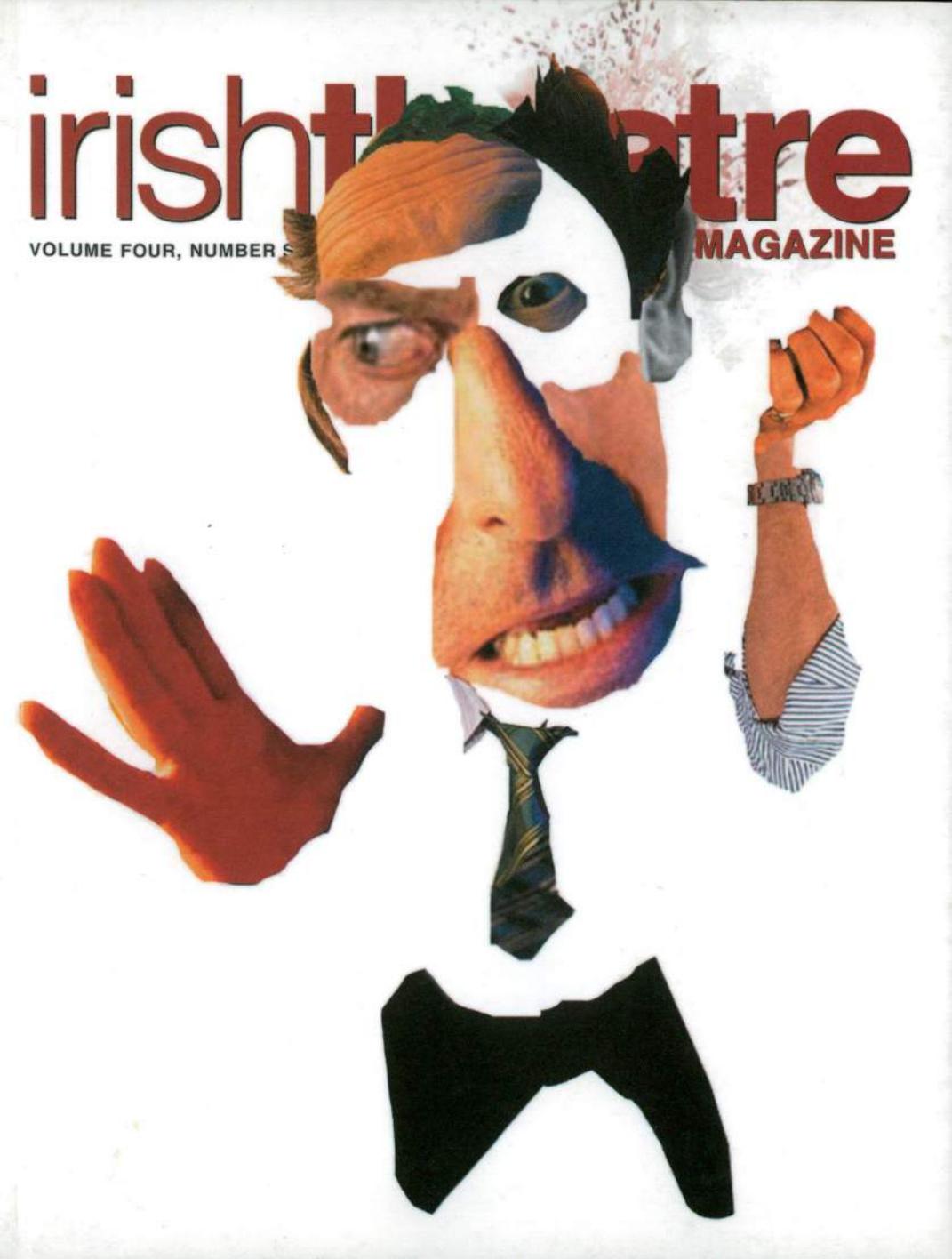


# irish theatre

VOLUME FOUR, NUMBER 5

MAGAZINE



# ON THEATRE: ARE YOU A ★ OR A ★★★★?

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- ★★ Only if you must
- ★★★ Worth a look
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**THE TICKET**

THE IRISH TIMES

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FROM TOP: DIVINE COMEDIE, SIBIU FESTIVAL, ROMANIA (PHOTO: TITIANA ALTBROD); LIA RODRIGUEZ COMPANHIA DE DANÇAS (PHOTO: PIERRE BIJASCO); THE CONTENT IN THIS MAGAZINE IS SOLELY THE OPINION OF THE AUTHORS AND NOT NECESSARILY OF THE EDITORS.



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# Making Connections

HERE'S A EUROPEAN FLAVOUR TO this issue of *itm*, as we explore possibilities for international collaboration. At a time when theatre companies, performers, venue managers and producers here are looking at ways of pooling creative resources through Theatre Forum and the Association of Theatre Artists, we look at what can be learned from other countries' practice. Certain themes recur: what strikes directors Lynne Parker, Jason Byrne and Conall Morrison, and is reflected in Catherine Boothman's report on the Sibiu International Festival in Romania, is European theatre companies' emphasis on sustained creative development and continuity, on the investment of time as much as money.

The capacity to plan ahead, to look beyond the exigencies of the immediate production, allows the free play of the imagination. When performing artists, directors and designers are contracted to work together for a number of years, there is a commitment to a shared vision. The work that is developed in repertory can be recreated and reshaped easily; it has become absorbed into the actors' bloodstream.

---

Let's hope the new voices on the Council will be valuable in their advocacy of medium- to long-term financial planning for arts organisations

---

Any attempt to translate these values into the Irish context immediately raises the question of multi-annual funding, currently under review by the Arts Council: let's hope its deliberations are speedy and that the new voices on the Council will be valuable in their advocacy of medium- to long-term financial planning for arts organisations.

Training emerges as another key to artistic excellence: the priority given by European companies to life-long professional development and to mentorship shines through. Now that plans for the Irish Academy of Performing Arts have been shelved, there is a danger that the creation of formal training structures for directors and actors will continue to be neglected. Perhaps this is something that Theatre Forum could tackle, when it begins its lobbying campaign in earnest this autumn.

Finally, Karen Fricker returns to this desk for the next issue, which will carry reviews of Dublin Theatre Festival, Dublin Fringe Festival and Belfast Festival productions. Ideas, comment and feedback can be e-mailed to her at [karenfricker@yahoo.ie](mailto:karenfricker@yahoo.ie).



# The Arts Council Sets Sail

**F**Ollowing the appointment of the 12th Arts Council, which the Minister for Arts, Sport and Tourism, John O'Donoghue, describes as "a microcosm of the arts sector, with a mixture of continuity from the previous Council, important artists of our generation and experienced participants who have worked in the arts community", *itm* has heard from one of the new Council's three returning

members about the testing times ahead.

"There's a huge challenge ahead in the light of the cuts being as savage as they are," said Patrick Sutton, referring to last year's funding shortfall which effectively derailed the Council's optimistic five-year arts plan. Sutton, who is director of the Gaiety School of Acting, returns to the Council for a two-and-a-half year term, along with journalist and critic with the *Sunday Independent*, Emer O'Kelly, and the artistic director of the Brú Ború traditional arts centre in Cashel, Úna Ó Murchú. They represent the continuity between the new Council, to be chaired by Olive Braiden, and the previous one, and signal the beginning of a revolving membership in accordance with the new Arts Act.

Sutton emphasised the responsibility of the new Council to "ensure that the lines of communication between it and its clients are open" in order collectively to advocate greater government spending



PATRICK SUTTON

on the arts. "The new Arts Council has got to look responsibly at what it does with the arts plan," he added, saying that the plan's projected funding for the arts was no longer viable in the current bleak economic climate.

Asked whether professional or political ties to the government had influenced the Minister's decision to recall him as a Council member, Sutton emphasised his artistic credentials but conceded his close government connections as a PR consultant to the Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern. "I can't get away from the fact that I know and admire the Taoiseach," he said.

Olive Braiden, a human rights commissioner, member of the Broadcasting Commission of Ireland, former director of the Rape Crisis Centre and Fianna Fáil candidate for the European Parliament elections in 1994, has been appointed Chairperson of the new Council. She heads a group predominantly drawn from professionals across the arts sector, with an impressive representation from the performing arts. The members include the writer John McGahern, choreographer Mary Nunn, poet and broadcaster Theo Dorgan, (who was given responsibility for co-ordinating the arts sector's response to the Arts Bill, now Act, by the previous

*The complete membership of the new Arts Council is as follows:* Chairperson

**OLIVE BRAIDEN;** director of the Cill Rialaig Artist Retreat, **NOELLE**

**CAMPBELL SHARPE;** artist **WILLIE DOHERTY;** poet and broadcaster

**THEO DORGAN;** Chief Executive of Wexford Festival Opera, **JEROME HYNES** (Deputy Chairperson); filmmaker and musician **PHILIP KING,** actor **ROSALEEN**

**LINEHAN;** director of the National Association of Youth Drama **ORLAITH**

**McBRIDE;** writer **JOHN** **McGAHERN;** Artistic Director of Brú Ború, **ÚNA**

**Ó MURCHÚ;** choreographer, dancer and lecturer

**MARY NUNAN;** theatre critic **EMER O'KELLY** and director of the Gaiety School of Acting,

**PATRICK SUTTON.**

Arts minister, Síle de Valera), actor Rosaleen Linehan, and chief executive of Wexford Festival Opera, Jerome Hynes — all of whom have been appointed for five-year terms. Hynes was a member of the informal group popularly known as the "gang of nine", which met with the Minister in the run-up to his Council appointments.

According to Sutton, the rolling membership "will keep people on their toes", and he also approves of the reduction in the number of members: "There's nothing like a smaller group of people to focus the mind," he said. Ahead of the first meeting of the new Council scheduled for later this month, Sutton outlined his hopes for a transparent and accountable Arts Council that faithfully represents the arts community and supports new talent.

"It's fundamental that the Arts Council gets its lines of communication with clients and potential clients in order," he said, putting his finger on the area that is perceived by practitioners and organisations as most in need of improvement. "If it doesn't, then the Council will head off on an esoteric boat into the ocean."

He added, without metaphor, that the newly instituted fee for ordinary Council members of €5,078.95 per annum will go "to fund my sailboat".



THE MYSTERIES

# A Parade in the Right Direction?

WITH THE DEPARTURE OF LONG-TIME COMPANY MANAGER Declan Gibbons this August, Macnas Theatre Company finds itself in a state of artistic and administrative flux. The latest in a series of key figures to have left the Galway company in recent years, Gibbons follows

John Crumlish, who left MacTeo (the group's commercial arm) last year. This move coincides with the conclusion of the company's three-year multi-annual funding contract.

Following the mixed response that met *The Mysteries*, the company's co-production with the Belgrade Theatre of Coventry which made its début at this year's Galway Arts Festival, the board

has an opportunity to consider the company's direction and possibly redefine the role of Macnas.

"It would certainly be true to say that Macnas is at a cross-roads," says one board member, the artist and journalist Stephen Dixon. "There was always a feral quality to Macnas, an exciting wildness. It has to recapture that excitement to survive. Macnas is getting that bit aca-

demic and I think that it has got a little bit too far away from its roots."

The roots of the 20-year-old company lie in community-based art, heavily influenced by visually inventive Catalan and Spanish street performance — encapsulated best, perhaps, in its series of spectacular parades through Galway city. These have been abandoned in recent years. This Halloween night, however, an outdoor event will be performed in Galway and Dixon sees this as a parade in the right direction. "We've got to try and involve Galway more, and take Macnas back on to the streets. I don't think it's a retrograde step: exciting visual treats on the streets of Galway under the Macnas brand — that's something of a return to core values."

Although the forthcoming parade was suggested by the board, another board member, John Crumlish, is reluctant to be drawn on matters concerning the future of the company. "Macnas is at the end of its multi-annual funding, so that will dictate that those questions will be looked at anyway. That review will inevitably take place and we can't predict the outcome." As "the logical conclusion" of the three-year funding programme, however, *The Mysteries* will soon become a topic for upcoming board discussions, while a suitable successor to Declan Gibbons awaits appointment. The negotiations for renewed funding from the Arts Council — which is currently reviewing its multi-annual funding strategies — will be steered by the acting company manager, John Ashton. "You could say that Macnas is in a dangerous place or a very exciting place," says Dixon. "Certainly things are going to change." Watch this space.

(The *Mysteries* will be reviewed in the next issue of *itm*.)

## THEATRE FORUM GETS GOING

With the appointment of Tania Banotti (pictured) to the role of chief executive officer of Theatre Forum, the Arts Council-funded group is to begin a major lobbying campaign this month under her direction. Formerly director of Film Makers Ireland, an organisation similar in purpose to that of Theatre Forum, Banotti has also held positions within the UN and has worked as a lobbyist in Brussels.



As board member Donal Shiels describes it, the campaign involves the co-ordination of "cells" among performing arts organisations throughout the country to lobby local politicians against public funding cuts. Meanwhile, research will be conducted to gauge the impact of the arts, both culturally and economically.

The long-term ambitions of the group include the initiation of training programmes in lobbying, while building alliances with British arts organisations such as the Federation of Scottish Theatres. Theatre Forum's current endeavours are designed to "push towards the Book of Estimates," says Shiels, suggesting a direct approach to the Department of Finance, rather than the Department of Arts, Tourism and Sport.

## LOBBYING FOR THE CRYPT

The Crypt Arts Centre will close its doors after the Dublin Fringe Festival. From October, the venue in the grounds of Dublin Castle will be used as a media centre during Ireland's six-month presi-

## what's news

dency of the EU. Alan Sharp, artistic director of Storm! Theatre Company, has initiated a "Save The Crypt" campaign, calling for letters in support of the venue.

While the company that has run The Crypt for the past nine years, Íomhá Ildánach, is not directly involved in the campaign, its Artistic Director, John O'Brien, says he intends to continue to operate the venue, claiming that there have been assurances from Dublin Castle and the Office of Public Works that the company could return. The Crypt's survival, however, is wholly dependent on a successful application for revenue funding to the Arts Council. "I'll do whatever

I can to make it happen," O'Brien says, adding that there was no point in marshalling such energies "if there's no will to see it continue on the part of the arts community and the government bodies". Blighted by the loss of FÁS Community Employment Schemes and Íomhá Ildánach's recent funding cut, The Crypt has survived the past year on a skeleton crew of volunteer staff.

Sharp has committed his support to Íomhá Ildánach should they return to the space when it becomes available in June 2004. If they cannot return, however, Sharp proposes to become The Crypt's artistic director on a part-time basis, installing a full-time company manager.

Letters in support of his campaign should be addressed to: Alan Sharp, Storm! Theatre, 53 Rialto Court, South Circular Road, Dublin 8.

## Critical Moments

This is where we fly our own flag and suggest that one of the highlights of the Dublin Theatre Festival over the last three years has been the *irish theatre magazine* International Critics' Forum. Bringing leading international and domestic critics together to discuss DTF and Fringe productions, this year's forum will be held on 6 October, initiating a week-long programme of events co-ordinated by *itm*.

