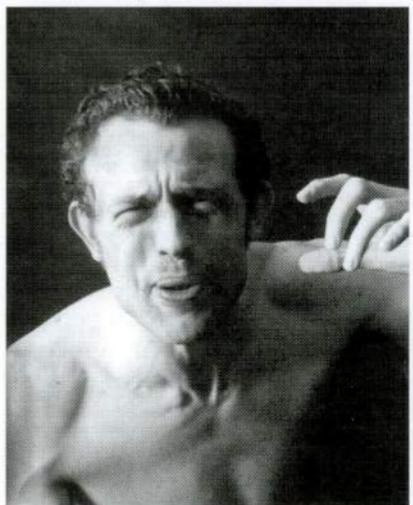
opinions & overviews

it is certainly not what we want to hear. The dilemma for anyone staging it is how to draw the audience into this stark world without watering down the play. In Crooked House's version there is no sense of hope anywhere along the way, so that their excessively bleak production has the ironic effect of lessening the final impact.

The play takes place some time in the future, in which people scrape a living in the ruins of cities, in constant fear of an all-powerful army. Hoxton, a middle-aged woman (Anna Swords-Murphy), has found a spot of relative comfort to live in among the ruins. An old man (Andrew Buchanan) and later a young man (Steve Gunn) arrive looking for water, and despite her protests, decide to stay on. The daughter she abandoned (Yvonne Ó Hara) turns up looking for revenge. Hoxton is neutral towards them all, taking what she can get, pushing everyone away and showing no regret. Eventually one of her spurned co-habitants betrays another to the army, who mutilate the offender in response. This sets off a chain of violent reaction where seemingly small, selfish choices have horrific consequences. Hoxton dies to the incantation of her one belief: "me, me, me."

Bond's play is a carefully structured voyage into the dark side. The chronicle of horror includes blinding, amputation, and a man, desperate to escape surveillance, cutting himself open to remove an identity tag cemented to his ribs. But people can be as bad as the army: Hoxton pours water onto the ground rather than give it to a parched traveller; a man leaves home as his dying wife screams for help; unwanted children can be smothered. The older characters are hardened and heartless and the young are trapped — the girl a traumatised victim, the young man turning savage by dint of experience.

Bond lays out the tiny steps a group of people take on the road to barbarity, acts of selfishness and mistrust that acquire weight over time and predispose people to worse. They are all so obsessed with their personal welfare that they cannot form bonds for their common good — a scenario that should ring certain bells in today's Ireland. The play builds up to a



INTENSE: *Crime of the 21st Century*

howl of remorse for the awful consequences.

It is very much a play of the 21st century, with its sense of foreboding, its harsh warnings about the cult of individualism, its fears that a super-efficient technology could become the ultimate instrument of social control. It expresses a profound despair about the future we face if we continue on our present track. Crooked House observe Bond's detailed instructions: set, costumes and stage action are strictly as he outlines. But despite com-

mitted acting from the cast of four and a clear attempt to fully realise his vision, the production is difficult to engage with.

John Doheny's set is a complicated white structure, a ruin with ramp, cell, makeshift table and fireplace. This is too much clutter — an attempt at realism in a futuristic play that would work best on a bare stage. Director Peter Hussey chooses to focus on the state of moral numbness that the characters inhabit; what fails to emerge is any trace of the humanity that might make us see something of ourselves in them. We see none of the tensions between the selfish and social impulses in each individual, or between that characters themselves as they try to form bonds. At several stages there is a possibility of collaboration: both men ask Hoxton to leave with them, and both later ask the daughter too, but the girl wants to stay with her mother — and all these options come to nothing. But the fleeting hope in these moments fails to come through, as it must if the play is to fully express the terror of guilt in the closing scene. The character of the young man, for example, does not seem to develop. Yet from a hopeful start he shows considerable strength through various tribulations until he too is pushed over the edge.

Crooked House have made an admirable foray into territory that is well beyond the theatrical comfort zone. But they take Bond's world too literally. The people they depict are so unlikely and unlikable that we can safely switch off. We get no sense of how ordinary they are, how their seemingly trivial choices are grains of sand that can eventually become an avalanche.

Margaret Irish is completing an MA in Modern Drama Studies at UCD.

DEAD FUNNY by Terry Johnson

Rough Magic Theatre Company
Project Arts Centre, Dublin

2 May–2 June 2001; reviewed 4 May

BY LIAM MACKEY

THE TITLE OF TERRY JOHNSON'S *Dead Funny* neatly defines the central theme of a play which finds hilarity embracing horror, and farce forever teetering on the brink of the abyss. In short, this is *Carry On Weeping* by any other name.

The play opens on a tense domestic moment in the troubled marriage of Richard (James Wallace) and Eleanor (Kate O'Toole). The sex has seeped out of their relationship and, at Eleanor's insistence, Richard has all too reluctantly stripped naked for a massage and video exercise designed to refire the engines of passion. Instead, at a delicate point which, it's fair to say, holds the audience rigid with attention, Johnson detonates a slapstick gag straight from the old school of Britcom, and the effect is all the funnier for the explosive release of tension which ensues. Thus, the scene is set for the high-wire act to come, as Johnson proceeds to walk the finest of lines between laughter and tears.

The notion that comedy can both mask and reveal raw emotion is further explored as we meet Richard and Eleanor's friends Nick and Lisa (Miche Doherty and Janet Moran), another couple with problems to spare, and affable loner Brian (Mal Whyte) whom we quickly suspect has his own "issues" to resolve.

The news that their hero Benny Hill has died shocks Richard, Nick, Lisa, and Brian, who are all members of a kind of Dead Comedians' Society who worship the old guard of Hill, Howerd, Morecambe & Wise, and the rest. Only Eleanor remains unmoved, convinced that there is more calculating style than genuine substance to



DING DONG! Kate O'Toole and James Wallace in *Dead Funny*

her husband's devotion to the old funny-men. She has watched him watching the videos, she says, and appreciation, she notes, is not the same as enjoyment.

It's an important speech, because many in the audience for *Dead Funny* may well share the same reservations about the nudge-nudge, wink-wink school of British comedy. Thankfully, such doubts in no way prove an obstacle to an appreciation of this play, even if its author does count himself among the faithful. Or at least so one must conclude from the gleeful attention to detail with which the members of the club pay homage to their heroes.

Indeed, it's a real testament to the quality of Terry Johnson's writing, and the cast's vigorous expression of his work, that as the full costume wake for Benny Hill builds to its climax, the borrowed gags, riffs, and routines are not only frequently funny in themselves but also, at

this strange remove, a powerfully effective counterpoint to the volcanic emotions threatening to erupt through the jollity at any moment.

So when, for example, amidst scenes of general mayhem, Eleanor is accidentally stripped of her dress to reveal sexy lingerie beneath, we immediately recognise the moment as a set piece Benny Hill gag; except, in the very next breath, we are plunged back into the painful reality of marital breakdown as Eleanor reveals that she bought the underwear in a further attempt to win back her husband's affection. This is the kind of emotional rollercoaster which *Dead Funny* rides throughout an especially gripping second act, as the characters plunge from high farce to grappling with shocking revelations that will have life-changing consequences for them all.

In a fine cast, Kate O'Toole is outstanding as the strong-willed but vulnerable

Eleanor, a pivotal figure around whom much of the drama rages, while Mal Whyte as Brian takes a familiar camp stereotype across a line that Benny Hill would never have even dared approach.

In a sense, *Dead Funny* is all about that dynamic: taking the conventions of British knockabout comedy, not at face value, but as a means to get behind the cosmetic surface of things, to the heart and the gut and even the groin. It is not giving away the precise ending to say that the play concludes, in classic tragic-comic fashion, with the spotlight on two faces as masks of sorrow and hilarity.

So it should be. Witty, moving and thought-provoking, *Dead Funny* is a sharp reminder that sometimes you really do have to laugh just to keep from crying.

Liam Mackey is deputy editor of Hot Press and a columnist with The Irish Examiner.

DOUBLE CROSS by Thomas Kilroy

Impact Theatre Company

On tour; reviewed on 24 May 2001 at the
Granary Theatre, Cork

BY PAUL HAUGHEY

FIRST PRESENTED BY DERRY'S FIELD DAY in the early '80s and now revived by Limerick's Impact Theatre Company, *Double Cross* is a difficult but rewarding work. The play offers a fictionalised interpretation of the lives of two real-life WWII figures Brendan Bracken and William Joyce, both of whom were of Irish lineage. One worked for the British government, the other for the German.

What gives this play its driving force is Kilroy's suggestion that both men were two sides of the same shilling, both as individuals and in what they represented. To emphasise this, Kilroy has one actor assume the roles of both Joyce and Brack-

en, in this case played by the excellent Darren Maher. Kilroy explores the way in which both men deny or dilute their Irish past, both determined to fully align themselves to their chosen empires.

This desire to reinvent oneself makes for fascinating subject matter. Bracken, born in Tipperary and raised in County Limerick, was the son of a stonemason who was one of the founders of the GAA and had possible links to the IRB, the forerunner of the IRA. A brilliant business strategist, Bracken controlled some of the important newspapers of his time, inventing himself to suit his needs as he went: Eton graduate, friend of royalty, man of the people, whatever it took to sway prospective allies to his side. He caught Winston Churchill's eye and was made Minister of Information, a crucial post in the war effort. That an Irishman, of rebellious, nationalist stock, should be running one of the most important offices in Churchill's war cabinet surely must qualify as one of history's great ironies. And that a second Irishman, William Joyce (albeit born in NYC), acted as his German counterpart, redoubles the irony.

One of Kilroy's early works, *Double Cross* is rather wordy and heavy with costume and scene changes, but in the hands of director Patrick Burke, judicious editing in text and stage direction result in a fluid and engaging work. A set of three black boxes, and a simple but effective backdrop of three strips of white sheeting stretched from floor to ceiling, along with imaginative lighting (also by Burke) and the actors' skills create a myriad of locations internal and external. The other two cast members, Jo Jordan and Robin Lee, play all remaining characters — which include narrators, Joyce and Bracken's partners, and others — with great flair and skill.

Kilroy explores the similarities between

opinions & overviews

Bracken and Joyce by examining their respective relationships with the women in their lives. Both reveal an incapacity to maintain fully honest relationships, as both are dishonest with themselves about their pasts. Bracken suffers from impotence, Joyce from excessive jealousy;



COMPLEX: *Double Cross*

Bracken has a cancerous throat, Joyce has a death wish and plays Russian Roulette with his identity towards the incoming Allied forces. As both men, Maher effectively crosses the range of necessary emotions, from outright arrogance to insidious manipulation, undercut with a startling vulnerability, allowing the audience to understand and perhaps empathise with these complex individuals. Maher, under Burke's perceptive direction, allows us access to Kilroy's sug-

gestion that these men were as much victims as anything else, finally crippled by a past they could not accept.

Double Cross is not an easily accessible work, with the weight of detail and information at times difficult to absorb. The use of film — always problematic in theatre — is perhaps more distracting than entralling, but does work well in the finale; audio clips of various radio programmes of the time also slow things down a tad. Nonetheless in the hands of Impact, this early Kilroy work is overall an engaging and satisfying piece.

Paul Haughey has reviewed theatre for The Irish Times, Arts West, and Galway Bay FM.

THE ENTERTAINER by John Osborne

The New Theatre, Dublin

25 April–16 June 2001

Reviewed 21 May BY PETER CRAWLEY

THE YEARS HAVE NOT BEEN KIND TO *The Entertainer*. This is as true of John Osborne's play as it is for his titular protagonist. Archie Rice, a failing, unfaithful vaudevillian, is bewildered by the winds of change, trapped in the shadow of his ailing father and losing his battle to keep the past alive. Similarly, Osborne's work is locked in a hermetically sealed vault marked "Britain, 1956." It has aged as well as fresh cream and its relevance here and now tastes distinctly sour.

Following *The Cherry Orchard* late last year, the New Theatre Company's second production begins to make their moniker rather ironic. So far, theirs seems to be a theatre yearning for the past, focussed on fading portraits of characters singularly unable to deal with the "new." Here then, is another domestic setting revealing another family displaced by the progression of time. The difference, this time

around, is that the precise political position of "the angry young" Osborne gives it a specific sell-by-date that has long since elapsed. Set against the Suez crisis of 1956, *The Entertainer* records a time of unrest for Britain, both at home and abroad — demonstrations in Trafalgar Square, trouble in colonial Cyprus, and the impending resignation of a Prime Minister. The Empire was suffering a crippling blow from which it could not strike back.

Making a tentative departure from absolute naturalism, Osborne presented this play as a series of domestic "sketches" punctuated by Archie's music-hall "turns," a sort of cod Brechtian framing device, where scenes of fraught family life are intentionally undercut by the bare-board "staginess" of jingoistic, vulgar, and unamusing comedy. This kind of shoestring presentation might have been particularly appealing to the "no frills" New Theatre where its suffocatingly rigid little stage make Osborne's virtue their necessity. That seems to have been the only attraction however, because it's clear that Ronan Wilmot and David Murray's jointly directed production could find little resonance in the play besides.