The Carroll Professor of Irish History at Oxford University and W.B. Yeats biographer, Roy Foster, delivers a keynote address on "Yeats and Criticism" on 8 October, and a two-day symposium, Conditions of Criticism: Models For Irish Theatre Today, is scheduled for 10-11 October. For information, e-mail conference@irishthemagazine.com or call 087-799-2330

### ASSOCIATING WITH THE ABBEY

Declan Hughes is this year's Writer-in-Association with The Abbey Theatre sponsored by the Anglo-Irish Bank. One of the co-founders of Rough Magic Theatre Company, Hughes' plays include *I Can't Get Started*, *Digging for Fire*, and *Twenty Grand*. His most recent, *Shiver*, was produced this year by Rough Magic.

### ONLINE AND INFORMED

In conjunction with its tenth annual International Conference in Liberty Hall on 3 October, Theatre Shop will launch its *Irish Theatre On Line* website. This is a searchable version of the *Irish Theatre Handbook* available free on the Internet, with details of Irish theatre and dance companies, festivals, support organisations awards and competitions. The third edition of the printed *Irish Theatre Handbook* will be published in 2004. Theatre Shop's



MUD

other ambitious online project, Playography — an interactive database of every original Irish play, is expected to go live with its first stage (1975 to the present) before the end of the year.

#### UPCOMING PRODUCTIONS

The Corn Exchange's production of *Mud* by Maria Irene Fornes continues at the Project until 20 Sep, while Alex Johnston's new play for Bedrock Theatre Company, *Entertainment*, runs in Project Cube until 20 Sep. Among the 14 Fringe Festival shows performing in Project is Ursula Rani Sarma's *Blue*, presented by Djinn Theatre Company in association with Project (6-18 Oct). *Blue* will then embark on a three-week national tour. Still at Project, TEAM Theatre presents Martin Murphy's *The Making of Antigone Ryan* from 13-18 Oct, while Graeae

Theatre presents *Peeling* by Katie O'Reilly from 22-25 Oct. Rough Magic then presents the Irish premiere of Laura Ruohonen's *Olga* in a new version by Linda McLean (30 Oct-29 Nov).

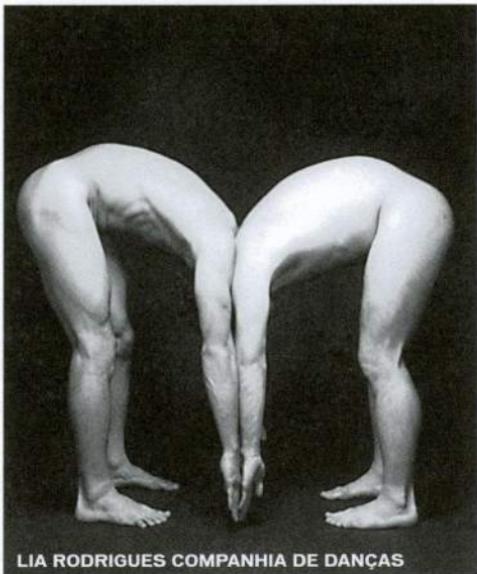
Garry Hynes directs Druid's new production of *Sharon's Grave* by John B. Keane, opening in the Town Hall Theatre Galway on 9 Sep, moving to Cork's Everyman Palace from 22-27 Sep, before performing at the Dublin Theatre Festival in the Gaiety from 29 Sep-7 Oct and subsequently in Sligo (9-12 Oct).

The Dublin Theatre Festival kicks into action from 29 Sep-11 Oct. Its programme includes the premiere of Brian Friel's *Performances* at the Gate (30 Sep-25 Oct), and Thomas Kilroy's *The Shape of Metal* at the Abbey Theatre (29 Sep-Nov 1). Robert LePage's *the far side of the moon* plays at the O'Reilly Theatre (30 Sep-9 Oct), ITIM

## what's news

Theatre Ensemble and the Cameri Theatre of Tel Aviv's *Mythos* is at the Tivoli (9-11 Oct), Het muziek Lod & Ro theater's Roddy Doyle-inspired opera, *The Woman Who Walked into Doors*, is at the Gaiety (9-11 Oct) and Stella Feehily's début, *Duck*, arrives to the Peacock (30 Sep-1 Nov), having been well received at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. For lots more details and booking information visit the festival website on [www.dublintheatre-festival.com](http://www.dublintheatre-festival.com) or call 01-6778899.

The Dublin Fringe Festival begins on 22 Sep and continues for three weeks, featuring home-grown and imported theatre. Week 1 includes the National Theatre's play-reading series, *Autumn Stories*, at the Peacock (25-27 Sep). The Performance Corporation presents *The 7 Deadly Sins* by Tom Swift and Jo Mangan (22-27 Sep) at the City Arts Centre. Gare St. Lazare present Michael Harding's *Swallow* (7-11 Oct) at The Hugh Lane Gallery; Be Your Own Banana's *De Bogman* runs at Andrew's Lane Studio (22-27 Sep). Opera Theatre Company and Almeida Opera



LIA RODRIGUES COMPANHIA DE DANÇAS

stage *Thwaite* (22-24 Sep) at Project Upstairs before Corcadourca bring Ger Bourke's *Snap* to the same venue (7-11 Oct), fresh from its Cork premiere in the IAWS warehouse (22 Sep-4 Oct). International offerings include Brazilian company Lia Rodrigues Companhia de Danças performing the nudity and politics-heavy dance piece, *Such Stuff As We Are Made Of* (6-11 Oct) at the SS Michael & John ... for more details visit [www.fringefest.com](http://www.fringefest.com).

Close on its heels, the Belfast Festival at Queen's runs from 24 Oct-9 Nov. Highlights include the premiere of Gary Mitchell's comedy, *Deceptive Imperfections*; Kabosh's version of *Sweeney Todd, the demon Barber of Fleet Street*; "a Bollywood film brought to life on the stage"; Philadel-



HERMANN SORGELOOS; TITIANA ALTBURG, PURÉMOVEMENT COMPANY

phia's Puremovement company present hip-hop dance piece *Students of the Asphalt Jungle* (30 Oct-1 Nov)... Before the festival, The Lyric presents a new version of Ibsen's *Ghosts* by Conall Morrison, who also directs (12 Sep-11 Oct)... Back at the Gate, Samuel Beckett's *Waiting For Godot* makes another reappearance (28 Oct-22 Nov) ... The Pavilion hosts Fresco Theatre's two-hander *Baobabs Don't Grow Here* from 10-13 Sep, with The Machine & Liam Rellis' production of John B. Keane's *The Field* slated for 15-20 Sep. Broadway Productions then present *The Marriage* by Gogol from 23-27 Sep.

Brian Friel's *Aristocrats* has replaced *The Playboy of the Western World* in the Abbey's schedule (12 Nov-24 Jan) while Blue Raincoat Theatre Company brings *The Strange Voyage of Donald Crowhurst* by Malcolm Hamilton to the Peacock from 4 Nov.

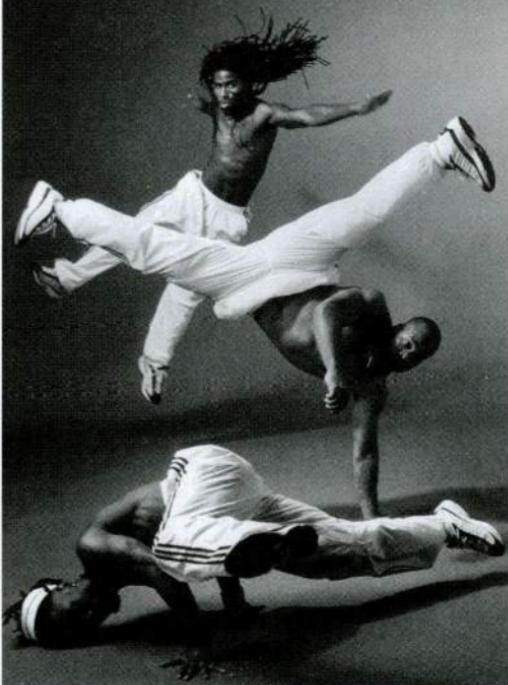
Prom Productions next bring Simon Moore's adaptation of Stephen King's *Misery* to Draíocht (8-13 Sep) and The Everyman Palace, Cork (22-27 Sep). Next at Draíocht is Full Circle Theatre Company's *Into the Woods* (16-20 Sep), and John Breen's *Alone it Stands* (30 Sep-4 Oct), before The Long Overdue Theatre Company presents a multi-cultural version of *Macbeth* (22-24 Oct).

Natural Shocks Theatre Company and The Civic present *The Comical Mysteries*, a new version of Dario Fo's *Mystery Buffo* by Kevin McGee (4-20 Sep). Also at the

Civic, Keegan Theatre company performs *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (8-13 Sep) and *Alone it Stands* returns from 15-20 Sep. *Rum & Raisin*, co-authored by Alice Barry and Deirdre Kinahan, and co-produced by Tall Tales and Noggin Theatre Company, plays during the Fringe, 29 Sep-4 Oct.

The Mermaid Arts Centre's programme continues with Dry Rain Theatre Company's production of *Dark Places* by Lorraine O'Brien (16-20 Sep) and TEAM Theatre's *The Making of Antigone Ryan* by Martin Murphy (2-3 Oct), before Djinn Theatre Company's production of *Blue* by Ursula Rani Sarma (21-23 Oct). ©

#### STUDENTS OF THE ASPHALT JUNGLE



[www.druidtheatre.com](http://www.druidtheatre.com)

# DRUID SHARON'S GRAVE

## John B Keane

**Directed by Garry Hynes**

**Winner of Best Director**

**The Irish Times/ESB**

**Irish Theatre Awards 2002**

**Town Hall Theatre, Galway**

Tues 9 – Sat 20 September

Booking 091 – 569777

**Cork Opera House**

Mon 22 – Sat 27 September

Booking 021 – 4270022

**Dublin Theatre Festival**

Gaiety Theatre

Mon 29 Sept – Tues 7 October

Booking 01 – 6778899

**Hawk's Well Theatre, Sligo**

Thurs 9 – Sun 12 October

Booking 071 – 61518/61526

Photo: Liam O'Callaghan taken from the book *Fishstoneswater*

The director of Galway Arts Festival, **ROSE PARKINSON**, argues that we need to broaden the way we think about co-production in this country and expand our understanding of the term to embrace true artistic collaboration

**F**OR MANY IRISH ARTS ORGANISATIONS the concept of co-production appears to be very ambiguous, as evidenced in an industry discussion about theatre touring in Ireland, co-hosted by *itm* and City Arts Centre in May.

In the context of venues and production companies, it seems that co-production, Irish style, is nothing more than one company asking another to buy the right to be called co-producer. This approach puts the focus on economic need rather than co-creativity and allows no room for real dialogue and co-operation. The insular perspective of many companies is perhaps born of an unwillingness to risk compromise, on the one hand, and lack of real engagement with the artistic process on the other. It ultimately serves to promote a climate of mutual mistrust.

While the ethos of co-production — collaboration — has not been generally embraced in Ireland, it is commonplace among creative organisations elsewhere in Europe. In Galway Arts Festival's experience of working with Irish and international companies, the contrast in mindset is stark: Irish companies exploring co-production opportunities almost always concentrate on financial investment (there are, of course, exceptions), while their European counterparts are more focused on the potential for creative

exchange and co-operation, a pooling of all resources.

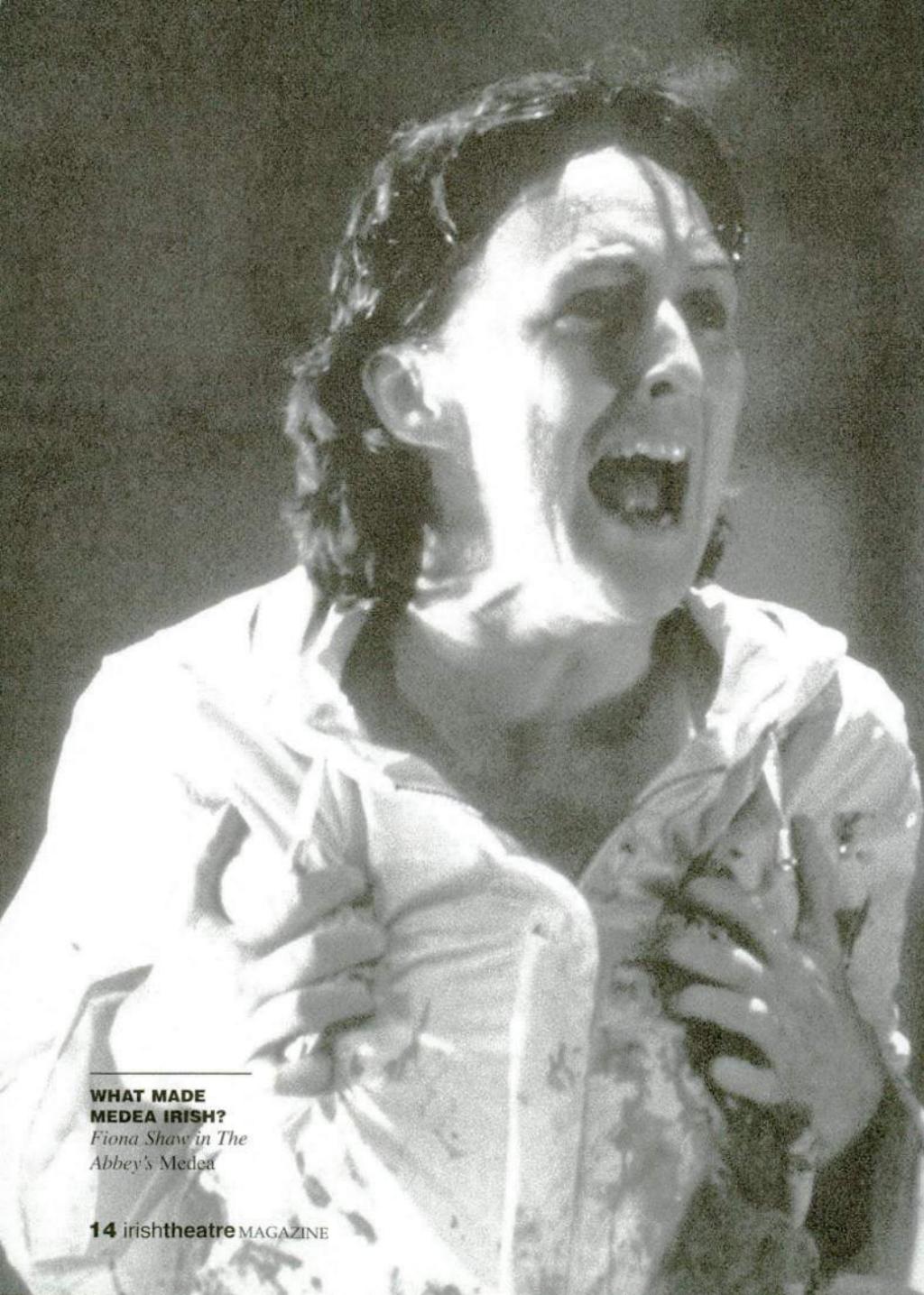
Looking at international work and practice through the lens of signature arts festivals in other countries, the collaborative approach is evident. Take, for example, the Avignon or Adelaide Festivals: the programme of national work showcased by these events consistently throws up productions that involve one or several partner-collaborators whose contribution is rarely purely financial. The recently founded European network, Eunetstar, takes the principle a step further. Comprising seven European festivals, Eunetstar's aim is to develop intra-European collaboration through co-production and

exchange. Among other initiatives, a joint European performance is being planned for 2005.

International practice demonstrates that, once genuine openness to collaboration exists, co-production does not have to entail compromise or interference with a clear artistic vision. Whether for short-term partnerships based on a common aim or for a complex, transnational creative process, the potential is vast. We all — venues, festivals, production companies — need to look outward and recognise that working together can open up opportunities in ways that ploughing ahead in often bitter isolation can not. 



PARKINSON



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**WHAT MADE  
MEDEA IRISH?**

Fiona Shaw in *The  
Abbey's Medea*

# Authentic Fictions

*"Irishness is a form of anti-art; a way of posing  
as a poet without actually being one."*

PATRICK KAVANAGH

**I**T IS FASHIONABLE TO DECLARE DEFINITIONS of Ireland and Irishness as problematic — as if this were a bad thing, or that the alternative would ever be desirable. ■ But faced with a conservative and essentially homogeneous body such as Irish theatre which yet contains enough diversity and dissent to render generalisations potentially absurd, can this declaration be avoided? Perhaps the first thing to remark is simply that Irish theatre is unusual in its combination of relative homogeneity *and* acute disputatiousness. To hear some of what passes for criticism you'd think that the Gate and the Abbey actually map out opposite extremes of theatre presentation.

In the third essay  
in our series  
"What Is Irish  
Theatre About?",  
playwright

**MICHAEL WEST**  
argues that what  
distinguishes  
Irish theatre is its  
preoccupation with  
its own Irishness

Most people have strongly held views on Irish theatre; indeed that frequently seems to be the point of it. People who don't go to the theatre have views on theatre. I myself have held firm convictions about shows or performances I never saw.

This admission serves to underline the selectiveness at work in such a survey, but it also suggests that to participate in Irish theatre is to talk about it, which is perhaps a very Irish formulation.

Not long ago there was a sense in which Irish theatre performed (and was consumed) in much the same way as the Irish rugby team: not a lot of organisation, too much emotion, and by God, if we were playing England we'd raise our game. Since then the rugby team has transformed itself beyond all recognition, both in terms of its fortunes and its technical achievement;

and it's noticeable that in their quest for higher standards and professionalism the players haven't sacrificed their humour or their guts. And they presumably drink less. Perhaps this is what is meant by being more outward looking.

But we don't necessarily want to turn into hard-to-impress, highbrow connoisseurs of spectacle. One thing that has been remarked on is — to stretch the use of the term — the responsibility of Irish audiences, in both their sense of ownership of the occasion of performance and their demonstrativeness. Visiting companies often talk about the intelligence of the Irish public (which could be discounted as saying no more than that their show was liked), but they also talk warmly of how quick the Irish punters are to get the nuances, the jokes, the emotion. It almost seems as if Irish audiences enjoy themselves. Whatever about making theatre, homogeneity and disputatiousness seem to produce excellent audiences.

So how *have* things changed over the last few years? Several critics have commented on the peculiar nature of Irish modernity — that the nation has, as it were, jumped from backwardness into forwardness without experiencing the middle stage of growth, that modernity has simply happened to what is in many ways still an unchanged country. In the arts, according to the analysis of journalist and critic Fintan O'Toole, this leap has led to a situation where the avant-garde in Ireland is incorporated into the mainstream in a way utterly unlike most of our neighbours. This fact — that the avant-garde has no old order to oppose, or its corollary, that the old guard has no compunction about cannibalising its young — has an arresting example in *Riverdance*, which is amusing or stirring depending on your point of view.

The pre-eminent achievement of *Riverdance* is to demon-

Almost a decade later *Riverdance*'s permanence and ubiquity is a rich parody of the idea of transformation that modernity aspires to: who is to say you can't step into the same riverdance twice?





strate that culture as a product can be both authentic and modern, can bridge the past and the problematic present with an amplified row of clicking feet. Almost a decade later its very permanence and ubiquity is a rich parody of the idea of transformation that modernity aspires towards: who is to say you can't step into the same riverdance twice?

But what does modernity mean when it comes to theatre? More lights? Bigger casts? Better plays? You will find in almost any discussion in Ireland today that modernity is merely a

**A ROW OF CLICKING FEET**  
Riverdance — a cultural product bridging past and present

euphemism for success; Irish theatre is no different. Whether it involves rural decay and keening, or alcoholism and urban despair, if it is an international hit it is by definition Irish and modern.

For a long time the complaint used to be that we were slow to recognise success (modernity); that only when something was successful abroad did we claim it as our own. The new confidence is expressed as follows: any old gobshite can make it in London, but is it any good *here*? Irish work is still expected to travel triumphantly, but it is no longer sufficient to be modern abroad; we must be modern in our own home.

One of the ways Chekhov has been reinvented in recent times has been by looking for Irish dramatists to adapt or translate or represent his work for English audiences. The Irishness makes the Russian more real: this is Chekhov in English, but not an English Chekhov.

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But if the current generation of practitioners and consumers has become accustomed to the notion of foreign success, how does this affect the way work is produced or conceived? What is the Irish style of theatre anyway? In what does its particular quality reside? To put it another way: what international venue would receive an Irish production of an international canonical classic? A Romanian production of Shakespeare is almost a cliché of European theatre; but an Irish touring *Hamlet*? *The Crucible*? What would be the point? The curious case of The Abbey's *Medea* merely reinforces this phenomenon: what exactly was Irish about it in London or New York? Fiona Shaw?

Irish theatre has produced plenty of writers and actors and, more recently, directors and designers, but if it hasn't yet produced a tradition of making theatre, a great school of presentation, is this somehow a bad thing? If instead this absence is something to be celebrated, if the Irishness of a production is not a superficial way of shouting or winking at the audience, does that mean that Irishness is not a style?

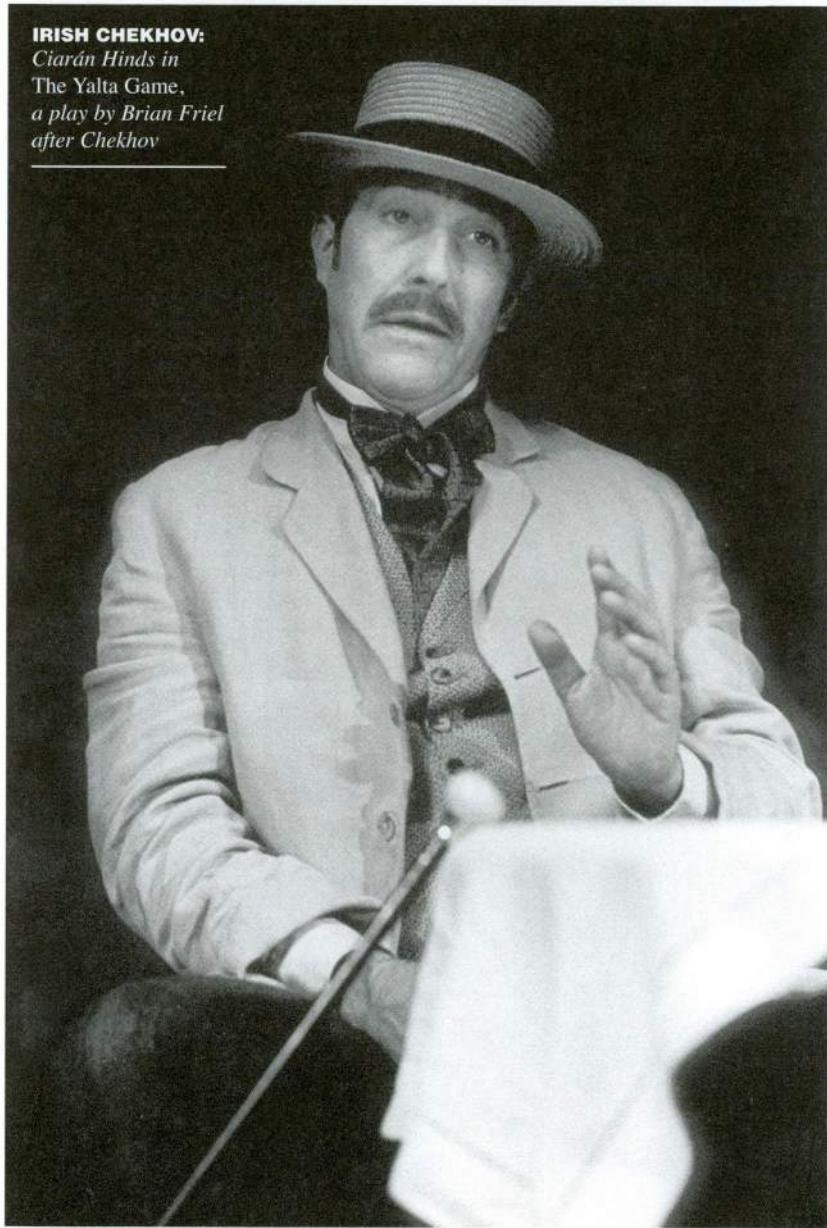
Perhaps, almost without knowing it, Irishness in the theatre has become not so much a style as a value. Irishness has come to signify authenticity on the stage; it is a formal equivalent of emotional facility. For years, Chekhov in England was full of restraint in country drawing rooms; one of the ways he has been reinvented in recent times has been by looking for Irish dramatists to adapt or translate or represent Chekhov for English audiences. The Irishness makes the Russian more real: this is Chekhov in English, but not an English Chekhov; emotion is presented in a language we can understand, both more immediate and mediated by difference.

There is a savage doubleness at work here. In the theatre at least, the Irish are familiar yet alien, as much to ourselves as to others. In spite of all our so-called confidence, we operate in a language that isn't fully ours, in a tradition that we have borrowed. That we have made these things our own doesn't deny the inheritance they have bequeathed us. We are the imago of

**IRISH CHEKHOV:**

Ciarán Hinds in  
The Yalta Game,  
*a play by Brian Friel  
after Chekhov*

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authenticity, yet we retail impersonation, assimilation, exile, storytelling — in short, *fiction* — as the essence of that authenticity.

It might be objected that this is simply a definition of theatre in the first place; that since Shakespeare (if not before) all theatre traditions must confront the fact that we are all but players who strut and fret our lives upon the stage, that the stage itself is an apt metaphor for our public lives. With the excuse that the entire history of western theatre is outside the remit of this brief account, I would also suggest that for other nations such observations are counted as being about the universal condition. A Spanish playwright who depicts this gap between the life lived and the life observed is in touch with the universal; an Irish playwright who depicts the same thing is being very Irish.

Is it absurd to claim Irishness as a simulacrum for authenticity while simultaneously arguing that such representations contain within them the knowledge of their own artifice? Quite possibly, but I would argue that an English playwright is not praised for being English; or worse, she is not understood through being English. Again, it is important to note that this doesn't mean that concepts of England and Englishness somehow escape being problematic; merely that Irishness is peculiarly entwined with notions of authenticity and travesty.

Many of the most successful Irish exports engage with this doubleness directly in that their explicit subject matter is the disruption between the way things are now and the way they used to be; but these laments for the brutality of rural living, its cruel export of the young: where are they celebrated? London and New York.

There is also a fascinating schism between what these plays (such as Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa*) represent and how they are received: frequently the harshness of the Ireland portrayed is celebrated as nostalgia by audiences. But, as above, this is not to suggest that the playwrights and companies who present these works are unaware of this, or that this gap or schism between subject and reception is not a manifest theme of many of these works. Or that audiences are not unaware of the tensions between misery on a hill and their sophistication at having escaped such a world.

It is equally important to remark that many Irish plays, of course, have moved away from, or never grew up on, the land but the fact remains that Irishness has become a subject in and of itself — this is in many ways what Irish theatre is *about*. This is definitively different from the theatre of most of our neighbours. To say that French theatre is about Frenchness would be at worst an insult, at the very best a questionable reactionary position; but it goes further than that. Our work is now expect-

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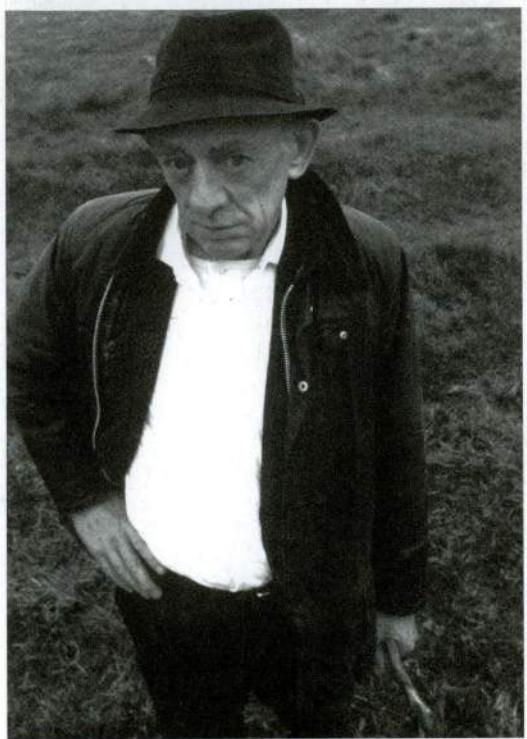
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**CELEBRATING THE WAY  
WE WERE** Catherine Byrne  
*in Dancing at Lughnasa*



TOM LAWLER



**MISERY ON  
A HILL:**  
*Mick Lally in  
The Field*

seen as being Irish, is to a large extent measured not by its art but by its authenticity, by which is meant its essential Irishness, and whether it is celebrated or faulted, this Irishness is somehow regarded as the *natural* measure of the work. Is this a bad thing? Not necessarily, because this access to the international scene is a privilege and an open invitation to challenge expectations. It is up to us to redefine the terms in which our work is created and understood. It is neither a question of completely losing our accent nor of stubbornly refusing to inflect it; neither of abandoning our identity nor rejecting all other incarnations. But let our work be seen as just that: work. We should be influenced by the best current practice, wherever it is from. Let us openly pursue excellence in all forms, both at home and abroad. Perhaps this will be our new nationhood.

ED

ed to retail fantasy or corrective about the state of Irish theatre *as its subject*.

Plays of urban brutality or middle-class dystopia, rural epics or sectarian politics: their technical achievement is generally taken as evidence of the maturity or immaturity of the Irish theatre scene. It is inconceivable that such a criticism could be levelled at an English play in an English theatre.