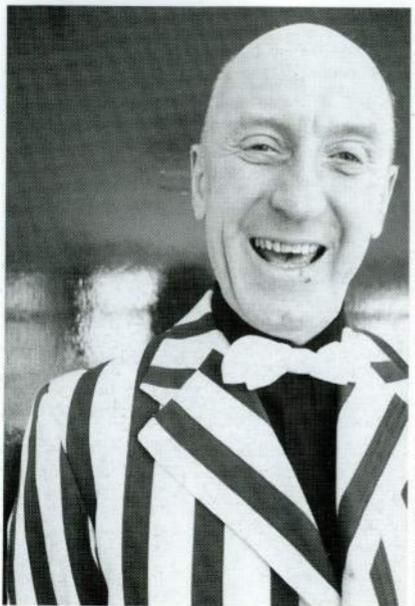
The opening dialogue between Billy and Jean Rice gets the show off to a stilted start. Billy is a retired music hall comedian and a grandfather with a tendency to reminisce. Supposedly an Edwardian throwback with dignified articulation and noble deportment, he is ill-served by Terence Orr's jittery cockney codger. Meanwhile Lorraine Horgan, as the long-absent educated granddaughter, sustains a performance that can be only described as a long, drawn-out wince. Her low-lidded, faraway stare conveys the constant intimidation of someone about to be hit at any second. It's hard to know where the blow is coming from — Jean is supposed to be

one of the few people of action onstage, a representative of the younger generation who has far fewer qualms when it comes to Trafalgar Square rallies.

Marie McNamara fares best with a sensitive performance as Archie's suffering second wife, the anecdotal Phoebe — overly made-up and permed to 1950s perfection. But by the time Wilmot's fading Archie joins the family, wearing an anachronistic black t-shirt and designer suit, we have a very strange domestic mix indeed.

As more and more gin is poured in the house, so the more maudlin the reflections become; the more bigoted the casual remarks about Poles next door and insidious "wogs"; and the more contentious the mentions of the Suez, where Archie's son Mick is serving. The abortive Suez venture split Britain politically and also revealed a widening gulf between generations. But if the frequent espousing of political positions and state-of-the-nation style addresses gesture to wide cultural significance, in prioritising Archie, the play actually remains something of a one-man show. You can see why Laurence Olivier was so keen to play the role originally.

Archie, the middle generation, is enshrouded in throwaway remarks and caustic routines that don't raise a titter at the strip-show, and deny any real communication at home. The consequence is that you cannot take him at his word, and he is an unsympathetic and unsatisfying focus point. When, late in the play, Ronan Wilmot meaningfully intones "I'm dead behind these eyes," his apparent emptiness is expressed with such hammy depth, it's confusing whether he means it or not. Similarly Archie's drunken impersonation of an "old fat Negress" as he sings the blues for his dead son could be a moment where his self-protecting irony



SHOWMAN: The Entertainer

breaks down, but Wilmot makes it a sympathy-destroying parody, replete with minstrel style open-palmed "jazz hands." Either way he it not worth caring about and neither is this poor realisation of an inexplicable choice of play.

GLORY BE TO THE FATHER

by Cónal Creedon

Red Kettle Theatre Company
On tour; reviewed on 20 April 2001 at the
Town Hall Theatre, Galway

BY PAUL HAUGHEY

SOME PHILOSOPHERS SUGGEST WHAT truly separates people from the animal kingdom and defines us as human is humour. Apparently humour has no survivalist function — we don't need it to

keep living. But it can be practically useful, as it could be in Cónal Creedon's *Glory be to the Father*, which uses humour to explore the fatherless world of a young man, Mossie (Frank Mackey). This is a memory play sparked off by Mossie's realisation that he is about to become a father himself. But Creedon's humour relies heavily on cliché and stereotype, with characters represented by colloquial sound-bites, rather than as flesh and blood individuals.

One of the primary functions of humour is the release of pain in a communal environment, in safety. True humour is the public exposure and examination of buried thought, of the fears and frustrations of the body politic, in a way which is non-threateningly effective. Creedon, however, reinforces rather than releases those fears and frustrations by his reliance on one-dimensional characterisations. Such an approach to characterisation might be acceptable if the plot or motif were the central character itself, but in this play no clear central theme is present, leaving one wondering, in the end, precisely why such an under-developed and misguided play was produced at all.

The play opens with Mossie returning from a night out with his girlfriend. Having received news of her pregnancy, he begins to reflect on his earlier home life. He was brought up by his mother (called Sis and played by Rita Evelyn Smyth), with his father nowhere present. The one male role model in his life was his uncle Jojo (Pascal Scott). Scenes of Mossie's earlier life are played in flashback; we revisit a particular point in the past when Sis started to chafe against being single, and when a bewildered Jojo wondered how to respond to his sister's unhappiness. What is apparently intended as the catalyst of the play's true action occurs when

Mossie's estranged grandfather (Terry Byrne) arrives on the scene; but what this arrival prompts is never really clear.

The device Creedon employs to tell this tale is Mossie's movement in and out of the past. Mackey dips into the action to become the child Mossie, and intermittently becomes the adult Mossie again — outside the action, narrating the unfolding events. This technique reveals Creedon's experience as a novelist — and inexperience as a playwright. The use of narrator in plays is difficult at the best of times and needs to be fully justified, and ideally used sparingly. The shift of Mossie from child to adult insider and then to outsider punctures credibility and coherence.

The most basic level of *raison d'être* was impossible to discern from play or production. The revelation that the grandfather who had arrived unexpectedly after many decades' absence is in fact an impostor, but is nonetheless accepted by Mossie as a valid role model on which to make his own life choices, is unconvincing both logically and theatrically. There is no allowance in either style or structure for the introduction of what is essentially a symbolic character (i.e., "Everyfather") and a thematic lynchpin.

Whatever weaknesses exist in this script, they were not spotted by director Ben Hennessy, who is also the company's artistic director. The failure of the work must lie with Red Kettle as much as Cree-

don. The responsibility of assessing a play's merit, or potential merit, after all, lies with the production company, on which an author relies for expertise. Perhaps the production of this play points to a larger problem in play development at Red Kettle and possibly in the sector as a whole. Should not the first and foremost



WHAT'S FOR THE TEA? Glory be to the Father

concern of any theatre company be quality of material? The alternative is copious amounts of bathwater, but no baby.

HAMLET by William Shakespeare

Praxis Theatre Laboratory
The Crypt Arts Centre, Dublin
5-9 June, 2001; Reviewed 9 June
BY BELINDA KELLY

ORIGINALLY ESTABLISHED IN LONDON IN 1985, Praxis Theatre Laboratory is now based in Roscommon. They are, according to the programme for their production of *Hamlet*, an experimental and small-scale

opinions & overviews

touring company that works through collaborative process and, in this case, without a named production director.

The stage is bare apart from several wooden crosses stacked together. The audience is seated around the central playing area. A piano strikes and Horatio (Olivier Schneider) opens the play with a prologue written by the company's founder, Sam Dowling (who also plays Polonius). Without further ado (or indeed, even Scene one) we are swiftly dispatched to the Court for the scene in which we first meet Claudius, Gertrude, and the titular hero. Before it's clear who's who, the troupe exit and Hamlet (William Rowsey) rips into his first soliloquy, in which he rails against his mother for betraying his recently-dead father. This monologue is intrinsic to our understanding of Hamlet's character; it is here that Shakespeare weaves his spell between the audience and their protagonist. But, as we only just had a glimpse of Hamlet's mother, his confession is impossible to absorb.

Jan Kott has said: "Hamlet cannot be performed in its entirety, because the performance would last nearly six hours. One has to select, curtail and cut. ... One can select at will. But one must know what one selects, and why." One has to assume that Praxis knew what they were selecting, but unfortunately that knowledge is never transmitted to the audience. Here the lack of an objective coordinator blunted the production's vision at the source. Because the charged opening scenes were deleted, we were denied a metaphysical drama. The scene in which Hamlet comes face to face with his dead father's spirit was trimmed considerably, ensuring we miss out on the full depth of the moral dilemma Hamlet faces. The Ghost's fatal advice to Hamlet and Hamlet's reaction to that advice were also



PEEPING: Sam Dowling in Hamlet

chopped, thus removing any reason for Hamlet's psychological journey through the play. We also lost Horatio's intriguing proposal of madness. These edits compromise the power of the play.

The cast members did not appear to be listening to each other, and at times the verse was declamatory. There were, however, passages with admirable clarity of diction and some welcome irreverence. Sean Duggan succeeded in creating two stylistically distinct performances as the Player and Laertes. He has a commanding stage presence and wonderful timing. Carol Brophy gave a strong performance as a confident but doomed Ophelia. Natalia Geci both designed the clever costumes and composed witty, Chaplinesque piano pieces.

What was staged at the Crypt was not a production of *Hamlet* but a collage of scenes which felt unfinished, not ready for an audience. Even if more rehearsal time had been devoted to the production, the over-zealous editing would not have given us enough of the play. I don't go to *Hamlet* for the highlights.

Belinda Kelly is an actor and writer.

THE HOMECOMING by Harold Pinter

The Gate Theatre, Dublin

7-30 June 2001; reviewed 12 June

BY NICK MCGINLEY

THE GATE'S PRODUCTION OF PINTER'S *The Homecoming* was always going to be special, representing as it did a theatrical homecoming of sorts for Ian Holm, its star. Holm played the pivotal role of Lenny in the play's premiere 36 years ago; here he returns to the play to take on the role of the aging patriarch Max. In turn the challenge of playing Lenny passed to Ian Hart, as versatile and electric an actor as you'll care to see. With the Gate having already staged two Pinter Festivals in 1994 and 1997, this production is part of a third bound for Lincoln Center in New York. Pinter has been very good to the Gate, and the Gate has been very good to Pinter.

The Homecoming remains a truly astonishing work and one that has aged well, in that it has never lost its power to disturb and provoke wildly divergent audience reactions. It can be read as allegory, but works perfectly well as naturalism, albeit in a world inhabited by strange, emotionally stunted people.

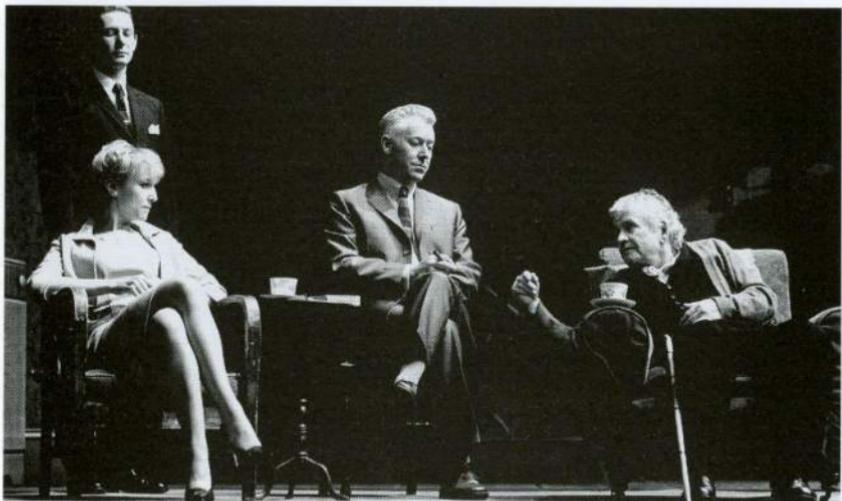
Teddy, a successful academic based in America, returns to his North London home to introduce his wife of six years to his family. His family is comprised of his seventy-year-old father Max, and his two brothers Lenny and Joey. Lenny, a sharp autodidact, is non-committal about the nature of his occupation, but towards the end it transpires he is a pimp. Joey is a labourer and keen amateur boxer. Their uncle Sam, an effete, gentle man who is a chauffeur, lives there also. There has not been a woman in the house since the death of Max's wife, Jessie. One can almost smell the pungent male body

odour gone stale in a world bereft of the female touch.

The truly shocking ambiguity of the play lies with Ruth, Teddy's wife. While Lenny's plan to set her up both as whore/mother-figure of the house seems to objectify her horribly, it is she who is in command throughout. Her seduction of Lenny is blatant, yet she always holds back just enough of herself to maintain her power amongst such high levels of male sexual frustration. After Joey (nicely underplayed by Jason O'Mara) has spent two hours upstairs with Ruth, he admits under interrogation from Lenny that he "didn't get all the way." Pretending to be outraged that his brother should be insulted in this way, Lenny's explanation of this is that she's "a tease."

"Tease" or not, she has maintained control over her body, with no damage to herself from the hulking Joey as a result. Her choice to stay on in London and set herself up as a whore in one of Lenny's Soho flats seems either male fantasy or an ultimate feminist statement of independence — from husband, from children, and from every form of male possession, bar the sexual. Her true reasons are never explained, but the fact that it is categorically her choice is made abundantly clear.

Lia Williams pulls off this balancing act between calculating femme fatale and (perhaps) hopeless nymphomaniac with panache. At first she seems to be a woman playing with fire that will consume her, but such is the command she conjures over all the men in the house that we soon realise that it is they who are in the greatest danger. Nick Dunning plays Teddy as a man desperately insecure in his relationship with his wife, who knows that to face his family will show the lie to his superficially successful family life. Was it the past she claims



FAMILY PLAY GONE WRONG: Williams, Hart, Dunning, and Holm in *The Homecoming*

to have in glamour photography that made him ashamed to show her to the family? Or was it the fact that in a family used to sharing everything, he knew he wouldn't be able to keep Ruth separate and obliged to him alone?