This last point reveals the overwhelming reality facing Irish theatre in whatever form it chooses to express itself: the foreign market. Practitioners in Ireland may be free (budgets allowing) to explore other models, even if much of this work is merely pale imitation of trends in London theatres or American TV. But the work that travels, the work that is

*Michael West is a playwright. His most recent work is The Evidence of Things.*

# Before



# After



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CLASSIC**

**TEXTS:** Radu  
Stanca Theatre's  
Othello and  
Divine Comedy  
(far right)





# Theatre Across Borders

What can Irish theatre-makers learn from Europe? **CATHERINE BOOTHMAN** reports on a recent visit to a theatre festival in Romania that fired up a group of Irish producers and directors. As well as seeing dynamic productions with imaginative stagings, dazzling visuals and exuberant ensemble casts, they brainstormed with Romanian directors. **PHOTOGRAPHS BY PIERRE BORASCI**

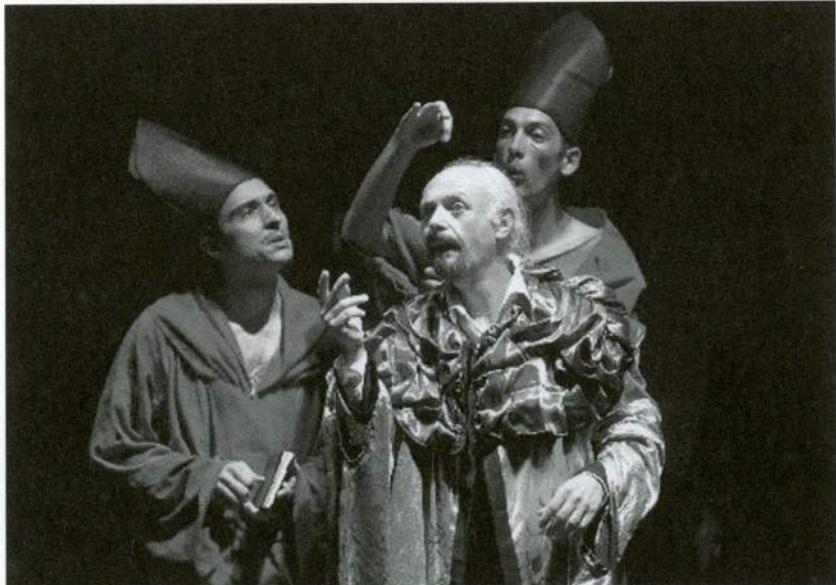
**A**TRANSYLVANIAN TOWN AT THE FOOT OF THE Carpathian mountains has been the setting for the Sibiu International Theatre Festival for the past decade. In contrast to the gothic image of Transylvania born from the imagination of Bram Stoker and relayed by Hammer Horror films, Sibiu evokes the hey-day of the Austro-Hungarian empire. Stout houses painted in faded blues, greens, yellows and pinks are animated by hooded windows that peer out from steep, tiled roofs like eyes. Sibiu is also known as Hermanstadt, reflecting its Germanic heritage. In these parts, Romanians historically speak German as well as Hungarian and, of course, Romanian.

The festival is based in the municipal Radu Stanca Theatre, directed by its actor-manager, Constantin Chiriac. Radu Stanca has a permanent company of 50 players, and is linked to the Theatre Faculty of the local university. The festival aims to combine freelance and independent co-productions with the repertory work of the permanent theatre companies that were maintained after the revolution of 1989.

John Fairleigh, of the Stewart Parker Trust and the newly

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**ENSEMBLE**  
**PLAYING:** *Radu Stanca actors in  
The Cockroaches*



# Nordic Aspirations

Rough Magic's interest in international writing took director **LYNNE PARKER** to Sweden, where she was inspired by the value that is placed on theatre

permanent companies of up to 30 actors who are on three-year contracts, which is ideal. It's not a job for life but it allows the development of proper ensemble work over a sustained period.

The resources they have are enviable: it is regarded as a necessity for Stockholm to have a civic theatre, the Stadsteater, as well as a national theatre, and it is considerably better resourced than our National Theatre. It has wonderful facilities and five performing spaces, each with its own dramaturg, which is a proper profession there – it hardly exists here. The dramaturg is not a literary manager; he or she does the research and reading needed in preparation for the staging of classic and foreign texts, as a service to the director.

They place a lot of emphasis on theatre for children and young people. In the basement auditorium of the Stadsteater, geared towards younger audiences, we saw a four-hour performance directed by Suzanne Oosten, Sweden's equivalent of Ariane Mnouchkine. Half way through the show the audience moved into another performance area altogether and when we returned an hour later, the space had been completely reconfigured. Now that's a flexible space...

I came away convinced that the more we open up to what's going on elsewhere, the better.

**T**HE ARTS COUNCIL IS GOING TO REGRET sending me to Scandinavia: it has given me notions, ideas above my station. Having presented a series of staged readings of contemporary Scandinavian plays at the Dublin Fringe Festival, Loughlin Deegan [literary manager] and I accepted an invitation to Stockholm last year to meet writers and look at shows, with the help of an Arts Council travel grant. The range of work we saw, from Racine's *Andromache* at the Swedish Royal Theatre to a one-person Fringe show, was outstanding. The attention to detail, the immense sense of fun and brio, the theatrical vision, the fantastic quality of the acting — all reflect the long rehearsal periods, which allow time to be truly creative. The larger organisations have



**PARKER**

We wanted to see what work was being made and presented in Romania, who the audiences were, and what kind of spaces people were using. We were also interested in the potential multilateral links that Irish artists could tap into.

formed Ireland-Romania Cultural Foundation, first visited Romania in 1972 and has forged close artistic connections there with poets, playwrights, actors, painters, directors, and composers. In response to an invitation from Chiriac to bring a group from Ireland to Sibiu, Fairleigh brought together a number of theatre presenters, producers and artists: Willie White, director of Project Arts Centre, Vallejo Gantner, director of the Dublin Fringe Festival, Conall Morrison, theatre director, Ali Curran, director of the Peacock Theatre, Enid Reid Whyte, theatre specialist in the Arts Council, and myself. We traveled under the umbrella of a "Visitors' Programme" of the European Cultural Contact Point (CCP). This is a pilot scheme whereby the Arts Council looks at new ways of assisting artists and organisations to build international partnerships. Also in Romania were Steve Neale and playwright Alice Barry, preparing a co-production, as well as Rosalind Haslett, who was attending a rehearsed reading of the Romanian translation of her first play, *Still*.

Long term expectations within the group varied from John Fairleigh's aim to establish "lasting collaborative exchange and cross-inspiration between two theatrical cultures", to Conall Morrison's "artistic interrogation of the impact on culture and consciousness of major upheavals of our time" (see panel on page 31). Willie White's aspiration to build a base "to better resource Project as a portal on experimentation in content and form in contemporary arts" reflected a common desire to build relationships with artists, practices and traditions elsewhere in Europe.

In the short term, we wanted to see what work was being made and presented in Romania, who the audiences were, and what kind of spaces people were using. We were also interested in the potential multilateral links that Irish artists could tap into. With whom were the Romanian theatre artists collaborating with internationally? We found that artistic and institutional

partners based in Hungary, Ukraine, Armenia and Bulgaria featured in the festival's programme alongside those from France and Germany.

Some of the group stayed for three nights in Bucharest in the centre run by the Theatre Union of Romania (UNITER), which had been a city centre residence of Ceaușescu's son before the revolution. The first play we saw in Bucharest was a production by *Theatrum Mundi* of Ionesco's





*Le Roi se Meurt/Regele Moare* directed by Ion Cocora, which, despite the association of authoritarianism with the figure of a king, portrayed the individual tragedy of a weary man defeated by conspiracy. The set was constructed as a mechanical system of pipes, flues, cogs and a propeller, and sections of the stage were taken away occasionally during the drama, eroding the world of the protagonist. The costumes were fantasy historical, combining Jacobean shapes with punky straps, buckles, fabrics and plastics. The design was expressive in itself, but was at odds with the drama.

*O Scrisoare Pierduta (The Lost Letter)* by I. Luca Caragiale, first produced in 1884, was part of the official repertory of the Romanian National Theatre. It was a political farce about local elections, gerrymandering and adultery, designed in 1920s style, and directed by Grigore Gonta for comic and romantic effect. Adriana Popescu and Violeta Scoradet, director of cultural programming and dramaturg, respectively, from the National Theatre met us afterwards and were interested in discussing questions of national repertory. Partly to address these

**COMING UP  
FOR AIR:**  
*Mihai Minitiu's  
The Job  
Experiment (left  
and above)*

issues they were initiating a platform for freelance directors to link with the National Theatre, and were involved in a burgeoning South East Europe Network of National Theatres.

The Sibiu International Theatre Festival took place over seven days, presenting several shows each day, as well as press conferences featuring broadcast interviews with directors, launches of new publications, play readings, and a workshop programme mainly attended by groups of visiting students. Audiences were made up largely of festival participants, including groups of students, members of the various companies, and invited guests.

Audience members nearly came to blows trying to get seats for the festival hit, *Cumnatul lui Panagruel/Pantagruel's Sister-in-Law (Homage to Rabelais)*, a comic meditation on gluttony and want, directed by

Silviu Purcărete. The production opened with a sprinkle of water magically bringing a piece of arid, sandy ground to life, and from this revival sprang a macabre celebration of theatrical sleight of hand. Archetypal figures of "Plenty" were contrasted with an ensemble of barefoot actors dressed in collarless suits, who banged spoons in a percussive chorus of down-and-outs. Language was no barrier here, and sound was used impressionistically: a bird

flitting between hungry characters was denoted by whistled bird song and the responsive actions of characters.

A sense of imprisonment was emphasised in a production of *Baal*, Berthold Brecht's first play, directed by Dragos Galgotiu of the Small Theatre of Bucharest. The play's drunken anti-hero drives the action, which is set on a cavernous black stage engulfing a cluster of domestic props. A bed, a fridge and a wardrobe — lit by yellow light from within, created a cramped living space in seedy neon, against the black hole of a poorly lit city. Occasionally four walls of perspex descended from above to entrap the characters within the home. The imagery of untempered alienation was reinforced throughout, particularly in a scene featuring clownish bandsmen playing music nobody could hear. Although the production was very language-dependent and there were no surtitles, the familiarity of the

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**MONUMENTAL:**  
the Romanian  
National Theatre,  
Bucharest



WILLIE WHITE

# Next Stop: Romania

Director

**CONALL**

**MORRISON**

relished the sustained exposure to a body of work offered by the Sibiu International Festival

audience and stage. It's very hard to achieve that here.

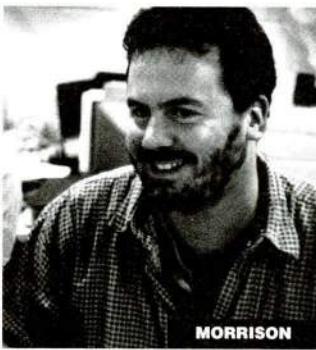
I'd love to work there with companies of that size, rehearsing for that length of time. There's still an abiding interest in theatre there, which is not necessarily the case here. It would be great to bring Irish actors there and to bring Romanians back here, to create a piece that would be about cultural exchange, grounded in lived experience.

I'm planning an Irish-language production of *Macbeth* and the inventive productions we saw by Andriy Zholdak — *Hamlet Dreams*, *Othello* — helped to stimulate my thinking about Shakespeare in translation, about what we glean through sound from foreign-language productions, how the auditory imagination finds the intention behind the dialogue.

Zholdak takes classic texts as starting points for wonderful journeys, and that was inspiring. With *Antigone*, and Ibsen's *Ghosts*, I'm attempting to take these great theatre blueprints and re-imagine them in ways that resonate with modern Irish audiences. Some plays seem to speak to a particular situation or moment: you find that there is a corner of contemporary society that can be illuminated by a work or by its form. In Romania, a country so ravaged by war, the aesthetic is a response to the people's history of dislocation and rupture: it was fascinating to see how their lack of interest in linear, naturalistic forms reflects their disjointed social, historical and political experience.

**I** WAS INTRIGUED TO GO TO ROMANIA, having heard John Fairleigh enthuse about it for years. I'd admired the productions of Silviu Purcărete that came to Ireland and I'd read a lot about Eastern European theatre.

It was a source of pleasure and frustration to watch the ensemble work in Sibiu. We bandy this term around a lot but when you see it really working, with the energy and fluidity and total integration of the cast, then you know this is the ideal, the gold standard. It was inspiring to see the endless invention of the work, the commitment to dramaturgy, the level of fitness and enthusiasm of the cast, the mutually enriching — and democratic — exchange of energy between



**MORRISON**

international audience with the work of Brecht, and the athletic and communicative performance of the lead actor, facilitated understanding of the drama. It demonstrated the shared elements of diverse theatrical traditions.

In 1935 Brecht wrote about *Baal* and his other early plays, that "music was used in a fairly conventional way", but then added that, "all the same, the introduction of music meant a certain break with the dramatic conventions of the time... music made possible something which we had long since ceased to take for granted, namely the 'poetic theatre'." The tradition of the poetic certainly seems well represented in this part of south-east Europe

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An original production, *Experimental Iov (The Job Experiment)* was conceived and directed by Mihai Maniutiu, and performed by actors from Sibiu's Radu Stanca ensemble. The setting was the shell of a sunken ship constructed like a giant zoetrope on top of the stage. The audience climbed the stage and took seats positioned next to square portholes in the riveted wall that enclosed an oval performance space. Leaning into the porthole, we had a full view of the faces of other audience members flickering like images on monitors, as well as the central becalmed space, where a floor-covering of balloons concealed characters. Leaning back afforded a view of the action through several square portholes at once, creating the impression of a filmstrip.

One of the actors wore a snorkel and oxygen canister, and her character regulated the air in the abandoned vessel in occasional manic, balloon-bursting circuits, releasing air into the dwindling supply. Three of the characters were wandering musicians, who occasionally played wild accordion street music before slumping back into their imprisonment.

While it was impossible to understand the drama fully without having read a synopsis beforehand, the imaginative setting and poignant relationships between characters generated a powerful sense of solidarity in despair.

The highlights of the festival were the energetic and sprawling creations of the Ukrainian director, Andriy Zholdak. His four productions were characterised by a relentless sequence of tableaux — stage images that were transformed and intercut at high speed. These ranged from 10-second "snaps" of a single character striking a pose, to long scenes that were like jamming sessions, where over 25 actors would create an entire historical era, often to an unlikely, blasting soundtrack of Moby and Morcheeba.

In a co-production with the Romanian actors from Radu Stanca, Zholdak created a personal response to Shakespeare's *Othello*, where Desdemona navigates her life accompanied by

# Language Lessons

Director

**JASON BYRNE'S**

exploratory work with Loose Canon has been shaped by his exchanges with European companies

head based theatre, without viscerality.

This was really helpful for me and I came back with a lot of confidence. Previously, I tended to have an inferiority complex about European theatre: I expected to go and see work and feel 'I am not worthy'. Instead, I saw the extreme extension of where we were headed, towards traditional stagings that stressed clarity of text at the expense of the dynamic of performance. So the spectators understood the text, but were not gripped, moved or confronted.

Our contact with the Italian director Eugenio Barba (pictured right) began when [Loose Canon colleagues] Gilly Clarke, Willie White and I went to an Odin Theatre workshop, which concentrated on the technique of the actor, resulting in a heightened, anti-naturalistic aesthetic. When I emailed Barba, expressing my disappointment with the final production, he invited me to the company's base in Denmark. Through the Arts Council's Critical Voices programme, we were able to invite his company to Dublin in 2001 for a workshop, which was a challenge to the Irish actors and a great affirmation for us. It was an opportunity for us to test what we'd been doing, to be given guidance and mentorship, to be less isolated.

There was a feeling of solidarity that's cross-cultural. It gave me a sense of faith to know that the people we emulate all worked in equally conservative environments and yet, through persistence, managed to transcend them. We've now been asked to participate in a European project to mark the centenary in 2005 of Stanislavski's first laboratory theatre.

**W**HEN I WAS GIVEN THE OPPORTUNITY to sit in on Peter Stein's rehearsals of Goethe's *Faust* during Expo 98 at Hanover, it was a significant moment for me. I had become preoccupied at that time with ways of developing a more impulse-based performance style with Loose Canon. Watching the *Faust* rehearsals reaffirmed the misgivings I had about our own practice: everything was dead and flat, there was a half-hour discussion of the text with Stein before the rehearsals, and that was it. It didn't seem very rigorous. It was neck-to-



BYRNE

## THEATRE ACROSS BORDERS

the figure of herself as a child in long socks and Alice band, and a crow-like alter ego. His three other productions were *A Day in the Life of Ivan Danisovich*, inspired by Solzhenitsyn's novel; *A Month in the Country* by Turgenev; and *Hamlet Dreams*, all performed by an ensemble of extraordinary actors from the Kharkiv State Academic Drama Theatre in Kiev.

*Hamlet Dreams* opened with a film reel of Edwardian portraits framed by the windows of trains and shops, and family photographs, eventually ripped apart by gunfire. Hamlet's father is dead; the first World War is imminent. The full ensemble created powerful images of the large-scale movement of people: a panicked sweep of suitcases and borders, expressions of mass denial, and absorption in burgeoning entertainment - cinema and popular music. Another ensemble scene portrayed Hamlet's stepfather, Claudius, at the peak of his reign, at a fashionable holiday spot surrounded by acolytes, enjoying the surf with the arrogance of some playboy king from the 1930s, in power on the back of a rising fascist tide.

The exuberance of these actors, of all ages, from Ukraine was inspirational. *Hamlet Dreams* was not originally programmed in the festival, but the company decided to stage it anyway for the fun of it. It started hours after the time printed in the programme (changed and photocopied daily) and ended at 2.00 a.m.

Working multi-lingually and on a large scale, experimenting with heavy aural motifs such as recorded cries of seagulls — not only across scenes but across different productions — Zholdak most energetically explored "poetic theatre". Seeing his work created an exciting sense of the possibilities of future artistic collaborations.

Following our visit to Romania, there have been some immediate outcomes: Andrei Marinescu has embarked on a translation of Conall Morrison's adaptation of *Tarry Flynn* and a return visit of Romanian theatre artists has been planned to take place next month during the Dublin Theatre Festival, Dublin Fringe Festival and Theatre Shop. Above all, seeds were sown that, given imaginative scope and the right institutional nurturing, could not only enhance the exchange between different theatrical traditions, but create something completely new.



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Catherine Boothman is the Arts Council's International Arts Executive and runs the European Cultural Contacts Point (CCP).

Special thanks to Mioara Lujanschi of the CCP Romania, Daniel Milicescu, Aura Corbeanu, Ion Caramitru of UNITER, Constantin Chiriac, Dan Bartha and Alina Coman of the Sibiu International Theatre Festival, Silviu Scrob and Andrei Marinescu.



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# Take Me to Your Leader

**SIMON DOYLE** introduces an excerpt from his libretto for **THWAITE**, composed by **JÜRGEN SIMPSON**. An Opera Theatre Company/Almeida Opera/Aldeburgh Festival co-production, it is an award-winner of the Genesis Opera Project, a London-based initiative for identifying new composing and writing talent. It will be staged during the Dublin Fringe Festival, directed by Dan Jemmett.



**SIMON DOYLE WRITES:** When I'm creating a libretto I'm thinking equally about the mechanics of drama and of music. My goal is to create a dramatic space which gives the composer and performers scope to run riot. In music theatre, verbal intelligibility cannot be taken for granted, and subtlety of plot and character can be easily lost, so I like to make sure that the piece would still function if stripped down to a sequence of silent tableaux. This is not to say that the words are unimportant, but it's enough that they inspire the composer and the performers to create a musical correlative that expresses their essence. Ultimately, the libretto only really lives when it has been fully translated into music.

*The setting of Thwaite is a post-apocalyptic world where survivors wait in a wood for a prophet to come and save them.*

## ACT THREE

*Fleeing a catastrophe, a motley assemblage of refugees congregates in a forest clearing and builds a makeshift shelter. Convinced that there is a prophet in their midst, they have poisoned both contenders, in the hope that one will resurrect and save them all. They have been waiting a long time.*

**PHIP** i think they may be dead

**BLANE** of course they're dead  
we've just killed them

- FIRK** so they're not to resurrect after all
- PHIP** perhaps we should wait a little longer
- WYKE** put them in the earth they rot i breathe their stench

*Enter Moorish, dishevelled and ragged looking.*

- MOORISH** and are they dead who killed them then has the enemy come even here
- PHIP** they died that one might live anew
- WYKE** they both claimed to be the prophet
- BLANE** and so we killed them both
- FIRK** to see just who would resurrect
- MOORISH** you surely all are lunatics
- FIRK** where did you go
- PHIP** we thought you dead
- WYKE** you disobeyed my edict not to leave
- BLANE** what of the world outside
- MOORISH** outside of here is chaos all rivers overflowed with blood irrigate the fallow fields round pits piled high with carcasses the air above is filled with shrieks and cries the enemy are massing near leave off this futile religion and flee before they come
- FIRK** yes we must flee and seek elsewhere our prophet



## **opera** excerpt

- MOORISH** no you must flee and hence  
relinquish seeking prophets
- WYKE** yes we must relinquish hence  
this seeking after prophets  
but it's here we that must stay
- MOORISH** no you must both flee and  
relinquish seeking prophets
- WYKE** do not contradict me  
i am your leader now
- PHIP** you cannot steal    **FIRK** you have no right  
our hope from us                      to govern us              **BLANE** our hope from us
- WYKE** if you dare oppose my law  
you'll face my unchecked wrath
- MOORISH** come leave him here to rule alone
- FIRK** yes let's quit this place  
**BLANE** but he would deprive us of our prophet  
**PHIP** we cannot follow such a man
- MOORISH** idolatry has clouded up your minds  
you'd sooner crouch and genuflect  
to spurious saviours in  
this woodwormed thwaite  
than flee and save your lives  
this shelter will not shelter you  
when enemy attacks  
foundations rotten  
see it falls

*Moorish collapses the shelter.*

- BLANE** sacrilege              **FIRK** sacrilege              **PHIP** sacrilege
- WYKE** tie this trouble-maker to a tree

*Blane, Firk and Phip restrain Moorish and Wyke ties him up.*

**MOORISH** hear me  
all must relent and flee

**BLANE** sacrilege      **FIRK**      sacrilege      **PHIP**      sacrilege

**WYKE** and now you others  
come submit to me

**BLANE** we will not submit  
**FIRK** we will never submit  
to your rule

**WYKE** leave off this treachery  
or face my wrath

**MOORISH** flee while you can

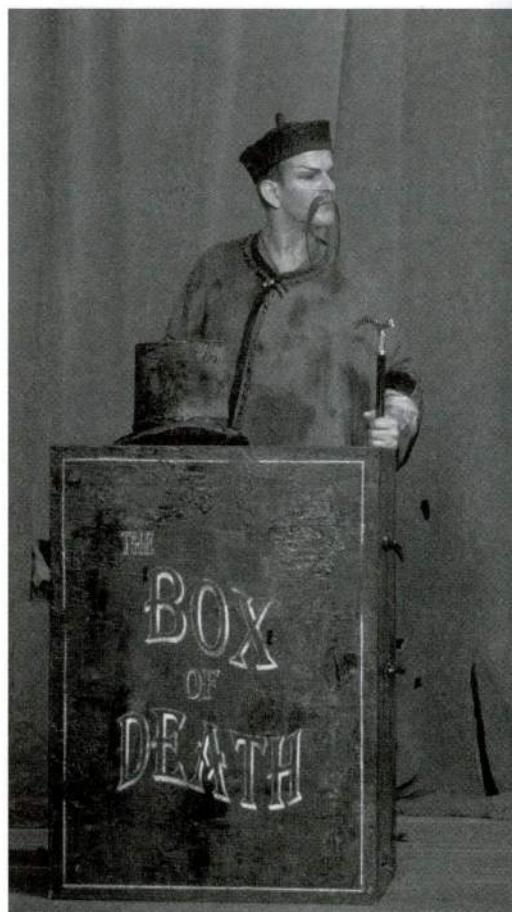
**PHIP** yes come let's go  
**FIRK** let's leave this tyrant  
**BLANE** to rule himself alone

*Firk attempts to untie Moorish.*

**WYKE** my rule will not be flouted  
without dire consequence  
the seas will boil  
the heavens will collapse  
before my will is cast aside

**FIRK** your rule is dust  
seas they'll freeze  
heavens evaporate  
before your rule  
we'll recognise

**WYKE** reluctant as i am  
to shed more blood  
i'll irrigate this  
thwaite with yours



*Wyke drags Firk to the ground and kills her. (The opera continues...)*





present

# OILEÁN

## A Celebration of the Blaskets

Director: Oliver Hurley

Costume Design: Leonore McDonagh ♦ Lighting Design: Jimmy McDonnell

Choreographer: Cindy Cummings ♦ Music Director: Tom Hanafin

\*

*Siamsa Tíre marks the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the departure of the Blasket Islanders to the mainland, in 'OILEÁN – A Celebration of the Blaskets'. This production celebrates and explores Blasket Island living, while also challenging our own notions of identity as contemporary islanders.*

\*

### Tour Dates 2003

Cork Opera House, Cork .....	21 - 23 October
Town Hall Theatre, Galway .....	28 - 30 October
Millennium Theatre, Limerick .....	01 - 03 November
Watergate Theatre, Kilkenny .....	05 - 08 November
Civic Theatre, Tallaght .....	10 - 15 November

'Stunning...' Irish Times

'A triumph.....ingenious.....the performance is outstanding' Irish Examiner

'Powerful.....brilliantly captured' The Kerryman

\*

Siamsa Tíre ♦ THE NATIONAL FOLK THEATRE OF IRELAND ♦ Tralee, Co. Kerry

[www.siamsatire.com](http://www.siamsatire.com) ♦ [siamsatire@eircom.net](mailto:siamsatire@eircom.net) ♦ Tel: 066-7123055

# entrances & exits

PETER CRAWLEY reports on backstage moves in Irish theatre



LOUGHLIN DEEGAN



JAMES CONWAY



JENNY HUSTON

Following **DEBORAH AYDON**'s departure from Rough Magic, the company's literary manager, **LOUGHLIN DEEGAN**, has been appointed as executive producer, starting next January. An appointment is pending for the director of Theatre Shop's playography project, commencing next year... **JAMES CONWAY** is to leave his position as Artistic Director of Opera Theatre Company early next year. The post has been advertised... **JENNY HUSTON** has vacated her position as company manager with The Corn Exchange to begin a career as a 2FM DJ. The position has been advertised... **THERESIA GUSCHLBAUER** has resigned as Artistic

Director of Galloglass to begin work as a freelance director and project co-ordinator. The position will be advertised... Former archivist of performing arts at the Linen Hall Library, **OPHELIA BYRNE** has taken up the position of director of the Young At Art festival, vacated by **REBECCA HUNTER**... **DECLAN GIBBONS** has stepped down as general manager of Macnas to pursue a career in music. The position has been advertised... Previously communications manager of the Dublin Theatre Festival 2002, **MARCUS BARKER** has begun work as the festival's full-time administrator... **AMY O'HANLON** has left Barabbas, where she was administra-

# entrances & exits

tor. The position will be advertised... **SARAH LING** has been appointed company manager of Bedrock. This is a new position.

**DYANE HANRAHAN** has departed as company manager of Corcadorka. Moving within the company, **FIN FLYNN**, previously the administrator, has filled her position. Corcadorka will advertise for a new administrator before the end of the year... **ALASTAR MACAONGUSA**, previously education officer of the Pavilion Theatre, has been appointed the new administrator of Focus Theatre... The Triskel Arts Centre has appointed **BELINDA QUIRKE**, formerly of the Cork Choral Festival, as its new general manager, while **DENNIS HERLIHY** has been appointed its new technical officer.

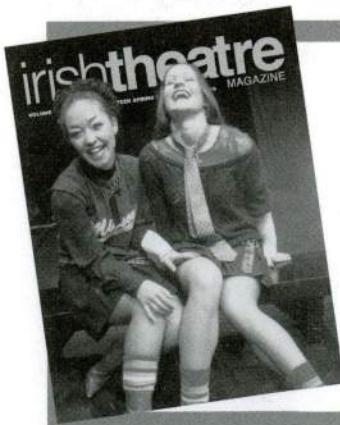


Both are new positions.

**CHRISTINE McKEON** has left her post as technician for Project Arts Centre. **JOSEPH COLLINS**, who previously worked as technical manager for the SFX, replaces her... Tinderbox Theatre has announced **MICHAEL DUKE** as its new artistic director. He has previously worked as a writer

and director and is a former associate director of Dundee Repertory Theatre.

**SITUATIONS VACANT:** Big Telly Theatre Company has advertised for a marketing/projects co-ordinator... The Theatre Producers Group NI has advertised for a part-time administration officer... Barnstorm Theatre Company is recruiting an Outreach Development Officer. This is a new position. (TW)



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# Through the Leaves

Book reviews editor **PATRICK LONERGAN** reports on new developments in Irish theatre publishing

**A**S ARTS ORGANISATIONS ARE BEING hit hard by the deteriorating economic climate, publishers are also finding the going tough, with many forthcoming books about Irish theatre delayed or cancelled. Things are looking particularly grim for Cork University Press. After much speculation about its future, the Press has announced that publisher Sarah

undertaken by an Irish publisher. The quality of two of its forthcoming books on theatre — PJ Matthews' *Revival*, an eagerly-anticipated treatment of the Abbey's early years, and Joan Dean's *Dancing at Lughnasa*, which deals both with the film and theatrical versions of Friel's play — gives some indication of what a loss the Press will be.



BRIAN FRIEL



MARINA CARR



PATRICK MASON



OSCAR WILDE

Wilbourne is departing, and that it is suspending the commissioning of new books — though it will honour existing contracts, while continuing to promote its backlist.

This is very bad news for Irish theatre, and Irish culture generally. Since 1925, Cork University Press has published many significant books, notably the *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, which was certainly the most ambitious and probably the most important project ever

C.U.P. receives funding from the Arts Council. It was given €17,000 this year — representing a drop of roughly five per cent from 2002. But its main source of income is Cork University itself. Like many third level institutions, University College Cork is currently experiencing a funding crisis; the scaling down of the Press's operations has been matched by the closure of some academic departments and other severe cuts.

The news from other Irish publishers is more heartening: Blackstaff Press have published Imelda Foley's *Girls in the Big Picture*, a lively and informative treatment of gender in Northern Irish drama. And Four Courts Press recently issued a tremendous new catalogue, of which the highlight for theatre lovers must be *The Wilde Legacy*, a collection of essays about Oscar Wilde that includes contributions from Marina Carr and Patrick Mason.

Mason also contributes to an interesting new book on Brian Friel by Tony Coulthard. *About Friel* is part of a new series from Faber, which includes volumes "About" Beckett and O'Casey. Coulthard reviews Friel's work by drawing on interviews and diaries, and by including the views of many practitioners who have worked with Friel. It's a simple way of looking at a dramatist's work, geared mainly towards students — but it's also very rewarding for the general reader. Faber are also publishing Martin McDonagh's *The Pillowman*. This "new" play (presented as a reading by Druid in 1997) is, interestingly, not set in Ireland, and should help us to form clearer ideas about McDonagh's work.