By the close of the first act, all Teddy's bravado from the far-off land of academia has been ruptured, and he embraces the animal territorialism of his past when he says, "Come on Dad. I'm ready for the cuddle." Dunning delivers the line with such menace that one knows that if pushed, he is every bit the match for Max or Lenny. Dunning's Teddy is not a man who quietly renounces his self-respect in giving up his wife, but a pragmatist who realises that she belongs more with them than with him and he seems somehow reconciled to this fact by his departure.

The play has not only aged well in terms of retaining its shock value, but also in terms of sheer entertainment. It is an

incredibly funny piece, with the bulk of the best gags spewed out in the first act by the curmudgeonly Max, masterfully performed by Holm. Such was the frequency of one-liners that the strikingly large living room where the play was staged felt like a surreal set where a sitcom was being filmed in front of a live audience. One wanted to cheer and shout out the character's name every time someone entered. "Joey!!" "Lenny!!" This hilarity which greets the vicious repartee in the first act gives way to the ever more surreal and ever more disturbing situation at the play's close. This was a fine production of a modern classic, ably directed by Robin Lefevre with a suitably musty environment supplied by designer Eileen Diss and a wonderfully expressive lighting design from Mick Hughes. One can only hope that the Gate's production of Pinter's *One for the Road* featuring the playwright himself will consider a Dublin sojourn

after London and New York.

Nick McGinley studied drama at TCD, film production at DIT, is a freelance script editor, and writes for RTÉ Online and Aertel.

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST

by Oscar Wilde

Gúna Nua Theatre Company in association with the Civic Theatre, Tallaght
On tour; reviewed at the Pavilion Theatre,
Dun Laoghaire, on 17 April 2001

BY MARGARET HANNON

MORE ABOUT ADAM THAN OSCAR, Gúna Nua's hip, contemporary *The Importance of Being Earnest* is very clever. But an abundance of cleverness for its own sake, to paraphrase Wilde, is apt to make one very sick and tired. So does the director, David Parnell, give us anything more? Well, yes and no. He shows a new way of playing an old play, which takes time to get into, but which captivates by the end. For most viewers, the surprises are no longer in the plot — the play's been on television so often — so Parnell gives them to us in his method.

The concept of the production is that we see a group of actors coming together in one of their flats to read *The Importance of Being Earnest*, presumably with a view to staging it. After a few pages of reading, they discard the text and begin to "move" it. By the end the characters are fully realised and the outer "frame" has disappeared. What we see is theatre-making exposed — the process from reading to staging, warts and all.

By the end the production works like a perfect cartoon — with larger-than-life, perfectly wrought characters. But not everyone in the audience, on the night I attended, chose to wait it out past the interval. Why? It's not because the first act is weak overall.

There are some wonderful scenes, as when Alan Smyth as Algernon and Simon O'Gorman as Jack sit on the sofa that, in the external story, belongs to fellow actor Lawrence Lowry — it's Lowry's flat where this rehearsal/performance is taking place. Lowry plays multiple characters and here is playing the butler Lane, but slips character just long enough to show his irate displeasure at the liberties the lads are taking, albeit with the blessings of the script! Another wonderful moment happens when Lowry is thrown a cap from backstage, and whacks it on to become another character — but not before, in a blink, acknowledging the cap-tosser.

These juxtapositions between the "real" and "unreal" on stage are very sharp. We see the three faces of man: his real real self, his idealized real self, and whoever it is he's pretending to be for that second. When Algernon plays "Bob the Builder" on CD, in place of the inappropriate "Wedding March" called for in the script (Jack has just made a dog's dinner of impressing his prospective mother-in-law), we see another deft exploitation of the possibilities inherent in the director's choice of staging: "Can we fix it?"

All in all, though, the first half feels like watching good actors rehearse, and one does start to wonder how much longer they will be able to draw it out. It is hard to tell the gaffes from the gags, which is disquieting.

The approaches to acting run the gamut. Some actors are "on" from the go. Alan Smyth is always assured as the lovable rake, Algernon. Some acquire mannerisms: Gene Rooney's tics as Miss Prism are side-splitting, but with them, she also adds an interesting level of sinistrerness to the character. Some are initially stiff and awkward as they tentatively feel their way towards their characters. Others

opinions & overviews

are the opposite: Karen Ardiff is a very languid Lady Bracknell, sprawled on the settee while incongruously spewing forth Wilde's arch words. But she eventually creates a truly original Lady, who blooms in the second half, batty and bitchy, like a cross between stage Rosaleen Linehan and yer wan from *The Weakest Link*.

The design is strong. Mark Galione, though he experiments initially with sometimes over-bright light, gets it perfect in the second half, from beautiful dappled sunlight in a "garden" to ultrachic multi-aspect lighting in an apartment, and so on. The actors credibly and ably move objects around on Karen Weavers' set to change locations from outdoors to in, and vice versa, in seconds. These changeovers are woven seamlessly into the action, and are entertaining in themselves.

David Parnell had a great idea. It's the perfect update, from Wilde's "age of surfaces" to our own. Simply substitute a

Smirnoff for a sherry here, a laptop for a notebook there, and the resonances are uncanny. Parnell just should have gone wholeheartedly for his concept from the start. The "play on a play" concept only partially worked.

IPHIGENIA AT AULIS by Euripides

The Abbey Theatre

23 March–21 April 2001; reviewed
on 28 March

BY CATTRIONA CROWE

IPHIGENIA AT AULIS RAISES ALL KINDS of questions which are of enduring importance: questions about war, about nationalism, about people's attachment to power and status, about the moral rightness of the sacrifice of life, and about the higher powers who are so often evoked when sacrifice is broached. But I would suggest that the overriding question that Euripides wanted to ask, and to go some way towards answering, in the play is:

What made Clytemnestra into a woman who murdered her husband and was in turn murdered by her son?

In most of Greek literature, Clytemnestra is presented as a murderous, adulterous wife, an uncaring mother, and an inappropriately power-hungry woman who deserves her fate. But in all of these portrayals — in Homer's *Iliad*, Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, Sophocles' *Electra*, and Euripides' own *Electra* and *Orestes* — she is ten years older than she is in *Iphigenia*; her children are grown, she has been ruling Argos for 10 years in Agamemnon's absence, and she has a lover, Aegisthus.

Her portrayal in *Iphigenia at*



HIP: Eithne Woodcock and Amelia Crowley in *Earnest*

ORLA MURRAY

Aulis is very different: she is the emotional and moral centre of the play. At this point in her much-described life, she has a troubled past and a terrible future awaits her. She is Helen's sister. Her current husband, Agamemnon, has killed her previous husband, Tantalus, and her infant child, in order to marry her. She is the mother of four children, one of whom is to be sacrificed to Artemis, and another of whom will murder her many years later. She herself is later to murder Agamemnon, on his return from the Trojan War.

When we meet her in Katie Mitchell's Abbey production, she wheels a pram on stage, containing her future killer, Orestes, and is followed by her young daughter, Iphigenia, whom she has brought to Aulis under the impression that she is to be married. As the truth of her daughter's fate is revealed to her — that Agamemnon intends to sacrifice Iphigenia to the gods for the sake of his war effort — she makes a series of impassioned, angry, grief-stricken appeals to Agamemnon and Achilles, which together form the rhetorical and moral underpinning of the play.

The feeling of the script is entirely on Clytemnestra's side. Her arguments are cogent, moral, logical, and emotionally moving. Agamemnon has no serious answers for her, and she is supported by Achilles, Menelaus, and the Chorus. She is obviously and completely right in everything she says. This is the first time a "good" prelapsarian version of Clytemnestra has appeared in Greek literature. She is presented by Euripides as all that is best in respectable Greek motherhood. This must have been a shock to audiences used to thinking of her as a byword for adultery and murder.

Having tried everything she can to save her daughter, Clytemnestra eventually acquiesces with Iphigenia's decision to

sacrifice herself for the greater glory of Greece, but she is ruined by the event. She takes no succour from the news, at the play's end, that Iphigenia has been spirited away by Artemis and that a deer has been killed in her place: "...Do you expect me to believe this story?/ Isn't it a lie, concocted for my benefit,/ To soothe me and keep me quiet?/ You bring me plasters for a broken heart." The play ends with a stilted speech from Agamemnon, exhorting her to go home and take care of Orestes. He then departs for the Trojan War.

At this point, anyone in the audience with a heart wants to kill Agamemnon. It is not at all unbelievable that Clytemnestra would harbour murderous feelings towards him until he returns to Mycenae many years later with Cassandra in tow as his concubine. Without condoning her slaughter of them both, we now understand it far better than before. Euripides, in what was his final piece of drama, explains Clytemnestra to audiences who, up to then, had not been asked to dwell on the dreadful and incurable wound caused to her by Agamemnon's sacrifice of their daughter.

In this production, Mitchell keeps Clytemnestra as the emotional centre of the play, but she also plays with the political and military issues raised by Euripides, and uses character, set, and costume to underscore Don Taylor's relaxed modern translation.

Agamemnon is presented as weak-willed, indecisive, intent on hanging on to power, but horrified by the sacrifice demanded in order to do so. Like all of Euripides' characters, he is multi-dimensional, and the way he is played makes us sympathise to some extent with his dilemma. Chris McHale's urgent performance conveys an appropriate mixture of emotional stress and self-serving duplicity.

opinions & overviews

ty. His military costume is standard twentieth century despotic, jackboots and epaulettes, the same uniform worn by Gestapo chiefs, Red Army commanders, and Latin-American dictators.

Menelaus (Frank Laverty) is presented as a blustering, angry, but probably good-hearted chap. He is dressed in a cream linen suit, which conjures images of the British Raj and French colonial governors. Achilles (Justin Salinger) is the model of the insecure young man, convinced that he is not getting his due, that he is somehow being slighted all the time, and at the same time, courageous and persuadable to the right course of action, even when it goes against his interests. Maybe Euripides is telling us something about the heroic character at close quarters. Mitchell has him kitted out in slightly too voluminous jodhpurs, so that he looks mildly foppish and not quite the type to take on "the whole bloody army," as he refers to them.

The Chorus is one of the delights of this production. Five Greek housewives (Kelly Campbell, Emma Colohan, Stella Feehily, Liz Kettle, and Gina Moxley) on a day trip to Aulis, they are quintessential rubbernecks, there to look at the heroes of the Greek army, whom they describe in terms appropriate to a fan magazine. They appear clutching their handbags and small Greek flags, and wearing decorative heels and headscarves. They are delighted to be involved in the action of such earth-shattering events, and give us the benefit of their observations, sometimes sounding like sententious biddies — "the wise never fear life's disasters, if virtue has been their discipline from childhood" — or "rash actions have fearful consequences" — sometimes giving voice to the feelings of the audience — "there's something evil in a goddess that demands such sacrifices." They weave in

and out of the action, each distinct and with her own characteristics (two of them smoke), and provide a fluent and flexible commentary on events as they unfold.

Iphigenia is presented as a very young girl; when we see her first she is in pigtails and ankle-socks. Her extreme youth emphasises her vulnerability and innocence, and makes her courage all the more touching, while enabling a subtext to her decision to die which can be read to some extent as early adolescent idealism and a capacity for self-dramatisation. Aristotle said in his *Poetics* that the character of Iphigenia is inconsistent: "for Iphigenia the suppliant in no way resembles her later self." It is true that she moves very quickly from heartbroken child begging her father for mercy to jingoistic young woman willing to give her life for her country, although she has moments of terror after her decision: "They'll hold my head back, by the hair," and at one point she says to her mother "We don't deserve this, do we?" surely a seriously poignant moment as well as a commentary on the capricious injustice of Artemis in inflicting this terrible fate on her.

Her way of dealing with what seems inevitable is to espouse male, military, nationalist values which emphasise heroism, self-sacrifice and love of country in place of the female values of modesty, industry and love of family. Mitchell underlines the falseness of this position by clever use of a microphone, having Iphigenia broadcast her more propagandist speeches to the troops waiting outside. The temptation to dress her up in a glamorous wedding dress is resisted. The dress is a purely ritual object, and she is wearing shoes two sizes too big beneath it. This emphasis on the childishness of Iphigenia makes her all the more inclined to excite our pity, but it



FLEEING FATE: Pauline Hutton as the title character in *Iphigenia at Aulis*

does point up the inconsistency referred to by Aristotle. Pauline Hutton gives an emotionally raw and very moving performance as Iphigenia, managing to complement Kate Duchene's modulated intensity as Clytemnestra.

In Mitchell's production, Clytemnestra first appears on stage dressed in an immaculate 1950s outfit: classic full-skirted dress, tight white jacket, heels, pearl necklace, and a serious hat. The 1950s are, I imagine, evoked as a period when women were exhorted to confine their activities to the home, and did so in large numbers until saved by Betty Friedan. Clytemnestra is, as we have seen, insistent on her rights and responsibilities as regards her position as wife and mother. At this point, she seems content to live her life as a decorous housewife, concerning herself with the organisation of her household and the rearing of her children. All of this is shattered by

Agamemnon's cruel decision.