Finally, we have an opportunity to appreciate the antecedents of contemporary theatre in *Irish Drama of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, a major new anthology of 12 plays. Beautifully produced, it has the potential to alter significantly the way we think about our theatre. It's being published by the Japanese publishers, Ganesha — another sign of Irish publishers' difficulties, perhaps — and is distributed in Ireland by Kenny's of Galway.

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Email books news to:  
patrick.lonergan@ireland.com

## GENDER AND MODERN IRISH DRAMA

by Susan Cannon Harris

Indiana University Press, 2002

REVIEWED BY HELEN LOJEK

JUST WHEN YOU THINK YOU'VE considered the canonical authors of the Abbey's heyday — Yeats, Synge, O'Casey — from every conceivable angle, Susan Cannon Harris re-envision them in a fresh (and occasionally unsettling) way. *Gender and Modern Irish Drama* covers the years between Yeats' *Countess Cathleen* (1899) and his final play *The Death of Cuchulain* (1939), arguing that the "relationship...between national politics and sexual politics" informed not only the development of the Irish National Theatre, but also the creation of the Irish Free State, and that both theatre and state continue to "contend" with patterns set during these four decades. Harris enriches her analysis of the Abbey's big three by juxtaposing their plays with the decidedly non-canonical and deservedly neglected plays of Padraig Pearse. Pearse's awkward dramaturgy opens a window to aspects of his rhetoric that were massively influential in the political arena, and all four authors are thoughtfully examined in light of the intertwined images of blood, bodies, birth, and death.

With the exception of Pearse, the playwrights covered are comfortably familiar, but Harris shatters complacent approaches by triangulating their plays between traditional notions of sacrifice (often blood sacrifice) and the period's increasingly influential medical science (concerned with both public health and race). Feminist thinking about gender and the body, and

Ireland's colonial history, are important factors in her analysis. Because the historical and cultural backgrounds so important to this study are less familiar than the texts, Harris spends considerable time establishing them, often risking overwhelming text with the powerful story of context. Text always wins in the end, though, and she reaches the enviable goal of allowing us to discover familiar material in fresh and unfamiliar ways.

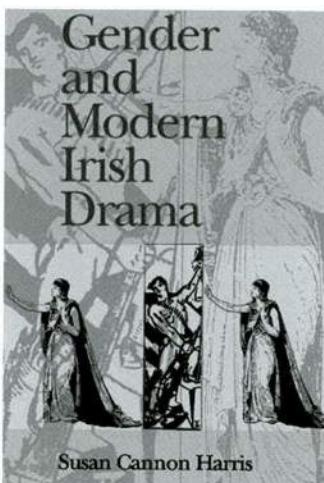
Harris is interested in the process by which individual and cultural values emerge, and she assembles relevant data about what is in the plays, and about the contexts in which they were written and premiered. Exploration of the phenomenal success of *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, for example, is made with awareness of both the vigorous press debate sparked by the earlier, highly controversial *The Countess Cathleen* and the non-controversy over Edward Martyn's contemporaneous *The Heather Field*. Harris' analysis of *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* is evidently shaped by availability of sources. Despite this limitation she presents a compelling analysis of *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* as a play whose popularity rested squarely on its reaffirmation of traditional notions of male sacrificial death for the benefit of female country

and mother, and on the readily identifiable presence of Maud Gonne beneath the Old Woman's costume. She goes on to analyse the "identification of the Irish woman with the Irish landscape" and the "connection between violence and fertility" on which the sacrificial paradigm depends.

Harris shifts the ground beneath set interpretations of later Abbey plays by assessing the extent to which they are reactions to the sacrificial paradigm she has identified. The *Playboy* riots she

considers a symptom of public panic over widespread depictions of the Irish as "infiltrated by disease and debility". Dealing directly with the often-sidestepped issues of Pearse's sexuality and his obsessive tendency to portray the blood sacrifice of young boys, she argues that his plays demonstrate a tendency to conflate politics and sexuality. Discussing O'Casey, she notes

that he provided a "heterosexual and patriarchal model" in opposition to the republican homoeroticism she finds in Pearse. She concludes with a bold and compelling reading of Yeats' *The Herne's Egg*, which she opts to take "literally...as having some reference to flesh, blood, and the material world". In Harris' analysis, the play emerges as an example of the troubling influences of eugenics and fascism on Yeats. Those



influences produced in *The Herne's Egg* and *The Death of Cuchulain* drama that places women in an untenable position between real and ideal, and ultimately sacrifices them (not men) in acts of extreme violence.

Playgoers, playwrights, and theatre rioters of the time might not have been fully – or even partially – aware of the gender-based cultural, political, and economic assumptions Harris traces, but her exhaustive examination of such factors leaves little doubt that this is an important way to think about the plays. In clear, readable prose (with helpful notes and well-chosen illustrations), she skillfully navigates the turbulent sea in which waves of sexual, national, literary, and political influence collide. The contexts she provides are rounded and grounded in extensive examination of historical and political sources; they are informed by carefully articulated and applied theory; and they provide the background for careful textual analysis. In sum they force us to ask whether previous paths of literary analysis have brought us to where we truly wanted to go.

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Helen Lojek is Professor of English at Boise State University (Idaho). Her latest book, *Contexts for Frank McGuinness's Drama is forthcoming from Catholic University Press.*

## THE THEATRE OF NATION:

### IRISH DRAMA AND CULTURAL NATIONALISM,

1890-1916

by Ben Levitas

Oxford University Press, 2002

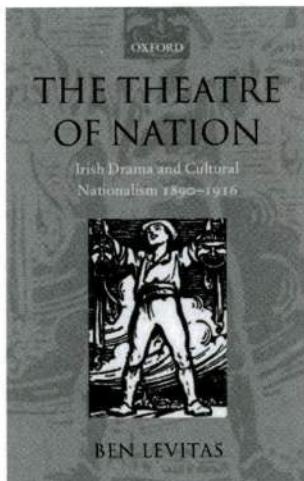
REVIEWED BY KAREN VANDEVELDE

BEN LEVITAS' *THE THEATRE OF NATION* examines the dialectic between drama and the politics of identity from the death of Parnell in 1890 to the Easter Rising, presenting a study in which "voices other than the strictly dramatic" can be heard.

Apart from a close reading of dramatic texts, theatrical performances and political events, the book also includes a detailed study of the contribution of journalism to this period of cultural flux.

Levitias gives attention not only to the canon of Irish drama, but also to less obvious theatre projects and playwrights. The Abbey repertoire is only one of the many dramatic sources in *Theatre of Nation*; events taking place

on minor stages in Dublin and elsewhere also shape his argument. For example, the first chapter, entitled "The Quintessence of Parnellism" (a variation on Shaw's famous essay "The Quintessence of Ibsenism") presents an unusual but convincing parallel between Irish politics and European theatre, with Shaw as visionary interpreter. In the same year that Shaw pub-



lished his praise of Ibsen, the Parnell scandal broke out. Ibsen, like Parnell, "exposed the false idealism of bourgeois society," states Levitas. He goes on to discuss the emergence of the Irish Literary Theatre (1899-1901) in the context of contemporary politics. He also refers to the flurry of new journals less tolerant of the establishment that emerged during the same period, to the nationalist alliances of Yeats, to the artistic rivalry of the theatre's directors, and the international basis for their theatre project.

Levitias aptly calls the early phase of the Irish National Theatre a "union of sceptics". During its formative years, conflicting views on the role of theatre in a changing society led to a series of splits in the company, and confrontations between Yeats, Synge and the nationalist press. Levitas weaves the political developments of the period into a subtle reading of Synge's *Shadow of the Glen* and Yeats' one-act plays. He also includes a fine appreciation of Lady Gregory as "the nationalist voice of the Abbey". Yeats and Synge demonstrated a talent for controversy, he notes, but Gregory "mollified with equal flair".

Because of accusations of anti-nationalism against the Abbey (culminating in the *Playboy* controversy) the Theatre of Ireland — set up by actors and playwrights who left the Abbey in 1906 — and the Ulster Literary Theatre were considered "implicitly more noble and nationalist" than the Abbey. By 1915, however, the politics of place had changed. When P.J. Bourke had his play *For the Land She Loved* staged at the Abbey instead of the Queen's, the authorities objected. Moved out of the

confines of "entertainment" and into the Abbey, the play acquired seditious power. This is just one example of how the author integrates famous narratives of the Irish dramatic movement (such as the *Playboy* controversy) with lesser-known but equally significant productions that marked the development of Irish cultural nationalism. Irish language drama, the Cork Dramatic Society, realist drama, the Home Rule Bill and suffragism all find a place in this book. So many possibilities are available for the "reinterpretation of what Ireland had been, was, and could be," argues Levitas.

In addition to giving a thorough overview of the dramatic activity of the time, Levitas demonstrates impressive scholarly zeal in tracking the developments, correspondences and rivalries of major and minor periodicals. His differentiation between the nationalist ideologies of some journals and the cultural policies of others is particularly informative. The archival sources informing his argument include a range of material that has often been overlooked. This is what makes his book stand out.

The *Theatre of Nation* is densely but elegantly written. At times, the weight of detail in the narrative obscures the author's wit and insight. Nevertheless, the attentive reader will be rewarded with a challenging narrative, not only on Irish theatre and politics in and outside the Abbey, but also on the rise of socialism, suffragism and Ireland's location in a European culture. 

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*Karen Vandervelde is a post-doctoral research fellow at NUI Galway, writing a book on the alternative dramatic revival in Ireland.*

## A FEW WHITE LIES

**Written and directed by Frank Shouldice**

Chambermade Productions

Andrew's Lane Studio

19 May-7 June; reviewed 3 June.

BY HEATHER JOHNSON

A MORALITY TALE SET IN CONTEMPORARY Dublin, Frank Shouldice's *A Few White Lies* opens with the introduction of four characters, who between them claim two marriages and two illicit affairs. Ray (Robert McDowell) does not know that while on business trips his wife Jane (Maria Tecce) is having an affair with his friend Michael (Alan King), and Michael does not know that his wife Audrey (Emma McIvor) has had a drink-fuelled one-night stand with Ray. Meanwhile, a younger, starry-eyed couple are making the decision to get married: Audrey's niece Elaine (Rachel Hanna), a plaintive puppy of a girl, is being romanced by Barry, a football-playing Dub.

All swagger and blind ambition, Barry was played by *Fair City* regular David Mitchell, and this casting seemed to attract a number of the soap's female fans to watch the TV actor up close and personal. The play's "Celtic Tiger" foursome and their moral stasis are contrasted with Mitchell's stage Irishman, Barry, (here a pundit on Roy Keane vs. Mick McCarthy, with waistband-pulling tick and Northside accent, who functions as a theatrical touchstone of plain truth). Most of the play's humour

is occasioned by this stereotype.

From these marital, extra-marital, gender, and class conflicts the play attempts to squeeze a sense of dramatic tension. Instead the action chugs towards the inevitable disclosures of infidelity; the play's structure is entirely predictable. Reference to the television catchphrase "Ask the audience" only reinforces the sense that we are watching second-rate TV on stage. The weak-



## THE WAY WE LIVE NOW

*McDowell and McIvor in  
A Few White Lies*

ness of plot is compounded by shortcomings in Frank Shouldice's production such as inconsistencies in staging. If the chic Audrey can afford a recreational cocaine habit, and husband Michael is a globetrotting IT maverick, then why was there a trashy, outmoded armchair in their sitting room? Purporting to describe contemporary Dublin, the play instead has a distinctly Eighties sensibility. The production's interpretation of cosmopolitan style stretched only as far as a Karl Lagerfeld coffee-table book and the

BRIAN O'BRIEN

dated shorthand of an order of "Corona and lime". While the character Jane, dressed in red, sits in a café waiting for her assignation with Michael, we hear Richard Clayderman's version of *Lady in Red*. This lent the scene neither irony nor intentional humour, and lampooned the image of Jane as a sophisticate with her glass of Chardonnay.

It was difficult to believe in any of the sexual relationships due to miscasting of the couples, poor wardrobe choices (particularly the men's), and uneven performances. Alan King as Michael was noticeably nervous, while Maria Tecce, with clipped diction and lack of projection, gave a wooden performance as Jane. On the other hand, Emma McIvor played Audrey with energy and is an actor who deserves a better role than this play could offer, particularly in view of its two-dimensional understanding of gender relations. While there were observations about the inevitable changes in long-term relationships, nothing original was said on the subject.

It is one thing to set a play in the contemporary period, but quite another to write a play *about* contemporary life. Shouldice, who is both writer and director, fails to do either convincingly. Tackling contemporary issues in an innovative and challenging way requires more than a sprinkle of local place names and references to Ryanair, personal organisers and satellite dishes. The writing is, at times, toe-curling. As marital discord builds, Ray mocks Jane, "Mind your make-up, make up your mind" — words delivered by McDowell with the unmistakable haste of embarrassment. Such a line should not have survived more than one draft. Later, the two older women recall advice given by their

schoolteacher Sister Joe, advice which turns out to be the "serenity prayer": "God grant me... courage to change the things I can", etc. This is a morality play largely constructed out of second-hand language. It was, moreover, a discouraging experience to be in a Dublin theatre in 2003 to listen to tittering amongst the audience at the sight of a used condom held up for laughs.

The programme notes disclose the playwright's interest in the "soul of Ireland" and "values-based change". The play certainly aspires to the grand statement, pinning its central message on the drunken musings of Raymond ("we are broken dolls"). Yet one does not leave the theatre disillusioned with the precarious state of marriage or the bleakness of modern life, but rather depressed that this may be an example of the state of new writing for the Irish stage.

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*Heather Johnson is a literary critic and tutor in literature at DCU.*

#### **AFTER DARWIN**

**by Timberlake Wertenbaker**

Prime Cut Productions

On tour; reviewed on 15 May 2003 at Old  
Museum Arts Centre, Belfast

**BY ÚNA KEALY**

AFTER DARWIN IS A PLAY CRISSCROSSED by argument and counter-argument, exploring the tensions between the struggle to exist and co-exist. Wertenbaker uses the device of a play about Charles Darwin and Admiral Robert FitzRoy inside a play about a struggling theatre company to consider how human beings might reconcile the instinct to compete for survival with the instinct to live in a symbiotic relationship with others.



It is a play about neo-Darwinism and yet it is more than simply a rhetorical debate.

The play opens with FitzRoy interviewing the young Darwin as he prepares to set sail to chart the flora, fauna and geography of the South American coast. FitzRoy hopes to employ a man of science who will advance the success of his expedition but he also wants a companion. This desire reflects the complex relationship between the advancement of mankind and the pursuit of individual happiness that dominates the play.

The story of Darwin and FitzRoy is interrupted by a character called Millie, a theatre director, and we discover that the Darwin/FitzRoy journey and relationship are merely imagined and that the real characters are Tom and Ian. These are actors performing speeches and actions

**NATURAL SELECTION**  
*Conleth Hill and Des McAleer in After Darwin*

that they do not believe or even, at times, understand, in order to get ahead in their own battle for survival. Through this

meta-theatrical construct, the play changes from a simple view of an historical story to one which becomes increasingly like an Escher drawing, with stairways of thought going off in all directions simultaneously. The effect was impressive and intriguing.