Duchene plays the part with increasing emotional intensity, beginning as a slightly imperious woman accustomed to ordering people around, moving on to shock at the news of her daughter's fate, then to bitter accusation of her husband, which contains within it her long-repressed resentment at his forcing her to marry him, and ending with hysterical grief at her daughter's death. She uses gesture beautifully to summon up timeless images of desperate women imploring, accusing, beseeching, despairing. She carries the burden of our pity and terror with great strength, and achieves a complete identification of the viewer with her terrible loss.

Francis O'Connor's set is an imposing semi-derelict space with tall windows, used to great effect to control light access to the stage and characters. Sunlight is palpable outside the set, and sometimes floods in. It is possible to believe in the

opinions & overviews

Greek fleet becalmed in the bay below, the soldiers hot and bored. The physical space feels temporary, as an army camp should; no-one has any reason to establish roots here. The only touches of colour are Iphigenia's red dress when we first see her, Clytemnestra's red fingernails, and the red flowers which can be glimpsed outside one tall window, and which are used to garland Iphigenia before the sacrifice. Otherwise the colour scheme is monochromatic and neutral, with Peter Mumford's intelligent lighting providing visual relief.

There are two moments of great directorial cleverness towards the end of this production: one occurs when Iphigenia's sacrifice has taken place, the goddess has been placated, and the wind begins to blow. The doors at the side of the stage burst open, and a hot, polluted, poisonous wind gusts on to the set. It is the original ill wind, which in this case will blow no-one any good, leading as it will to a ten-year war in which thousands will be killed. This piece of stagecraft is totally in keeping with the ominously prophetic atmosphere of the play, and has the kind of grandeur that remains in the memory.

The second is the staging of Agamemnon's farewell speech to Clytemnestra: Mitchell puts him in front of a microphone, and has him address his despairing, grief-stricken wife through a public speech to the troops, making political capital from his dreadful crime. He never looks at her, does not touch her, and leaves the stage without acknowledging her personally at all. As the Chorus cheers on the troops, rubbernecks to the last, our last glimpse of Clytemnestra is of a bewildered, abandoned woman whose life is in ruins, and whose husband would not even attempt to comfort her. The

seeds for Agamemnon's murder, and all that it leads to, are sown.

Catriona Crowe is an archivist in the National Archives. This review is adapted from a pre-show talk delivered at the Abbey Theatre on 3 April 2001.

KEVIN'S STORY by Maeve Ingoldsby

Barnstorm Theatre Company
On tour; reviewed on 2 April 2001 at the
Beltable Arts Centre, Limerick

BY MARY COLL

THE WORK PRODUCED BY BARNSTORM Theatre Company generally connects directly to the everyday issues facing a young audience, and is determined by the message as much as the medium. This allows teachers and parents to follow on from performances with discussions and workshops back in the classroom which focus more closely on the agendas raised in the plays. In this process there is a real danger that the best elements of good theatre will be lost or sacrificed along the way, as too often happens with work created within the parameters of theatre for young audiences, especially educational theatre.

However, *Kevin's Story*, written by Maeve Ingoldsby in collaboration with Barnstorm, succeeds in reaching its targets in almost every respect. It is well written, well directed, and performed with genuine energy and humour. It allowed the audience to think, or more importantly to change the way they think, while being entertained by, and engaging with, a story they could easily relate to.

Kevin's Story deals credibly with the problems created by individuality and difference, when a child does not conform

to the rules and regulations of the group and lives by a set of values and behaviour which can set him or her apart. Kevin (Niall Power) has a vivid imagination and frequently slips into daydreams and fantasies. This gets him into trouble with the system — with his parents, with his teacher, and with the other children who have no patience for him and tend to make fun of him. His days are always a series of minor disasters because he gets lost in a fantasy world with everything from dancing schoolbags to Stallone-style commando raids.

One of his greatest problems is trying to live in the shadow of his perfect sister Katy (Eva Bartley) and her equally perfect friend Becky (Jennifer Barry) — an issue which most children struggling with siblings could readily identify with, judging by the jeers that greeted the adult voiceover urging him to "be more like your sister." Kevin's friend Mark (Peter Daly) enjoys the wildness of Kevin's imagination, especially as it spills over into their games; all of the children share a fear of their common enemy, Basher (David McCorry), the archetypal school bully who terrorises the playground.

The play takes Kevin through an ordinary school day, with all its anticipated lows, leading to an unexpected high, achieved through the kind intervention of an adult named Slow Joe (Patrick Bridgeman), the school caretaker. Joe redefines the inherited wisdoms Kevin has grappled with all his life, and gently teaches him new perspectives, as well as the survival skills one rarely learns within the classroom. This gives Kevin the courage to be true to himself, and in doing so he achieves the kind of success he has literally only dreamt of before. This is the ultimate

feelgood story, but with 21st century attitude.

Working very tightly together the cast managed to convey the concerns and dilemmas of young children with seamless performances that caught their vulnerability as well as their limitless energy. It also achieved this without patronising its young audience or preaching to them, which is hugely important to maintain credibility. Philip



YOU OLD BAG: Kevin's Story

Hardy's direction kept everyone on the move and kept the pace moving along at maximum speed, facilitated by a lively original score from John Ryan, matched with clever set and lighting design by Moggie Douglas and Trevor Ahern. Holding the attention of any audience is a challenge, but particularly so when the average age is less than ten. It is to Barnstorm's credit that they achieved this while simultaneously captivating the imagination of those present who were slightly older, and infinitely more cynical.

Mary Coll is a poet, critic, and broadcaster.

opinions & overviews

KING LEAR by William Shakespeare

Second Age Theatre Company
On tour; reviewed 26 February 2001 at
the Gaiety Theatre, Dublin

BY SUSAN CONLEY

THE PACKED HOUSE AT SECOND AGE'S opening night at the Gaiety was comprised largely of school-age children: their energy filled Dublin's grand old theatre, and served as reminder to the adults in the audience that a healthy irreverence towards the work at hand is, well... healthy. They unknowingly channelled much of the impatience that the adults among them were too well behaved — and socialised — to reveal: the bits the kids found boring elicited a rumbling of shifting, whispering, and giggles, and unfortunately, there was ample opportunity for them to express themselves. Those of us who were there to take Alan Stanford's Lear seriously (as directed by himself, by the way) were hard pressed to do so in a dreary production of a play that is hard going under the best of circumstances.

Yet there's so much potential in the play to appeal to a contemporary audience. The series of events wouldn't be out of place on a daytime talk show — "I Gave My Kids Everything And Look At The Thanks I Got"; the freshness of the themes of sibling rivalry, bad boundaries, and reconciliation is part and parcel of what continues to make Shakespeare producable. The modern psyche hasn't fallen far from the Elizabethan tree, and the story continues to resonate and absorb even when the production is less than stellar. The dysfunctional Lears, despite their royalty, are fallibly human after all, and when played truthfully and humanly, provide the kind of archetypal family that is

entirely recognisable.

Perhaps it is the absence of Queen Lear that causes the King to demand that his daughters stroke his ego and profess the quantity of their love for him. When Cordelia, youngest and wisest, will profess only to the quality, she is summarily banished, and the kingdom that was to be divided into thirds is now split down the middle. Scheming Goneril and Regan soon turn against their father, whose shock at their betrayal wedded with his overarching pride force him out into the wide world and ultimately into madness. Cordelia returns with the army of her husband, the King of France, war breaks out, and almost everybody dies.

Here the setting and design were updated, and both were standard "Shakespearean Modern" — the set was comprised primarily of two large brick walls painted gold, and the first scene, set in the banqueting hall, was straight out of a Habitat catalogue with its straight backed, cloth covered chairs, golden goblets, and long matte black table. Yet Bruno Schwengel's design revealed itself to be fluid and graceful, as the floor-to-flies walls shifted, turned, and carved space within the space, devolving from the posh castle interior to the windswept hill and back again. The costumes also filled the usual minimalist requirements, with the men in Armani-like garb of severe black suits and leather coats, and the women in shiny Karen Millen-esque gear.

As directed by Stanford, the acting was uneven, with at least half of the cast not entirely confident vocally or with the text. A young Emma Moohan looked great as Cordelia, and one imagines that with time and seasoning her presence will make itself known vocally as well.

The court attendants seemed as camp as tents, and Liz Schwartz was in a world all her own as a grating, semi-hysterical Regan. Johnny Murphy shone as the Fool, and was a perfect example of an actor in complete control of Shakespeare's poetry: because he is so at home with the rhythm and cadence of the lines, he is by extension fully engaged with his character as well. Stanford himself was nearly impossible to understand for the majority of the play: his growling, almost guttural delivery made a hash of many of the longer speeches, and overall, one missed much of what

ought not to happen when a production has even the most nominal focus and vision.

THE LIEUTENANT OF INISHMORE

by Martin McDonagh

The Royal Shakespeare Company
at the Other Place,
Stratford-upon-Avon

Reviewed on 12 May 2001

BY MICHAEL BILLINGTON

MARTIN McDONAGH AND CONOR McPherson represent the polar opposites of modern Irish drama. McPherson writes haunting, literary plays about blocked male emotions, the blight of booze and the tension between the pastoral dream and the Emerald Tiger. McDonagh, from the vantage point of South London, pens wilder, scarier plays that both mock and exploit the Synge-song Irish tradition in a thoroughly postmodern manner. Critics, certainly in Britain, tend to favour McPherson. But McDonagh has a fizzing, irrepressible talent seen at its best in this blackly brilliant and noisily controversial comedy: easily his most potent brew since *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*.

The only surprise is to find the play getting its premiere in the Royal Shakespeare Company's Stratford studio, the Other Place. Apparently it was rejected by both the National Theatre and the Royal Court, but the final choice of venue is highly appropriate if only because McDonagh's play shows a positively Jacobean zest for violence. It starts in an Inishmore cottage in 1993 with the dozy Donny and the androgynous Davey agonising over a headless cat: their dilemma is how to convey to Padraic — Donny's gunman-son who's supposedly too mad for the IRA — the news that his prize pussy has been run over. Gradually, and teasingly, McDonagh lets the cat out of



MONARCH: Stanford and Murphy in King Lear

Lear had to say, in more ways than one.

It was in the shadow story of that other dysfunctional clan, the Gloucesters, in which the production found any strength, poignancy, and feeling of justice fulfilled. And it was Edgar (Robert Price), wrongly displaced by his bastard brother Edmund (Simon O'Gorman), whose journey as a character seemed the most clear. Watching him reconcile with his estranged father (Robert O'Mahoney) made us forget about that other lot — and that seems something that

opinions & overviews

the bag. First we see mad Padraic, who wants to form a splinter group within the INLA, routinely torturing a playground drug-pusher: when he hears that his feline, whimsically-named Wee Thomas, is "unwell" he speeds urgently home. Then we meet a trio of Padraic's fellow-gunned men who are the real cat-batterers, and are using the dead moggy as a decoy to lure their prey home and carry out a revenge killing. Completing the circle is Davey's cow-blinding, crop-haired sister, Mairead, who waylays Padraic on his return to demonstrate her paramilitary fervour and sexual excitement at the sight of a weapon suitably cocked.

What is clear from this exuberant satire is that McDonagh himself is both picking off political targets and offering an ironic commentary on Irish drama. Through mad Padraic, McDonagh nails the sentimentality and Puritanism of the macho Irish gunman: Padraic drools over his cat while tearing the toenails out of an indiscriminate dope-peddler ("If you concentrated exclusive on the Protestants I'd say all well and good") and angrily rejects Mairead's taunting suggestion that he may be sexually into boys ("There's no boy-preferences involved in Irish terrorism, I'll tell you that! They stipulate when you join").

Equally, McDonagh lampoons the fashionable appeal to historical sanctions in order to justify contemporary violence: "Do you know how many cats Oliver Cromwell killed in his time?" one of the trio of pussy-bashing avengers solemnly asks. And the cow-maiming Mairead, like the egg-breaking Slippy Helen in *The Cripple of Inishmaan*, represents the willful eccentricity of young women in an essentially male world.

McDonagh deploys humour and violence to satirise the monomania and fanaticism of republican terrorism. But,

like all his plays, this one constantly alludes to the great Irish tradition. McDonagh is faux-naif when he protests his ignorance of the past: his work is filled with a postmodernist pluralism that is both ironic and playful. Mairead's passionate arousal at the sight of Padraic's gun-toting violence proves that McDonagh is drowning in Synge. And the endless jokes at the expense of firebrand political rhetoric takes us back to O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars* where the speechifiers hymn "the sanctity of bloodshed" while



COCKED: The Lieutenant of Inishmore

women tear each other's hair out in a pub-brawl. A mocking knowingness is a vital part of McDonagh's dramatic character.

The case against him is that he paints with too broad a brush; and I've heard it argued that *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* offers an essentially Anglocentric vision of Ireland and, in particular, does scant justice to the varying shades of opinion within the INLA. Against that, I'd claim that McDonagh has the courage of his theatrical convictions and pushes every situation to the limits of absurdity. Within the play's opening seconds, bits of brain spurt out of a dead cat. Padraic and Mairead

fiercely embrace in the midst of an ear-shattering, *Goodfellas*-style gun-battle. And in the final scene the almost parodically homely cottage has become a blood-bathed slaughterhouse strewn with sun-dered body parts which are methodically hacked into smaller pieces. The scene is both grotesquely funny and highly political, in that McDonagh's pay-off shows that the violent retribution has been based on a case of mistaken feline identity. "So all this terror has been for nothing?" one character numbly enquires only to be told that "It has." This is not just a clever plot-twist. The implication is that, after decades of guerilla warfare and dedicated terrorism, Ireland is no nearer to achieving unity. It's a deeply cynical conclusion but one wholly in keeping with McDonagh's stance as a sardonic, subversive observer of the Irish scene.

Fittingly, his play is directed by American Wilson Milam who proved himself a master of orchestrated mayhem with the trailer-trash play, *Killer Joe*, and who here choreographs the violence with daunting skill. And, in a predominantly Irish cast, there are superb high-strung performances from David Wilmot as the ascetically murderous Padraic, Kerry Condon as they scrawny boyish Mairead, and Owen Sharpe as the deceptively girlish Davey. But what happens next to this wild comic desecration of Irish household-gods? I am told the RSC production is going to the West End. But McDonagh's play also deserves to be seen on Irish turf. I just wonder, given that it has something to offend everyone, if there is any theatre with the balls to put it on.

Michael Billington is theatre critic of The Guardian.

LIPS TOGETHER, TEETH APART
by Terrence McNally
Focus Theatre Company

Reviewed 26 April 2001 BY SUSAN CONLEY

TERRENCE McNALLY'S *LIPS TOGETHER, Teeth Apart* is drenched in upper middle class white American angst. This angst suffuses everything in the play, from real estate to the creation of cocktails, all the way through childbearing and childrearing, up to sickness and death. Angst, angst, angst, throughout the whole holiday weekend during which this award-winning 1991 play is set.

But this is not a thinly veiled criticism — it's not a criticism at all. It's something akin to wonder at the experience of hearing and watching a story unfold as smoothly, and up until the third act, as seamlessly as it does in McNally's examination of the then-burgeoning AIDS crisis. The myriad undercurrents — and boy, are they myriad — eddy, swirl about, and crash as regularly as the waves off the deck of Sally and Sam's Fire Island beach house.

Fire Island is a popular summertime gay haunt, and the previous owner of this house, Sally's brother David, was part of the gay community that barbeque, bask, and flirt on its shores. But David has died from AIDS, and Sally and Sam have come to assess the property, bringing another couple with them: Sam's sister Chloe and her husband John. A weekend literally surrounded by partying homosexuals forces all of the four to come to grips with their prejudices, hatreds, and fears.

Their relationships are complicated by the fact that John has had a fleeting affair with the tense, brooding Sally, but Sally now wants nothing more to do with him. She wants a baby and thinks she may be pregnant, but Sam doesn't feel cut out for fatherhood. Chloe swans about, controlling, pacifying, preparing drinks and meals, determined to have a good time — even if it kills her and everybody else. She

opinions & overviews

flirts with the neighbours, practices song and dance numbers for her amateur theatricals, and generally attempts to create enough noise to drown out her fears for her relationship with her husband, who also happens to be dying of cancer.

As they say in New York: Oy vey! But again, oy vey in a good way: McNally is a master at threading one storyline through the next, at exposing one fact after another as directly and efficiently as Chloe sweeps one pitcher of drinks away to replace it with a platter of hamburgers. Not an ounce of energy is wasted in lugubrious exposition as he layers motives on top of desires on top of expectations in a way that is rich and never overpowering.

That the four are intertwined is expected, but it's the level of their involvement that is continuously, consistently, and effortlessly exposed. McNally sets out to tell a complex story simply, and largely succeeds... up until that third act. Information suddenly comes out in a rush; the leisure with which we have reached that point is thrust aside; and while he throws in some last minute zingers to keep us interested, one can't help but feel a bit disappointed that "Big Issues" were taken from their nearly subtextual place of power and trotted out before us so baldly, so blatantly. John's forgotten cancer was suddenly remembered, Sam suddenly definitively didn't want to be a father, and the piece wandered off into a unfocused, uncentered, weak conclusion.

As far as the production goes, what it lacks in pace it made up for in style: the set by Robert Lane was absolutely perfect, and was full of little tricks and treats for the audience: the wind chimes that rustled in an absent breeze, the flying kite, the flags that fell from the flies, "tossed"

by the neighbors. The design was brilliantly faithful to the sort of architecture one finds in that part of the world, and it fit the space of the Focus to a T.

Orlaith De Burca and Paul Roe shone as the suburban brother and sister, and their "Joisey" accents were dead-on; while Peter Holmes and Ashling McLaughlin were fine, their roles were



DIPPY: Lips Together, Teeth Apart

far less showy and appeared somewhat under-investigated. Most of all, the abundance of physical life created by the actors in their parts — making drinks, flying kites, painting canvases, the sorts of actions that make up daily life — were fully explored and gave a depth to the world of the play that is often missing on the Irish stage.

LOCO COUNTY LONESOME

by Patrick McCabe

Black Box Theatre Company
On tour; reviewed at Andrews Lane
Theatre, Dublin, on 4 May 2001

BY MAURICE DUNPHY

GLORIOUSLY GIDDY TALES OF BLOOD, GUTS and slaughter in a small, unnamed borderland town are reduced to inanity in Black Box's production of Pat McCabe's *Loco County Lonesome*. Joe O'Byrne originally directed a version of *Loco County* for Co-motion in 1994; this production, also directed by O'Byrne, features considerable re-writes — most significantly, it's performed by two actors as opposed to the original five — but still fails to engage fully with its audience.

In a disused abattoir, the immaculately white-clad "losers-in-love" Vance and Moss while away their time chopping benches, singing cowboy songs, and re-enacting the events of the recent manslaughter of a local girl by her abattoir-owning father. Vance struts his stuff as the macho unperturbed loser, recently dumped by his lover Jody for abattoir-owner Munro, and only occasionally betrays his genuine heartbreak. In his pain, and pettiness, he recoups his "pound of flesh" by stealing meat from the abattoir. The equally forlorn Moss, still grieving his daughter after many years, struggles to imagine what life might be like should his wife undergo an urgently-needed operation. While Vance steals back his "meat," Moss loses his, albeit indirectly, through his wife's ongoing amputations. Butchery is central to their sad existence and, as partners in slaughter, they are perpetually lonely, occasionally volatile, and potentially depraved as they try their damnedest to bury their real-life personal disappointments.

Between them they excitedly "play" all the anti-heroes of their tragi-comic tale, primarily those of "Big John" Munro, his daughter Della, and her ex-convict lover, Packo. The story they enact concerns Della's ill-fated rendezvous with Packo one night at the abattoir. Awaiting the arrival of Packo, she flirts wildly with the butchering duo, her sexually fawning admiration of their "choppers" exposing the seedier side of the bored, immature, "poor-little-rich-girl" about town. Packo duly enters to take Della to "McGrath's Field" for sex but Vance and Moss engage him in recounting his prison days and fatefully delay his intended departure. Big John arrives intending to confront Vance on the recent meat-thefts but uncovers his daughter's affair and demands its immediate cessation; in the ensuing conflict Packo threatens to shoot Munro. Munro somehow manages to wrestle the gun away and in the resulting scuffle accidentally shoots Della dead. Munro falls apart, as does his abattoir, and Packo goes pure "loco."

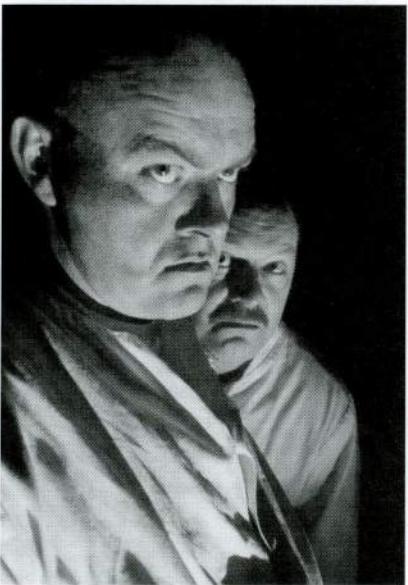
Vance and Moss are frigid, funny, and frightening foils for each other in this grotesque tragi-comic view of small town Ireland. At least they should be. McCabe's play, however, depends on precise character changes in order that these two dramas — that of Vance and Moss in the aftermath of the tragedy, and then their telling and re-enactment of their tale — unfold clearly. The cast of Pat Nolan, as Vance, and Pat McGrath, as Moss, rarely achieve this precision, and the long-winded, and at times confusing, details of the narrative become increasingly wayward.

Nolan depends primarily on voice for his various characterisations but rarely matches this with physicality, constantly resorting to an ill-defined, stock physical repertoire. Confusion sets in when his various accents slip, particu-

opinions & overviews

larly in the exchanges between Packo and Big John, in which he plays both characters. The more physically adept McGrath fares somewhat better and his tragic-comic Della comes to life accurately and believably.

O'Byrne's direction fails to establish the primary dramatic tension of Vance and Moss's present situation and most of the production's energy goes into the re-enacted story. His cast struggle to clarify their



LOSERS: Loco County Lonesome

separate roles but, trapped within the existing framework of the production, they float undecidedly between the two and "story-telling" wins out at the expense of the play's inherent theatricality. Roisin Kearney's white lighting remains static for too long and fails to assist or enhance the mood of the early part of the

production. When the lights eventually change and interact with the stage action there is a marked improvement in the stage picture as the blank set, furnished only with a metal butcher's bench, comes into its own as an effective theatre space.

McCabe said in a recent interview in *The Sunday Tribune* that the play is about "the way people mythologise the events of their lives" and while the writing in *Loco County Lonesome* certainly achieves this, resonating with the painful reality of loss, fear and confusion, it here fails to materialise in either dramatic or theatrical terms. This version of *Loco County Lonesome* is already "chopped and carved" down from McCabe's original attempt at a stage version of the material; but even more paring was necessary here to have created truly explosive theatre from this dark sad and hilariously funny piece of storytelling. As it stands this *Loco* limps along and largely fails to work, running out of steam long before its final telling images of the lost and frightened butchers, trapped by their deadly secret.

Maurice Dunphy is a community arts worker with Tallaght Partnership.

MACBETH after William Shakespeare

Blue Raincoat Theatre Company
The Factory Performance Space, Sligo
20-31 March, 2001; reviewed 30 March

BY MATTHEW CAUSEY

THE LIFE OF WESTERN THEATRE IS BASED in appropriation and repetition of the accepted canon of texts and performance styles. Innovation is established through a borrowing of the myths and staging techniques of history. Aeschylus and Sophocles rewrote Homer. Euripides rewrote Aeschylus and Sophocles. Seneca rewrote

the Greeks. The Renaissance playwrights rewrote the Latin plays. Marina Carr rewrites Euripides, and the experimental theatres of today rehearse the strategies of an early avant-garde. It is not so much a problem or lack of creativity as an artistic methodology that, in part, define the practice of theatre and set it off from so many other arts. Blue Raincoat's recent production of *Macbeth* continues this reassessing of earlier theatrical forms (physical theatre) and a rethinking of a classic text (Shakespeare) in an inventive and exciting manner.

Macbeth marks the fourth production of a Shakespeare play during the ten-year history of the Sligo-based company. This production is a finely crafted and technically sophisticated adaptation of Shakespeare's text, even though the play has been radically edited and altered by the company to fit their physical approach. Less a comment, analysis, or meditation on Shakespeare's play, the performance is rather an appropriation of the text toward its own end. Blue Raincoat's *Macbeth* is not unlike a jazz composition such as John Coltrane's improvisations based on the melody of "My Favorite Things." It is not exactly a Julie Andrews Broadway show-stopper, but more a quotation of the original — something new out of an old familiar theme. Blue Raincoat's *Macbeth* is a performance of structural aesthetics. The performance strategies, not the play, is the thing.

The performance style of Blue Raincoat emphasises physically based and improvisatorially devised stagings, with the actor's body serving as the primary point of convergence. The performance is shaped by danced and mimed physical scenarios and tableau vivants, played against quiet, still readings of the text. There is an intriguing melding of imagi-

tic staging, evocative video projections, and an elaborate music score (borrowed from the Kronos Quartet, Philip Glass, and Tom Waits). These elements are played against the ensemble's collective body that brings a swirling imagination to the stage. Video loops of approaching armies are projected against a rectangular screen on the back wall while a manic and angular parade of bodies circle the space to the delirious and demented carnival rhythms of Tom Waits' music.

The training of the Blue Raincoat ensemble, which lies in the corporeal mime of Etienne Decroux and the focus exercises of Anne Bogart, is well exhibited in *Macbeth*. The performers' centered body work shapes the ensemble into elaborate and baroque stage pictures that dissolve, transition, and reestablish themselves across the small stage of the Factory Performance Space. The timing of the Blue Raincoat company is impeccable. The production is staged to its pre-recorded music score with the accuracy and rhythm of film editing. Perhaps, this is the strongest element of the work: a rigorous timing that creates the urgency and seductive drive of the performance. Instead of psychological verisimilitude of character motivations revealed through textual narrative motivating the performance, it is the work's inner logic, physical images, and rhythmical timing that establishes the momentum.