The production was particularly well cast: Conleth Hill played Darwin with the humour and enthusiasm required by the first act and allowed his character to change as the Darwin/FitzRoy story progressed in the second act. To the role of the homosexual, self-centred actor, Tom, he brought the same seemingly effortless understatement that helped make Marie Jones's *Stones in his Pockets* such a success. Des McAleer was excellent as the

CHRIS HILL

repressed English aristocrat tormented by the theological threat that Darwin posed. He had less to work with in the character of Ian but his performance was focused and compelling throughout.

Norma Sheahan played the theatre director, Millie, with the energy and humour that the part demands and wisely avoided overacting the part. Sean Francis gave a solid performance in the difficult role of the playwright Lawrence. Lawrence is not willing to compete relentlessly to achieve his ambitions and this left his character seeming weaker in comparison with the others, perhaps because, whatever the advantages of living in harmony with others, the tension of competition is more dynamic and dramatic.

Wertenbaker blurs the lines between the frame play and the play within the play through a seamless interruption of one by the other. She divides her play into episodic scenes which can often be clumsy and tedious, but Prime Cut's Artistic Director Jackie Doyle recognised the need for a fluid transition. The scenes moved into one another smoothly, the lighting and sound operation was slick and the actors performed with a concentration and ease that are the mark of a good director and a fine cast.

The set was minimal (a simple black box) and the lighting design was low-key but the production did not suffer for this. This is a play of ideas and Doyle let the text do the talking. She allowed herself the luxury of a Bell Helicopter soundscape that vividly captured the creaks and groans of seafaring life. This added tension to the production and integrated one scene into the next, maintaining momentum and giving a rhythm to the emerging ideas. Tina McHugh's lights snapped off sharply at the end of scenes,

leaving a tableau image suspended on stage. The sharp lighting effect created a moment of stasis, encapsulating the idea that, in the modern age of pause and playback, the theatre is a place of uncompromising momentum.

---

Úna Kealy is a research student in Drama at the University of Ulster.

#### **BEATS 'N' PIECES**

**by Raymond Scannell**

Meridian Theatre Company

at the Half Moon Theatre

18-28 June; reviewed 20 June

**BY PATRICK COTTER**

I WENT TO BEATS 'N' PIECES WITH no idea what the play was about but with high expectations, based on the playwright's reputation. I had seen Scannell's *Mix It Up* last year and thought it was the best original play by a Cork-based author since *Disco Pigs*.

As I sat in the compact auditorium, awaiting the opening of Johnny Hanrahan's production, I noted with anticipation the array of multimedia paraphernalia which has become almost *de rigueur* on the Irish stage. It has been 20 years since I first encountered a multimedia component in an Irish play: Field Day's production of Thomas Kilroy's *Double Cross* and I was electrified by the experience.

Enough of my reveries: as the performance began, sound designer Cormac O'Connor's excellent and appropriate soundtrack boomed, while lights-up revealed four hooded figures hissing. They then broke into a monologue, divided piecemeal between the four players. The monologue was in rhyme, of the worst kind: *back with black, fear*

with *here*, see with *graffiti*, etc. The play was performed in ensemble: the four characters were members of the same gang and obsessed with graffiti. They spoke with working-class accents without being actually working-class in every case. They listened regularly to a DJ who peppered his routine with the word *Revolution*, more as an aesthetic device than a call to arms.

The characters (played by Frank Bourke, Fiona Condon, John McCarthy, Raymond Scannell and Eoin Slattery), the working-class milieu and the dynamic between them reminded me a little of Walsh's *Sucking Dublin* but the language and structure of the play were reminiscent of *Disco Pigs*.

There was poetic language in this play even if it wasn't in the rhyme or rhythm. Referring to a house full of family members he can't stand, Mono (played ably by a well-directed Scannell) declares that "I reach my house and it moans at me". He talks about how the sound of the key entering a lock is like "a strangled whisper". The play is full of heightened emotion, but lacks moments of tenderness and quiet for counterbalance.

The players' alternating monologues and ensemble pieces were punctuated by scenes with the (presumably pirate) DJ making community announcements relevant to the counterculture to which



#### RHYMING IN MY HOOD Raymond Scannell in Beats'n' Pieces

the characters subscribed. There were also extracts from a more conventional talk show, which failed to convince. An ostensibly concerned woman phones in to complain about the abusive teenagers gathered on her doorstep. But nowhere in her voice is there anger or fear.

The segment is accompanied by video images of still cartoons depicting the speakers. A litany of mistakes here in Tom Creed's sound and lighting design: radio does not need pictures and if video-

TOM LAWLOW

projected images are to be used, why choose still rather than moving images? And why cartoons that looked like the *Daily Mirror's Andy Capp* strip?

All of this detracted from the play's serious intentions, which were not only the desire to place storytelling at the centre of Irish culture but also to explore some big ideas. Ideas such as the motivation of destructive teenagers, the contrast between graffiti as art and graffiti as purposeless, damaging tool — as well as other nebulous, political questions.

One doesn't look to art to produce answers, but one does expect cogent questions. There was little cogency. Fragments of the text revealed Scannell to be the gifted writer he is, but as a whole it did not hang together. I felt that the 22-year-old author had taken on too much with a play of this length and with all the disparate elements he poured into it. But I left still confident, however paradoxically, that Raymond Scannell has a great future as a playwright.

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*Patrick Cotter is Director of the Munster Literature Centre.*

#### **BEDBOUND by Enda Walsh**

Asylum Productions/Woodford Bourne

Cork Midsummer Festival

Granary Theatre, Cork

17-28 Jun 2003; reviewed 23 June

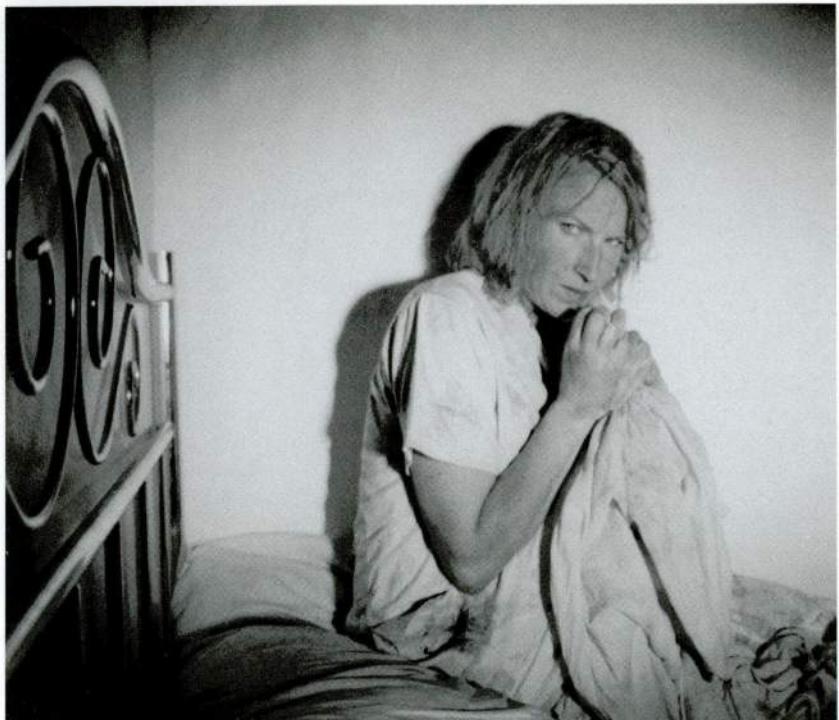
BY NEIL O'SULLIVAN

LEAVING THE THEATRE, MY BRAIN rattling around inside my cranium like a frozen pea in a... No, dammit. My tender psyche flattened like a tube of toothpaste that's been battered by a lumphammer-wielding sumo... No. How to describe it? Anything but the old reliable "wrung out like a dishrag" — which is precisely how

I felt. Enda Walsh's *bedbound* can create that effect. It is an intense, visceral piece of theatre that smacks you right between the eyes with its compressed depiction of a psyche tormented by paranoia, greed, twisted ambition, infantile jealousy. It's set in an imaginative landscape whose physicality is as stunted as its attempts to escape it are vivid and panoramic.

The play is concerned with the relationship between a father and his disabled daughter, both of whom live in a bed in a single tiny room. The story relates how they came to be there and the consequences of that journey. The father, once a humble store room humper, rises from his lowly position to dominate the cut-throat world of Munster furniture retailing. He achieves this with the help of his unusual talent for pyromania. Thereafter his egomaniacal and all consuming quest to become the cross province, home accessory franchise of choice for middle Ireland leads to murder, abuse and an abundance of cheesy vol-au-vents. On our journey we discover, among other things, the glory of draylon, the fundamental necessity of harmonious soft furnishings and that God comes from Glasheen. It explores the ultimate consequence visited upon a man who is willing to do almost anything to gain an edge over his competitors, whose suppressed rage is capable of destroying anyone who gets in his way, or disappoints him, and who perceives all things in terms of their utility to him and his goals.

The writing itself is, at times, outstanding. Many examples spring to mind, but particularly where the Daughter, whose life experience has been extremely limited, observes the act of talking itself — as though for the first time. She speaks



in a metaphor-laden rush which highlights her jagged, panic-stricken discomfort, her uneasiness at occupying her own skin.

Brilliantly brought to life by Julie Sharkey, the Daughter has a chameleon-like capacity to shift between the various imaginary characters required by the play's governing fantasy. Added to this is the dilemma of her complicity in her own imprisonment and her simultaneous attempt to escape. Both characters suffer from the push-pull psychodrama of the terminally confused, desiring to escape but fearing it even more, but

#### **NOWHERE TO HIDE**

*Julie Sharkey as the  
Daughter in Bedbound*

the Daughter suffers more acutely.

The Father character is frighteningly convincing: he is a kind of furniture

shilling *übermenschen*, powerfully played by Dominic Moore in a vivid and interesting performance. His characterisation is littered with lovely touches and he is utterly believable as a man with the hungriest genitals in Europe. Genitals aside, his performance is kinetic and intense. He makes the character both repulsive and, oddly, in the end, somewhat sympathetic.

If you prefer your theatrical experiences to be accompanied by rose petals,

HILARY O'SHAUGNESSY

depicting gentle emotions, delicately played, then you'd probably be better off skipping this. The protagonists experience a psychological isolation and torment so extreme that the identification essential to effective drama is initially problematic. But this is overcome as the story progresses towards its resolution, if you can call it that, involving, as it does, no more than a momentary cessation of suffering. But this culmination permits a certain cathartic release of tension. And it is in this release that the play exerts its considerable power.

It is also frequently hilarious, never more so than when exploring the repulsively self-serving shenanigans of the Father in his attempts to bottom-feed his way to the top. Donal Gallagher's direction is assured and well measured. The stage, lighting, and sound design by Olan Wrynn, John F. Cumiskey, and Linda Buckley, respectively, are all subtle and perfectly pitched for the piece. I found myself moved, deeply troubled, entertained and ultimately, to quote Elvis, "All shook up". Job done. Well done.

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*Neil O'Sullivan is a Cork-based playwright.*

**THE BLIND FIDDLER by Marie Jones**

Lyric Theatre, Belfast

10 June–5 July, 2003; reviewed 10 June

**BY PATRICK LONERGAN**

PERHAPS UNFAIRLY, MARIE JONES remains more noted for commercial than critical success. *The Blind Fiddler* — an exciting fusion of melodrama, traditional music, and great storytelling — looks likely to be as successful as her earlier plays. But it also has an impressive emotional and thematic complexity that shows clearly that her work de-

serves closer critical attention.

The play begins on Lough Derg, a place that has already inspired one of the great works of recent Irish writing — Heaney's *Station Island*. Like Heaney, Jones uses the island's three-day pilgrimage to frame an attempt to come to terms with the past. In this case, the pilgrim is Kathleen (Carol Moore), who has come to Lough Derg in the footsteps of Pat, her recently dead father, who had visited the island for each of the previous 30 years.

As a child, Kathleen had been inspired by her father's story of the Blind Fiddler, whose music had so delighted people that it made them forget their hunger. It's a romantic tale — but one that Mary, Kathleen's mother, knew was utterly inappropriate to the life of a poor Catholic family in 1960s Belfast. She insisted that Kathleen and her brother reject their father's romanticism for an upbringing that gave them financial security and social acceptance — but at great personal cost. Kathleen is resentful and confused about this — particularly about her father's compliance with the insistence on upward mobility. Her visit to Lough Derg is an attempt to come to terms with her past, which she reconstructs in a series of vignettes set mainly in her father's pub. Populated by a multitude of characters — played by only four actors — each scene is also accompanied by a lively traditional score performed onstage by Cathal Hayden, Máirtín O'Connor, and Cathal Synott.

At the play's heart is the notion of sacrifice. The people who walk barefoot through Lough Derg do so to be able to enjoy the lives they'll resume after their pilgrimage. This is poignantly contrasted with the sacrifices made by Pat and Mary for the sake of their children — well



motivated, but resulting only in unhappiness. This focus on Catholic ideas about sacrifice allows Jones to provide one of the most interesting treatments of sectarianism yet seen on an Irish stage. Although ostensibly acting in her children's interests, Mary is motivated by terrible shame about her own status, insisting that her children speak in accents different to her own, that her husband cease playing the fiddle, and refusing to allow a traditional wake to be held in their pub. What's tragic is that these sacrifices prove partially justified — Mary's children acquire financial stability, whereas their father's customers are forced to emigrate because of Belfast businesses' refusal to employ Catholics.

Jones manages to deal with these issues without being divisive, presenting the

**PILGRIMS' PROGRESS**  
*Hewitt, Gordon, Deardon, Moore, McCafferty in The Blind Fiddler*

action around the Troubles, in the early 1960s and the present. This allows her to show how social class and sectarianism are closely related in Northern Ireland

— an idea that's clearly relevant to the Troubles, while also resonating with other aspects of Irish life: the association of traditional Irish culture with shame and poverty has been a powerful influence on life in Ireland, north and south, since the Famine, remaining evident in many ways even now. Jones is attempting to reclaim our traditions from our history: she shows that traditional Irish music has been an undervalued — and devalued — tradition, and her inclusion of music in the play, as well as the musicians' movement during the action from the stage's wings to its centre, are powerful gestures.

There is also a theatrical reclamation

at work: with a brief nod to Synge, Jones is clearly reaching back to Boucicault. This is one of the play's most likeable aspects, but also one of its problems. The use of music and dance is likely to bring the play much success, but their importance is sometimes overplayed, so that — as was the case with *Dancing at Lughnasa* (which *The Blind Fiddler* in some ways resembles) — the production may be misinterpreted as offering the message that oppression isn't so bad once the people being oppressed can sing a nice tune and dance with "wild" abandon. Jones's writing works against this interpretation, but there are times — particularly during the final ten minutes — when the sentimentality becomes excessive. But this problem shouldn't detract from the quality of Jones's achievement: ensuring that her audience will go home happy, she still refuses them any easy answers to the problems she poses.