The piece's self-reflexive nature, structural concerns, and mediated elements lift the work of Blue Raincoat out of the questionable and historically isolated physical performance practice of some European theatre companies. By "historically isolated" I mean that much physical theatre is based in an earlier aesthetic of the liberation politics of the 1960s, which privileged the presence of the body as an essen-



DANSE MACABRE: The company of Blue Raincoat's Macbeth

tionalised, unfragmented, and unchallenged unit. Blue Raincoat is moving toward a more contemporary practice of the performing body as a shifting identity in conflict and convergence with technology, deconstructed narratives, and new codes of cultural construction.

The stage consists of a rolling bed that acts as throne, battlefield, and stage, and an armoire, which when its doors are opened and closed creates a stage within the stage. The *mise-en-scene* is in constant motion. The set pieces roll across the space in a dance with the actors' collective body. The movement echoes the liquid manner of acting that creates flows and energy fields that are captured in image while characterisation and gesture float from actor to actor like an infection.

There is a similarity to the complexity of Shakespeare's language and the density of physical image on Blue Raincoat's stage. One can mark the multitude of

themes, relations, and metaphors that recur, while still remaining engaged in the narrative flow. Nonetheless, like the poster for the show that ambiguously and inexplicably depicts Judy Garland in *The Wizard of Oz*, this *Macbeth* is only vaguely about *Macbeth*. But, that's a good thing.

Matthew Causey lectures at the School of Drama, Trinity College.

THE MEMORY OF WATER

by Shelagh Stevenson

The Peacock Theatre, Dublin

24 May-30 June 2000; reviewed on
28 June BY ROSY BARNES

IT SEEMS THAT MOTHERHOOD HAS BECOME a sort of lazy symbolic shorthand for contemporary writers. And who can blame them, with the rich pickings of easy metaphor to be had? Take Shelagh Stevenson's award-winning *The Memory*

of Water, which boasts an absolute catalogue of baby-related events: an underage pregnancy in the past (fall from grace), the possibility of pregnancy in the present (new hope), forced adoption (abandonment and betrayal) and final resolution of dead child from past and no pregnancy in the present (all hope vanquished)...

The Abbey has already commissioned a new play from English writer Stevenson, who is, incidentally, the only woman playwright included in the Abbey's 2001 programme.

The story of three sisters the night before their mother's funeral, *The Memory of Water* is Stevenson's first play. Themes include memory, forgiveness (ultimately), and families. Oldest sister Theresa (Marion O'Dwyer) is an organic veggie, meting out homeopathic remedies to anyone listening. Middle sister Mary (Jane Brennan) — the one who thinks she is pregnant — is a successful doctor, embroiled in a passionate affair with a married man. Baby sister Catherine (Dawn Bradfield) is a bed-hopping, narcotic-popping neurotic who moans about her inability to form long-term relationships.

Three wildly differing stereotypes. Add sneering, sarcasm, and a pinch of jealousy. Quip until mixture light and fluffy. All you need is the "ghost" of their mother (and her clothes), caught in an unexplained fifties time-warp, and — voila — instant recipe for comedy and heartache.

To be fair, Stevenson has a great way with the one-liners and the first part of the play is fun and frisky, though perhaps more reminiscent of seventies sitcom than the bleak black comedy we were lead to expect. (But no complaints there). However, now we know why sitcoms tend to stop after half an hour. At over two and a

half hours long, *The Memory of Water* feels long and the light comedy can't take the strain. As a result, Stevenson ups the ante, but apparently loses her way and substitutes theatrical "set-pieces" for real development. What was an engaging light comedy descends into an uncomfortable mixture of sloppy farce and sentimental drama.

Perhaps if Stevenson had gone for either pure farce or pure drama the result would have been more successful. As it is, she goes for the best of both worlds and ends up with neither. An extreme sentimentality undermines the ruthlessness needed for good farce, while the self-consciousness of the comedy undermines the emotional life of the characters.

However, structural problems apart, there is still some smart and knowing writing. Unfortunately, director Mark Lambert ignores the dry finesse of Stevenson's sentences, in favour of the crashing camp of the set routines. Where lines should be acerbic and telling, they are delivered with a cymbal crash. Where the more farcical elements demand precision and control, this production offers the laboured lumbering of a pantomime. This production does nothing to counteract any of the hammy moments; simultaneously overlooking the play's qualities and amplifying its problems. It's a crying shame to see such a talented cast appear so stagey.

But the most disappointing thing of all lies in the play's depiction of women. It is impossible to get away from the play's strangely conservative nature. Without a relationship, without a child, there is nothing. "I have to learn to live in the cold," says Mary when she realises she isn't pregnant after all and her deadbeat boyfriend isn't about to ditch his wife for her. Women are, as ever, depicted as unable to function without the role of wife and mother.

opinions & overviews

If this attitude was merely embodied in the character, rather than the assumption of the play itself, it would be interesting. After all, Mary is incredibly selfish: caring little for the life and marriage of the



SISTERHOOD: The Memory of Water

woman whose husband she wants to steal. And if the play were satirical, it might even have something to say about women's attitudes to themselves. However, we are never asked to take an objective view and the simplistic production does nothing to rescue the text from its own complacency. We invited to view Mary's situation as tragic and we, like her, wallow in it.

But perhaps we can't completely blame Stevenson. She has after all inherited a tradition of wet stage women that goes back centuries. And one must by necessity recognise the expectations of an audience even if one wishes to go past them. Unfortunately Stevenson just stops right there, trusting that babies and pregnancies are enough to get us all emotional. The audience are satisfied. "Oh yes — we recognise that theme."

But it could have been so much more! Couldn't it?

A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM by

William Shakespeare

Corcadorca Theatre Company
Fitzgerald Park and Fota Gardens, Cork;
reviewed on 7 July in Fota Gardens

BY PAUL HAUGHEY

ONE OF THE MAJOR, THOUGH OFTEN overlooked, contributors to Irish art — be it visual art, writing, or theatre — is, of course, the weather. Our much-bemoaned ever-cloudy skies force would-be writers indoors (read pub). They force aspiring painters to draw mostly from the palette's darker hues, and they keep sensible theatre practitioners firmly walled in. Nice, then, that the Corcadorka crowd have continually chafed against this restriction by staging outdoor productions — from their promenade *Phaedra's Dream* to last year's *Trial of Jesus*. This summer they staged Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in two parks in and around Cork city. But working outside brought disadvantages as well as advantages.

Top of the list of positives is the sense of occasion, of expectation, that such a novelty creates in its audience. Gathering at the beautiful big house on the well manicured lawns of Fota Gardens, close to

where the first scene was to be staged, the collective excitement was palpable — only a few bottles of bubbly and a fistful of cucumber sarnies could have made the evening more perfect. In time we were guided by music to the setting for scene one — a steep embankment with symmetrically aligned pillars connected by large stone steps, led up to by a long gravel pathway. We gathered on the grass verge to await the players' entrance — and what an enchanting entrance it was.

Introduced by the hypnotic music composed by Mel Mercier and Linda Buckley, three figures, tiny in the distance, move along the pathway towards us — the first a swaggering Theseus, dressed in white like a Texan oilman, complete with cowboy hat and boots. He is followed by a mincing Hippolyta; and finally by the manservant Philostrate, carrying an oppressive throne chair on his back. The combination of body movement, costume colours, and the flat, symmetrical landscape offered quite a striking impression, but not one which the performance could sustain fully.

Shakespeare's a bit of a tricky fish, of course — to stage him traditionally or to stage him adventurously? The war rages on, with the popular vote swaying to and from opposing camps at various junctures. But whatever side you swing to, any interpretation of Shakespeare's work must be consistent throughout.

It's not enough to alter a script in isolation, or by instinct and taste alone; one needs to view the work

as an integrated whole, aware that change in one area demands adjustment in others, if balance and beauty are to remain intact. Director Pat Kiernan's decision to cast Maria Tecce as Thesus and later as Oberon, king of the fairies, was an unfortunate one. Tecce is undoubtedly a good actress, and had the decision been balanced by cross-dressing in other roles, it may well have worked. As it was, two similarly strong female actors, Tecce and Elizabeth Bracken, playing Oberon and Titania, undermined the important representation of hidden desires and conflicting duties Shakespeare presents between the two characters, which, while not dependant on gender, is dependant on contrast.

Playing outdoors also presents its own problems, the primary one being voice control and projection; and it's not enough simply that the audience hear everything, but there are subtleties and wit in this particular work that require full expression. This was not always achieved,



CASTING A SPELL: *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

opinions & overviews

notably among the four lovers, but also between Bracken and Tecce, whom although maintaining volume and excellent diction, lost range and nuance.

The one player who did maintain range, subtlety, diction, and engaging presentation was Gerald Walsh as Bottom. Walsh's interpretation and presentation of the text was perceptive, imaginative, and masterfully controlled — a pleasure to witness. Shakespeare's mockery of amateur drama has rarely come across so well. Also in a strong supporting role was the setting itself, with the natural "props" intelligently and imaginatively used. A burnt-out tree stump became a throne; pathways delineated opposing fairy kingdoms; and the aforementioned stone steps framed by pillars became the royal court, all adding to a sense of communion with the mystical aspects of this play.

Overall, however, Corcadorca's production of this much-loved play, whilst containing imaginative and striking moments failed to maintain consistency either in the underlying approach or in the presented work. Nonetheless as a testimony of faith in the much maligned Irish weather, and as evidence of Corcadorca's continuing innovative approach, this production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was a worthwhile event.

MOTHER COURAGE AND HER CHILDREN

by Bertolt Brecht

Gerry Sinnott and Paula Holt in association with Vesuvius Theatre Company
The Olympia Theatre, Dublin
1–23 June, 2001; reviewed 12 June

BY VICTOR MERRIMAN

MOTHER COURAGE AND HER CHILDREN is a difficult play to do well. It is all too easy to do it badly. No one ever sets out to cre-

ate bad theatre, but sometimes the sum total of choices made, or not made, amounts to just that. This production was a case in point. Manfred Wekwerth, a longtime associate of Brecht, has written extensively about Brecht's work, and his writings return again and again to how, in



BIG MAMA: Tynne Daly as Courage

the English-speaking world, directors and actors just don't "get it"; doubtless this production would have fuelled Wekwerth's flame. Some of Wekwerth's complaints centre on blocking, and this was certainly a problem in this production directed by Vanessa Fielding, where elementary stage groupings were simply beyond its competence.

There is another sense in which Brecht's work is "blocked," and that is at

the level of ideas. Brecht saw capitalism as the deliberate imposition of limitations on human beings, and Anna Fierling is the creature of limited situations imposed by imperial warfare, which Brecht critiqued as a heightened articulation of the dynamics of capitalism.

Joe O'Byrne's decision to relocate the dramatic action to Derry in the early 1970s neutered the drama from the first scene. That the eldest son of a Traveller woman from Athenry would not only not be harassed by B Specials outside Derry, but accept their inducements to join up, is a proposition so ludicrous as to collapse the play, and render what follows meaningless. The search for crude correlations between imperial conflict and contemporary colonial repression deprives the production of its ability to engage with either.

Historically untenable, O'Byrne's translation is also theatrically disastrous. Brecht's purpose in *Mother Courage and her Children* is to create not reality but allegory. The location of relevance can be left to audiences. Jerome Bruner locates one of the pleasures of a work of art in the act of making connections, often between apparently unrelated phenomena and events. Brecht's dramatic strategies are specifically geared toward such an engagement, and this is especially evident in his deployment of irony. No subtleties survived the translator's attentions here, however, with historical mismatches, gratuitous anachronisms, and gross non sequiturs erupting all over the stage.

This version of Brecht's examination of war as "the continuation of business by other means" had a clear commercial strategy: choose a "theatre classic," attract a star to play the lead, and sell the "relevance" and newness of the production. Tyne Daly is an intelligent actor, technically sophisticated, and with strong stage

presence. She may one day have an opportunity to play Anna Fierling, Mother Courage. If she does, she could do worse than share the stage with actors as accomplished as Aoife McMurrough-Kavanagh, Des Nealon, and Vincent McCabe. They too deserve an opportunity to explore their roles in a coherent and thoughtful production.

Victor Merriman lectures in drama at DIT Rathmines Road.

ORIANA

Kabosh Productions

On tour; reviewed at Project Arts Centre, Dublin, on 10 March, 2001

BY CATHY LEENEY

OUTSIDE OVER THERE — WHERE YOU live when you're asleep — is the chosen country of Kabosh's *Oriana*. In a cut-out skyline of tall buildings, scaled, balanced upon, and toyed with by four silent performers, an urban dream-time is conjured up. The buildings part to reveal a fairytale bed, and between the stage and the audience, baby bear cots invite younger watchers to curl up and be carried away.

The performance begins with a dance of go-to-bed ritual, and at once, the intense imaginative life associated with sleep is signalled, for the bed is not only a resting place; it is a doorway into another existence, the threshold of a secret life. The physical skills of Seamus Allen, Mike Carbery, Allesandra McIlduff, and Aoife McMahon are wonderfully exhilarating to watch. With ease, they create a rainbow of moods from gravity, to charming innocence, to mischievousness. Choreographer Rachel O'Riordan, triumphs over gravity (Newton's kind) to achieve magical effects of suspension and altitude. Objects and people disappear and re-appear



FANTASY WORLD: Kabosh's Oriana

unexpectedly, and the windows, ledges, and crannies of the set (by designer Gary McCann) seemingly take on a nocturnal life of their own. The music by John Dunne is soft and rhythmic, muted by its journey through sleep.

Oriana means the golden, or chosen one, according to the programme, in which director Karl Wallace describes the story as being "about searching for your dreams," and about Oriana's decision whether to follow her friends or make her own path. Perhaps I was too distracted by the jinks and the grace of the players, but this narrative passed me by as I watched. What I did suss was that a seasonal theme was being worked out; and what I assume was a Winter sequence, with the performers wrapped in bias-cut, old fashioned dressing gowns, was nostalgic for a lost world of romanticised childhood.

Oriana is always entertaining, and sometimes beautiful and strange. How-

ever, it edits out the deep fright and disturbing surrealism of childhood nights. Who has never checked the wardrobe for intruders, or jumped into the bed from afar for fear of the hand that might shoot out from the dark, and fasten on your ankle like a vice? In Oriana, that terror is sugared into something more picturesque. The threshold that beckoned so promisingly early on is rendered more cosy than creepy, perhaps in a bid for reassurance.

The striking graphic design for the production is reproduced on the CD of John Dunne's score, which is available as a programme and memento.

Cathy Leeney lectures in the Drama Studies Centre, University College Dublin.

PASSAGE by Deirdre Kinahan

Tall Tales Theatre Company in association with the Civic Theatre, Tallaght
On tour; reviewed 25 May 2001 at Andrews Lane Studio, Dublin BY MARGARET IRISH

PASSAGE BEGINS WITH A WOMAN searching through the papers in cardboard boxes that are the remnants of her mother's life and finding nothing of any significance. Nora has led one of the undocumented lives, the life of an Irish emigrant in London. But her daughter persists, and by the end of the play has found a bundle of love letters and with them the story her mother had kept

from her. Deirdre Kinahan's play touches on the lives behind the lies we tell to preserve our illusions.

London-born of Irish parents, Kate is a successful young professional in a happy relationship with her partner Sara. With her mother's death she revisits the rift that caused them to break off contact, and realises she can now never solve the puzzles of her background — what her father was really like, and why her mother, who romanticised Ireland and her family there, never visited the place. An unknown cousin who calls with condolences provides the key. Kate is drawn to Brian as part of her mysterious Irish family, and also because, as she tells him: "you're solid, confident that you belong." He is drawn to her for more basic reasons. The family trail finally leads her to Dublin where she finds out the truth — that her mother was fleeing the disgrace of single motherhood when she took the boat. The only way Nora could survive was to invent a story of marriage and widowhood for her daughter and family, and to cut herself off from her country of birth.

The play centres around Nora, but the dead woman cannot tell her own story, and instead we get a patchwork of details. Kate recalls their shabby house, her mother's work in a launderette to support them, and the mistrust of people that kept them both isolated. On stage we see Nora (Julianne Mullen) in silhouette behind a screen, speaking the words of her earnest love letters to the accompaniment of innocent music and dancehall lights. The effect is of looking at a photograph, of listening to a young girl in love, yet Nora remains remote and unknowable. In the programme two young women smile radiantly from a battered photograph, but the play infuses this image with a sense of pathos and squandered lives.

The reciting of the letters by the shadow figure intercuts the action at several stages — an ingenious device, but one that is used too often. We quickly gather that Nora's innocence is being abused by the absent lover, and the final crisis is unnecessarily drawn out. Likewise the truth about her departure for England is signalled early and is obvious to all except Kate. But if Kate's anger at finding that her mother fled in shame seems extreme, it becomes understandable — the play suggests that the real grief is in finding the dream, the image of life in the far land being dashed.

Kate's lesbianism seems to serve only as another notch of alienation from her family background. Sara is the perfect partner, loving and sympathetic, jealous of Brian and of Kate's new Irish family. But having left in distress at Kate's infidelity, she does not appear again. We can only wonder what the Dublin relatives make of Kate's love life. The play sets up the tension between family and personal ties so well that it would have been interesting to see it explored further.

Phoebe Flint is an engaging Kate and Robert Shaw an amiably gormless cousin Brian. The scenes between these two are highly comic, with many gaffes such as Brian's gift of sausages to the vegetarian Kate. Maureen Collender's brisk direction makes the dialogue fly, although a very funny sequence of misunderstandings between the cousins could have done with a few more baffled silences. To the credit of all concerned, Brian's Irishness is never overdone. Billie Traynor plays a suitably motherly aunt Margaret, while Victoria Monkhouse struggles with the vaguer part of Sara, at her best when she has a clear stance to take — as in her scene of jealous conflict with Brian.

The play is strongest in the first act, when Kinahan catches the mixture of dis-

gust and fascination with which the London Irish view this country. Kate has many an apt phrase for this: Irish ballads, for her, are "like death threats couched in lullabies." But the enduring image of the play is of the woman behind the screen, the woman who cannot appear on stage, the tragic and defeated Nora.

PORT AUTHORITY by Conor McPherson

The Gate Theatre

Reviewed on 27 February 2001 at the New Ambassadors Theatre, London

BY IAN SHUTTLEWORTH

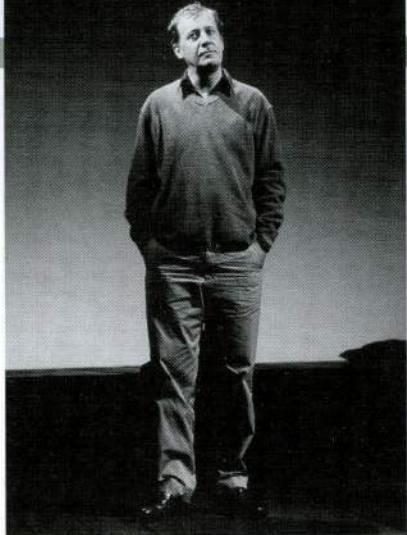
CONOR MCPHERSON CONTINUES TO BE ONE of the most consistently interesting and powerful playwrights in the British Isles today, but he does so while not writing what would normally be understood by the term "plays." *The Weir* was not just McPherson's breakthrough to a wider audience: it also seemed as if he was gradually moving away from his previous, mostly monologue-based, work and towards writing dramas in which people interact with each other before our eyes. In this respect, *Port Authority* is not only a step backwards, but causes us with hindsight to re-evaluate *The Weir* as simply ringing some minor changes on the monologic style which continues to be McPherson's sole territory.

In the earlier play, in effect, we can infer that the writer considered the exchanges between the characters as no more than a kind of verbal frame for the stories at the heart of the piece. Here, once again, we have a group of men — one young, one middle-aged, one elderly — standing on stage telling us their respective stories, five minutes or so at a time. The three stories are linked, but far more casually than in McPherson's similarly-structured *This Lime Tree Bower*, in which we heard essen-

tially the same events from three different viewpoints; here, each man's tale is self-contained, with just one or two minor references that throw out guy-ropes to show that it is taking place in the same Dublin as the others.

The stories are standard McPherson territory: basically, they are misses. A young bachelor and a 70-year-old widower tell of their misses in love, a middle-aged man of his miss in material life. In each case they tell of strange, almost random events generating compelling, impassioned sagas: that the crucial occurrences and people in our lives are not the ones we think or expect, and are not the ones we're actually with. Young Kevin, astounded to find himself in love with his female housemate, tries and fails to reconcile the nobility and honesty of his feelings towards her with the scuzzy world of desperate pub punk bands he inhabits. Middle-aged Dermot finds a plum job fallen into his lap and whisking him away to at least the edges of the world of international showbiz, but, almost in an older version of McPherson's *Rum And Vodka*, he drinks, pisses, and pukes it away, and ultimately learns that it was in any case all a mistake — the job was intended for a man who shares his name. Old Joe alternates his accounts of the mundanities of life in the residential home in which he now lives with his recollections of the woman he, like Kevin (his grandson?), suddenly realised he loved in passion-ate vain.

The tales are written with the same kind of "scrupulous meanness" by which James Joyce characterised his own style in *Dubliners*, although they are more engaging and less astringent in the telling than Joyce's short stories. For me, though, the smallest of points caused



SCUMMILY ALLURING: Stephen Brennan
in Port Authority

disproportionate annoyance. As the trio share Eileen Diss's deserted jetty, they are cued to their next bit of storytelling by a bell dinging once, twice or thrice as appropriate for each man. At one point, elderly Joe laughs his final line, then breaks down and moves away upstage... only for the beautiful moment to be shattered by that damn bell commanding him back, twice, as if he were Winnie in Beckett's *Happy Days*. It's a discordant note of schematic metaphor in the otherwise straightforward, natural world of McPherson stories.

As against that, he remains unmatched both in spinning yarns and in letting the narrators' characters emerge through their telling of the tale. Stephen Brennan gives a stoical but robust, even scummily alluring character to his tale of professional failure; Eanna MacLiam's Kevin tries and fails to clothe himself in the sassiness of the young, so that his sensitivity insists on showing through; Jim Norton is remarkable in finding subtleties of nuance and modulation in

Joe's tale. No great advances, then, but another gem of its kind.

Ian Shuttleworth writes about theatre for The Financial Times (London).

SHESAWHORE

Project, Dublin

April 24th – 28th 2001; reviewed April 25th

BY TARAGH LOUGHREY-GRAHAN

THERE'S A WHOLE NEW THEATRE LANGUAGE out there — are you brave enough to learn it? A new wave of theatre artists are integrating multi-media into live performance, creating what many believe is a new system of communication between artists and audience, one that may be an innovative response to the shorter attention spans of Western audiences in the "naughties."

Designer Neasa Hardiman and writer-director Deirdre Mulrooney's recent performance piece, *shesawhole*, speaks in this new language. *shesawhole* is a 35-minute show, inspired in part by Angela Carter's connection of two artists who happened to be named John Ford. This new production used as its source material a work from each of the Fords: the Jacobean dramatist's play *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* (1630), and the American filmmaker's *Stagecoach*, which dates from 1939 and which featured the then-unknown John Wayne. These works acted as a strong skeleton for both creators and audience to hold on to whilst engaging with this multi-media experiment.

shesawhole begins when a woman dies in the prairie, leaving behind her heartbroken husband and two teenage children, Johnny (Paschal Friel) and Annie-Belle (Una Kavanagh). Their father cannot cope with his loss and distances himself from his children, who grew up "out there, in that little house on the prairie, so lone-

opinions & overviews

some...[with] nobody for those young folks to talk to 'cept cows, cows, cows."

On her deathbed their mother told her boy: "Look after your sister." The two become very close. They had "silence and space and an unimaginable freedom which they dare not imagine." But they did imagine it, and he ends up paying her a little too much attention. Annie-Belle ponders the irreversibility of her defloweredness, and, in true *Blue Lagoon* fashion, eventually reality bites — she's pregnant. A whore she ain't — but in trouble she is. Luckily, though, the minister's son falls in love with her, and, a shot-gun marriage and a very suspicious mother-in-law later, her brother tragically ends all his sister's hopes for future happiness.

The actors also serve as storytellers, telling their tale in the third person. Just in case we, the audience, forgot that we were in a theatre, the projector operator sat in amongst us. At one stage, even he had to duck when the bride forcefully threw her bouquet in the audience's direction, obviously implying, to the amusement of all, that we were guests at her wedding.

The use of multi-media is all too often regarded as just a marketing gimmick. But the combination of live and prerecorded elements in *shesawhole* proved how effective the layering of different media can be, and how able contemporary audiences are to take in information through visual shorthand. One look at John Wayne on the screen was enough to trigger, effectively, various images of the beautiful Wild West in one's mind — elemental images of fire, water and earth, images of nature, encompassing human nature.

In a recent interview Deirdre Rooney said that "film is the medium of realism, whereas we are more inclined to look for poetry in theatre." There were glimpses of such poetry here, moments in

which props and language danced with media projections and took us with them. Sometimes, however, technology cut in on the dance uninvited and stole us away. If gimmickry did come into play, it lies in the performance being based around the almost-completely coincidental fact of the sharing of a common name.

Overall one couldn't help feeling that the show worked better in concept than it did in actuality. There was a sense of visual over-stimulation, as in the production's climactic moment, which was robbed of its full potential impact by the chaotic interaction of live and pre-



BUCKETS OF TROUBLE: *shesawhole*

recorded elements. *shesawhole* was a brave, risky experiment, one which paid some good dividends, but as with all forays onto new ground, there are still pitfalls to be overcome.

The standard of acting was commendable, with a wonderful, physical perfor-

mance from the enthralling Una Kavanagh. Louis Lovett gave Father Dougal a run for his money as the goofy, naïve Minister's son. Multi-tasking was the name of the game as actors doubled as projector operators and even screens; at an early stage Paschal Friel picked up a film projector and shot an image of the USA onto Annie Belle's dress as she described their life story.

she saw her was programmed to coincide with the annual Dublin Film Festival, but one hopes we won't have to wait another year to see what these adventurous artists' next move will be.

Taragh Loughrey-Grant works as a publicist and as a continuity presenter with TV3.

THE SPIRIT OF ANNIE ROSS

by Bernard Farrell

Druid Theatre Company

Town Hall Theatre, Galway

25 May–9 June, 2001; reviewed on

1 June BY IAN WIECZOREK

DRUID'S PRODUCTION OF BERNARD FARRELL'S most recent play marks something of a reunion for company and writer: Druid produced *I Do Not Like Thee, Dr. Fell*, Farrell's first play, some 20 years ago. Over those decades Farrell has become a household name through a string of comedies that have achieved popular acclaim and have become a staple of the amateur drama repertoire. *The Spirit of Annie Ross* is very much a part of that oeuvre.

On this occasion Farrell's device for bringing the *dramatis personae* together is a house allegedly haunted by the ghost of the title character, a maid-servant who committed suicide there and who supposedly appears once a year on the anniversary of the event. Four people arrive to stay overnight in the house as a charity

fundraiser, and to give an account of the proceedings to "The Gerry Ryan Show" the following morning: bluff, jocular husband Larry; dutiful, coiffed wife Helen; freewheeling young teacher Colm; and ditzy hairdresser Aisling. But this is Farrell country, and all is not quite as it seems. Over the course of the night the veneer cracks to expose a less comfortable side to the characters, as their stories, as well as that of Annie Ross herself, are revealed.

Perhaps in deference to Farrell's style, this is a fairly conventional production, equating the traditional territory of "light comedy" with a suitably elaborate set, and as can be expected from a Druid production, the lighting, sound and technical stagecraft are unimpeachable. Farrell's writing is so assured that the play almost directs itself, but under director Bairbre Ní Chaoimh it rattles along at a fair pace with some well-wrought comic timing, particularly in the first act.

This is very much a play of two halves, the second act taking on a much darker hue, as when Larry's violent instability is fully revealed. The problem is that these passages sit uncomfortably within the general lightness of the bantering dialogue, and as a result the production suffers from a lack of overall consistency. Together with the portrayal of the supernatural element of Annie Ross herself — swinging between *Blithe Spirit* and *Poltergeist* — there is a sense that this production is not sure how funny or how scary it should be.

Bernard Farrell is generally a better — or more careful — portrayer of women than men, who tend to be depicted as slightly absurd caricatures. On this occasion the acting honours definitely go to the women. Joan Sheehy's portrayal of Helen, the pillar of strength behind a dys-

opinions & overviews

functional marriage and a husband struggling with nervous breakdown, is a well-crafted study of understatement. Sarah-Jane Drummey is excellent as the young

Crowley never really finds a third dimension in Larry, even once the pretence of his jovial public persona is exploded and his vulnerable interior is exposed. Similarly Frank Mackay rarely succeeds in fleshing out the role of the wayward teacher looking to find himself in the wake of a near-death experience.

Theatrical comedy — as opposed to the injection of humour into dramatic situations — rarely receives the critical recognition of other forms of theatre, and "light" is an adjective often associated with Bernard Farrell's plays. This does Farrell a disservice. He is a playwright who knows his craft, and uses it to explore the human condition as well as to entertain, and while "popularity" is considered to be something of a dirty word in certain artistic quarters, it is a powerful argument for the staying power of one of the most enduring voices in Irish theatre today. Druid's production of *The Spirit of Annie Ross* plants itself firmly, and perhaps unexpectedly, in the realms of traditional theatre, as far from the Rural Gothic motif the company have pursued in recent years as one could imagine. While "light" comedy may not be to everyone's taste, it will certainly serve to introduce the company to a new audience.

Ian Wieczorek is a Mayo-based writer and critic.

THE WALLS by Colin Teevan

Royal National Theatre, London

In rep; reviewed on March 14th 2001

BY IAN SHUTTLEWORTH

CREEPY! The Spirit of Annie Ross

hairdresser Aisling, balancing gauche incomprehension and naïveté with honest pathos when it comes to the telling of her own unhappy, unresolved past: a most impressive performance. Although he is the play's central character, Donncha

TOWARDS THE END OF JOE ORTON'S *LOOT*, a character remarks, "What has just taken place is perfectly scandalous and had better go no farther than these three walls," with a nod and a smirk to the theatrical convention that the audience are in effect

ANDREW DOWNIE

looking through an invisible fourth wall. In Irish writer Colin Teevan's new play in the National Theatre's Cottesloe studio, a middle-class Dublin family face the crisis, on Christmas Eve, that the fourth wall of their own living room has just vanished. As the evening wears on, the other three follow one by one. The family name, nat-



CRUMBLING: The Walls

urally, is Walls.

The symbolism of *The Walls* is fairly obvious: as the physical walls disappear, the psychological and emotional ones erected by each of the family members come into sharper view and themselves threaten to crumble. In particular, mother Stella — a terrifically edgy, switchback performance from Clare Higgins — finds it ever more difficult to keep driving the polite social fiction of the evening. Like the miraculously remain-

ing roof of the house, it becomes clear that each of the family is keeping a lid on his or her inner demons without any real support beneath but solely through "Faith, hope and... spite." Only younger son John — Gary Lydon, as ever suggesting a semi-dormant but far from extinct volcano — is emotionally honest throughout, leaving the restored house at the end.

Teevan's play nods towards his compatriots Beckett and Joyce ("Coincidences will be general over Ireland," remarks someone in an explicit reference to the latter's novella *The Dead*); in tone it is old-school Theatre of the Absurd, sometimes calling to mind Ionesco but more often the more whimsical strain of British and American absurdism.

The vanishing walls are, as it were, the family "rhinoceros": a progressive catastrophe which it is taboo to speak of directly. Even The Man who comes to repair the place (Toby Jones, his amiability a little underused here) sits down and engages in small talk rather than actually doing anything about it.

Director Mick Gordon has assembled a diverse yet impressive cast (also including Karl Johnson and Tony Rohr), and he orchestrates events with his customary discreet scrupulousness. Towards the end of its 100-minute playing time, though, Teevan's script begins to flag: having conveyed all his characters to the emotional ground zero and exploded a kind of memory bomb which irradiates them all, he has nowhere much to go but backwards. (Dick Bird's set design gets the last laugh, in that when the walls are restored, that elusive fourth wall comes down along with all the others.)

It's an intriguing piece, more complex and successful than it may at first appear, but still not a completely solid structure.

opinions & overviews

WHY I HATE THE CIRCUS

by Ioanna Anderson

Greenlight Productions in association with
the Civic Theatre, Tallaght
5–24 February 2001; reviewed 7 February

BY SUSAN CONLEY

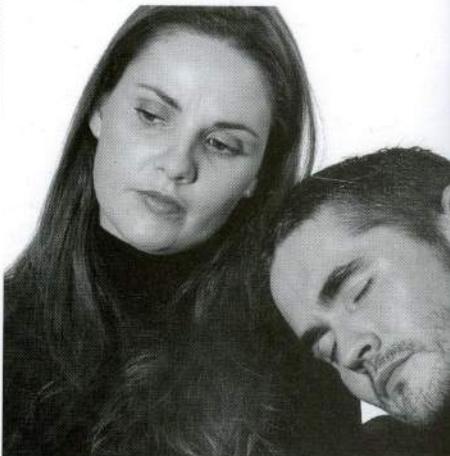
Greenlight Productions came charging out of the gate in 1999 with *Describe Joe*, a one-man play by Ioanna Anderson; it garnered praise across the board for its quiet lyricism. Following up such a well-received debut was bound to be daunting, but Anderson and the company gauged their ambitions intelligently: the modest two-hander that premiered at the Civic Theatre's Loose End studio raised the bar high enough to break out of the form set by *Describe Joe*'s monologue structure, but didn't present undue challenges to this still-fledgling company as far as concerns the producing of untried, original work.

While the title of Anderson's new play implies the Big Top, it's more a metaphor for the craziness of existence, the feeling that one always needs to perform in one capacity or other in this circus called life. The way that Anderson has structured the play in some ways echoes the experience of seeing a three-ring circus — that sense of your attention being drawn in a number of directions, of being distracted and entertained at the same time. In the play there are some subplots and stories, told by Una Kavanagh's character (we don't get names here), that are not totally relevant, possibly not fully entertaining, but serve a kind of sideshow purpose to the main event — keeping the character played by Fergal McElherron from dwelling too much on his troubles.

His sister Mary is in hospital, wired up to a variety of machines, and her prospects aren't good. He's been hanging around the place, not sleeping, not eating

much, worrying over Mary's condition and the fact that his parents have dumped all the responsibility on his shoulders, and swigging the drink he has camouflaged in his flask. When Kavanagh joins him, the atmosphere almost immediately turns confrontational, and as the story unfolds, we learn the deep history that they share that allows them to tell each other some home truths — and to entertain, patiently, each other's boring stories.

Anderson unwraps their common history slowly, and we are drawn into the revelation of the whys and wherefores of



CONNECTED: Why I Hate the Circus

the two friends' relationship. As we learn, they were neighbours, schoolmates, then lovers — the facts are gently exposed, in half-sentences, inferences, and reminiscence. Refreshingly, we are not hit on the head with their history, and as we wait with them, we also get caught up in the rhythms of anticipation. The hospital waiting room serves as the concrete symbol of their abstract waiting, as they both

PETE MATHEWS

look out for their big break in life, for their sister and friend to pass away, and for the pain of unmet expectations to fade. Both have moved on and have created new primary relationships, and there is no question that either will dishonour their new partners by fooling around for old time's sake. This notion that men and women can meet on the plane of platonic friendship — and stay there — borders on the revolutionary, at least as far as most stage and screen depictions of relationships are concerned. Here, while both seem to experience the dregs of attraction, they manage to convey a depth of regard that transcends a typical "will-they-won't they" scenario.

The story takes some surreal turns, and its Christmas setting isn't fully enough enmeshed in the text to be truly symbolic of anything but a difficult, sentimental, "family" time of the year. While we get to know the characters quite well, and indeed become familiar with most of their extended families, the dying Mary is not as fully developed through description and reference as are Kavanagh's sister Lisa or McElherron's father. Off-stage characters are tricky entities: their lack of presence can, if handled incorrectly, overwhelm the physical presence of the main protagonists. While Anderson's text doesn't reach this sorry state of affairs, the relative lack of development of Mary is rather disappointing, and natural curiosity wants to know why she's ill, how long she has been so, and why the two really seem to care about her beyond family ties and neighbourhood friendship. This is the vital relationship that remains unexplored, one that would have added another layer of richness to the text.

Near the end of the play, Kavanagh's character relates an evocative, beautiful story that is the play's payoff; it's like

those moments when one of your friends comes out with an insight that reminds you why you like them, why you invest in their friendship. It takes a while for *Why I Hate the Circus* to find its quirky rhythm, but it's worth the wait, and it was a promising outing not only for Greenlight Productions, but also for emerging writer Anderson.

WIRED TO THE MOON by Maeve Binchy

Fishamble Theatre Company

On tour; reviewed on 19 April 2001 at the
Belltable Arts Centre, Limerick,

BY MARY COLL

MAEVE BINCHY IS WITHOUT DOUBT Ireland's most beloved writer of popular fiction; her novels and short stories explore the lives and loves of characters who are at once utterly familiar and utterly inoffensive. Her writing has the same effect as comfort food: it makes you feel happy and reassured, temporarily, and just like comfort food, it has its limitations. These become particularly obvious when Binchy's stories are transferred to the stage and expected to survive there without the benefit of the necessary life support systems, such as a decent script and good direction. Fishamble's production of *Wired to the Moon*, adapted and directed by Jim Cullen, lacked both, and relied instead on individual performances to carry it through for 90 minutes. Sometimes this worked, very briefly; most of the time, however, it did not.

Wired to the Moon, as staged by Fishamble, is a series of urban stories from the 1980s told separately in a scene-by-scene format which is linked by sufficient pop music from the period to create an ambience of harmless nostalgia. It's a world of shoulder pads and soap operas, where everything is played in soft focus, to

please the audience and most especially to make them laugh. Caricature rather than character drives the production, as we move from office to living room to clothes shop, careering through the lives of women like Julie, who's being exploited by her married lover to ghostwrite his magazine, and Nora, the journalist who finds love late in life, but not too late for a happy ending.

En route through this series of emotional cul-de-sacs, there are one or two genuinely entertaining moments, when the performances rise above their dismal circumstances. The best of these is Helen Norton's portrayal of Eileen, a housewife struggling to meet the impossible expectations of her friends as they arrive for a dinner party. This is well observed social satire and Norton performed with the kind of timing and skill associated with the stand-up routines of Victoria Wood and Dawn French. Noelle Brown and Sonya Kelly also had a number of good moments, where the audience made a real connection with their characters. However the insubstantial nature of the material was unable to sustain any level of credibility when the production struggled to rise above the comic and address more serious issues.

The most cringe-inducing of these was the vignette in which seven-year-old Bernard, played by adult actor Arthur Riordan, tries to make sense of his par-



HIJINKS: Wired to the Moon

ents' breakup. While this story may have read well originally on paper, and while Binchy is capable of shading her writing a little when necessary, the clumsiness of its transition to the stage rendered it devoid of meaning and utterly patronising. Riordan struggled to portray a seven-year-old in an emotional crisis, and the audience, who were being treated like seven-year-olds by the director, struggled with him through a quagmire of euphemistic dialogue on the subject of marital breakdown which offended their intelligence by spelling out everything they needed to know.

Not all writing can make the transition from the page to the stage successfully; indeed, sometimes there is no point in undertaking that journey in the first place unless something new and original can transpire in the process. That is the case here; I am not convinced that the end result was in the best interest of either the writer or the audience.



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