The play has been given a fantastic production by the Lyric. The set, designed by Ferdia Murphy, moves with impressive flexibility through a variety of locations, and Paul Keogan's lighting is great. But the cast, directed by Ian McElhinney, are the heroes here. Moore gives a fine performance in the play's central role, and she is brilliantly supported by Julia Deardon, John Hewitt, Dan Gordon and Frankie McCafferty, who all play multiple roles. Whether *The Blind Fiddler* will prove as successful as Jones's earlier work, it's certainly her most rewarding play to date.

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*Patrick Lonergan is books editor of this magazine and is researching for a PhD in drama at the University of Berkeley, California and NUI Galway.*

**CHARLIE** by John Breen

Yew Tree Theatre Company

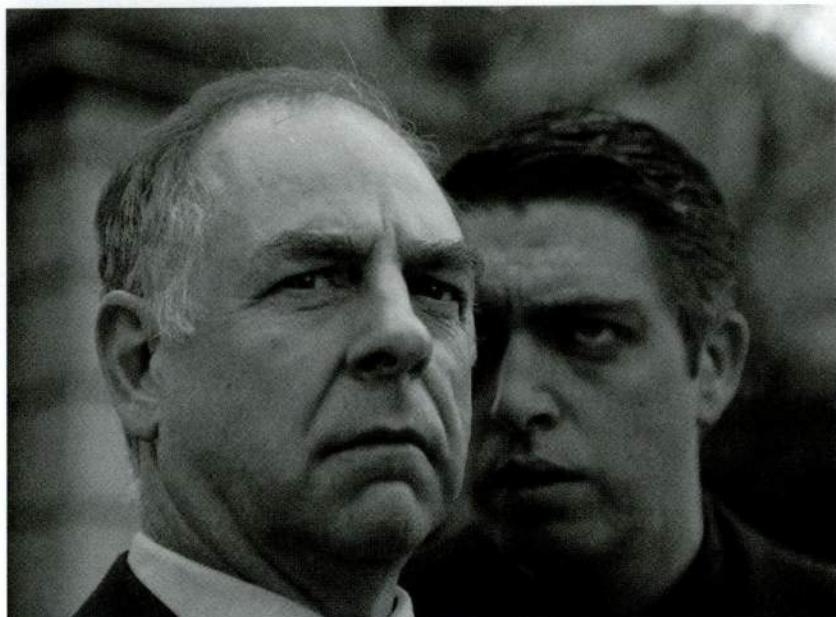
On tour; reviewed 15 May 2003 at Theatre

Royal, Castlebar

BY IAN WIECZOREK

JOHN BREEN'S *ALONE IT STANDS*, a play that picaresquely chronicles Munster's Rugby victory over the All Blacks, is undoubtedly one of the major popular - and populist - Irish theatrical successes of the last decade. It is no surprise, then, that Breen's follow-up play, *Charlie*, was greeted with considerable anticipation. For its subject Breen has chosen the life and times of a man who has become embedded in the Irish psyche over the past four decades, the singular figure of the former Taoiseach, society personality and self-made *cause célèbre*, Charles Haughey, who, throughout his chequered history has continued to fascinate media and public alike.

*Charlie* charts the life of the hero through his meteoric rise from the ranks and his equally dramatic fall from grace. Commencing with a fictional meeting between Haughey and a Co Mayo farmer after the opening of the Céide Fields Centre in Ballycastle, at a time when Haughey's career is over and his reputation is on the rocks, we are taken in sequential flashbacks through significant events that have brought him to this point. We are presented with the behind-the-scenes scheming, the deals, the manipulation of the media and of Fianna Fáil, and other pivotal events such as Haughey's meeting with Margaret Thatcher. There is considerable humour to be found too, both in the knowing and often ironic humour of hindsight and also the finely wrought and often ripe language, delivered with the timing and



pace of a 1930s screwball comedy.

Breen has clearly done his homework, but rather than offering a chapter-and-verse chronology of historical events, he deftly conjures his version of the man behind the persona with a certain amount of artistic license. A succession of pared-down scenes using an extremely effective dramatic shorthand, succinctly evoke the ambience, mindset and dynamics of the time and the players, and make this a very "user-friendly" version of Haughey's story for those not fully versed in the intricacies of the plot(s). The play treads a fine and careful line, neither lionising nor demonising; it presents Haughey as a shrewd opportunist who takes advantage of the com-

#### **IRRESTISTIBLE RISE OF THE BOSS** Garret Keogh and Karl Shiels in Charlie

mon practices of his milieu. Machiavellian in his dealings, Napoleonic in his self-belief and ruthlessness, he is imbued by

Breen with a degree of idealism and vision, balancing naked ambition with an honest wish to further the cause of Ireland and its people — an idealism that for him justifies his own excesses.

The linchpin around which the play revolves, Garrett Keogh gives a commanding and superbly realised performance, both as the formidable, power-hungry Haughey on his seemingly inexorable rise, and also as the beleaguered, incapacitated and rather more philosophical figure of later years. Also impressive is the support cast of seven (Michael Hayes, Paul Meade, Ciaran

McMahon, David Parnell, Tara Quirke, Derek Reid and Karl Shiels. In later performances Karl Shiels was replaced by Enda Kilroy) who create the host of characters that populate his world and bring the vignettes to life, shifting personae at a quickfire pace. That is not to suggest, however, that there is any lack of subtlety, and there are some tellingly quiet scenes amid the maelstrom of machination and domineering.

The overriding impression is of a well-shaped and highly energetic blend of dialogue and physical interaction. Breen's direction is tight yet fluent, and his understanding of dynamics and the spaces between his characters is to the fore. The lighting by Sinead McKenna is minimal — often stark — but effective, and a judicious Michael Nyman soundtrack adds both a sense of inexorable inevitability and, more quirkily, something of the atmosphere of Restoration comedy. Guy Barriscale's set design is also understated but effective: newspaper-covered walls (with their sense of historicity), doorways and windows are all slightly askew, while television screens — displaying flags, relevant catch phrases of the time and "live" interviews by video camera — add a knowing, postmodernist air to the proceedings.

As a play, *Charlie* is a much stronger work than *Alone It Stands*, which, for all its polish and entertainment value has always seemed rather light. With *Charlie*, Breen has produced a much more substantial, thought-provoking work, full of virtuosity both in the writing and, with this production, in its realisation.

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### **CRAVE by Sarah Kane**

Playgroup Theatre Company

Granary Theatre, Cork

29 April - 3 May 2003; reviewed 30 April

BY ALANNAH HOPKIN

CRAVE, SARAH KANE'S PENULTIMATE PLAY, was first performed at the Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh in August 1998, less than a year before her suicide at the age of 28. It has since been staged throughout Europe, and was first seen in Ireland at project@the mint, in Dublin in October 1998.

The play marked a turning point in Kane's short career. Critics who had condemned her earlier work, *Blasted* and *Phaedra's Love*, for what they saw as gratuitous violence were forced to recant, and recognise the arrival of a major theatrical talent.

This tense, poetic four-hander was a brave choice for director, Tom Creed, and Playgroup, Cork's newest professional theatre company. *Crave* may be short — about 45 minutes — but it is extremely condensed and explores abuse, desire, loss and the disintegration of personality. The words work like a quartet for four voices; they may not always make conventional sense but fall like hammer blows on the emotions, delivering a terrible truth that is somewhere between intuitive and psychotic. As the character M puts it, "If this makes no sense, then you understand perfectly". The language is plain and pared back, colloquial, but with echoes of T.S. Eliot's 'The Wasteland', the King James Bible, and the Book of Common Prayer.

Playgroup's production opens with the four black-clad characters standing in bare feet, leaning against the wall at



TOM CREED

the back of the stage. They move forward, and stand in a straight line on a black set (designed and lit by Tom Creed) adorned only by a grid of 88 white light bulbs suspended above the actors' heads.

The actors speak their lines at times as monologue, at times to each other, across each other, to the audience or to an unseen other. Gradually, the characters, who are designated only by letters, B, M, C and A, reveal their identities, and possible relationships between them are suggested. B (Raymond Scannell) is a middle-aged man, a self-confessed paedophile; M (Cal Duggan) is an older woman who is pursued as a lover-mother figure by the younger man, A (Diarmuid Fehily) and is a mother/therapist figure to C (Hilary O'Shaughnessy), a disturbed, damaged young woman, ravaged by grief and close to despair. Her past includes teenage rape, abuse by a grandfather, and a father who colluded in the abuse, who may or may not be B.

It is not the characters' relationships with each other that matters: it is their various desires, their cravings, their deep unhappiness. The emotional centre of the play is C, with her memories of abuse — "A 14-year-old to steal my virginity on the moor and rape me till I come" — anorexia, domestic violence. One of her longer speeches consists entirely of the repetition of the question, "What have they done to me?" 20 times.

Hilary O'Shaughnessy's performance captured C's desperation, and her occasional touches of black

humour. Raymond Scannell was suitably sinister as B, while Cal Duggan brought intelligence and depth to M's loneliness and fear of old age. Diarmuid Fehily, who is currently studying acting and making his professional debut, coped well with a most demanding role, possibly one of the most difficult one he will encounter in his whole career.

The ensemble playing demanded total concentration, and at times reached a high pitch of controlled emotion. The text was taken at a smacking pace, perhaps a little too fast. On the opening night there were several fluffed lines; perhaps in the course of the short run these disappeared.

The immediate comparison is with Beckett, the Beckett of *Not I* and *That Time*. Kane's use of the rhythms of speech and the pauses between words, and the precision of the interweaving of the four voices, is magnificent. But while Beckett retains a certain boundary between stage and audience, and lets his drama happen in the realm of the intellect and psyche, Kane works with raw emotion, setting no limits to what an audience might be asked to endure. The pain at the core of the play is a very intimate pain; rather than witnessing someone's breakdown, you feel as if you are taking part in it.

Although *Crave* performs better than it reads, like all great plays it is fear-somely difficult to stage. Other productions have had the characters in arm-chairs and at a table. Director Tom Creed's choice of a single line facing forwards, with the actors standing throughout (with rather a lot of clenching and unclenching of fists as the emotion intensified) seemed a strange deci-

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**LIVES AND LETTERS** Scannell,  
O'Shaughnessy, Duggan, Fehily in *Crave*

sion for a three-sided auditorium, condemning two-thirds of the audience to a partial view.

Even so, it was invigorating to be in the presence of writing of this calibre and acting of this intensity.

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*Alannah Hopkin is a writer and critic. She has reviewed theatre for publications including the Sunday Times, the Irish Examiner, Time Out and the Financial Times.*

**CRESTFALL by Mark O'Rowe**

Gate Theatre, Dublin

20 May-7 June 2003; reviewed 26 May

BY BRIAN SINGLETON.

MARK O'ROWE'S PLAYS TO DATE have centred on Dublin's criminal classes in a murky underworld of violence and abusive behaviour. The most successful, *Howie the Rookie* (1999) and *Made in China* (2001), operate in an exclusively male terrain, where relationships are replaced by arbitrary codes of honour, and action is motivated by fear of shame. Women, as constructed by his male characters, fall into the predictable categories of mothers and whores, both existing to satisfy base instincts and fantasies. In *Crestfall*, however, O'Rowe gives voice to women, and also moves the action into a fictional country town. But despite the gender and location shifts, his women are prostitutes, nymphomaniacs or wives trapped in loveless marriages, who inhabit the all-too-familiar twilight zone of abuse, violence and sexual degradation. It all makes for a very uncompromising and, at times, unpalatable experience.

Director Garry Hynes has teamed up with her favoured designer, Francis O'Connor, to create a stage environment of reflective metal, reminiscent of a

gaudy night-club, with all its connotations of assignation and alcohol-fuelled violence. Against this opening backdrop comes the first burst of Paul Arditti's sound design: the cries of children, discordantly out of place in the very adult, sexualised imagery of the set, but also a counterpoint to both the opening and closing moments of the play in which the innocence of child's play is featured. Essentially, though, the stage is bare for O'Rowe's three women to tell their solo tales of sex, drugs and violence in three 23-minute monologues, only connecting with each other in their narratives through their relationships with the same men.

First is Olive Day, played by Aisling O'Sullivan, whose impressive height and incessant strutting creating an angular and unsettling performance, appropriate for a character who has forsaken her husband (Jungle) for being too nice and plunged herself headlong into a world of extra-marital sexual relationships against a backdrop of abattoirs, shotguns, and "faggots" next door. Her view of her compulsive sex life, like her body language, is distorted. She feels that she is empowered by her chosen lifestyle since the only men she prefers to have sex with are powerful and ruthless, men at the cutting edge of either business or the underworld, men who will use and abuse her. She is ashamed of her husband because he was once humiliated by one of these more desired men. O'Sullivan wrestles with O'Rowe's heightened poetic realism, with all its savage imagery, and punches it out at us, recounting her story as if from a distance, but her character is actually (and sadly) immersed in self-justification.

Next comes Alison Ellis, played by Marie Mullen, who delivers her mono-


**REFLECTIONS FROM THE**
**LOWER DEPTHS**
*Eileen Walsh in Crestfall*

logue with a little more acquiescence, at one point even kneeling down. She is ashamed of her

body, and for a long time has not spoken to her husband but maintains a burning desire for a normal family life. At the outset she rescues her son Philip from the clutches of a would-be child molester (the same man who humiliated Jungle Day and who turns up as an evil client in the next monologue). Philip had been kicked in the head by a stray horse and is suffering from brain damage. Alison's husband, the Bru (who is one of Olive's suitors), forces Philip to take revenge on the

horse together with the rest of the men in the village. But it is Alison who rescues her son once again and provides the starting point for a possible healing in her relationship with the Bru.

Tilly McQuarrie (played by Eileen Walsh) is the third woman, a drug-taking prostitute who, because of a back-street abortion at an early age is unable to have children. Her encounter with the would-be child-molester and Jungle-shamer plunges us into the depths of depravity as the man will not pay her for her services unless she has sex with his three-eyed dog. It is Tilly who engineers the plot resolution as she informs Jungle that her pimp Inchy Bassey is the real father of Olive's child. It is in her monologue that the story of how Jungle takes a shotgun and kills Olive, Inchy and finally himself emerges. And it is at this point that the text finally returns to moments of tenderness as Tilly snatches Olive's

child (Poppin'eye) and takes him to the river to wash the blood of the adults from his body in a pseudo-baptismal scene. A tiny trap door opened in the set and Walsh plunged her hand into water at that moment in the monologue. But that tender moment is short-lived, spoiled by the corpse of the horse floating by, killed by the savagery of the men of the town.

Collectively, O'Rowe's monologues plunge us into an infernal cycle of abuse. Despite Alison and Tilly's desire for a bet-

ter life, the three women are trapped, and the telling of their plight traps them even further. Their prose is in the past tense, pronouns being dropped in favour of verbs. The effect might be the refusal by the characters to identify with the action but it also creates a driving energy which is an aggressive *tour de force*. But, as fine as this sounds in theory, in practice true theatrical communication occurs when we as spectators can determine even hints of self-awareness or reflection.

Hynes's direction attacks us with such an unremitting force, sparked off by the violent imagery of the text and its driving energy, that we too cannot afford to reflect, but instead are assaulted by a torrent of verbiage as violent as the imagery it contains. The whole experience is of a tone poem, "savage, insidious, this perpetual crestfall", leaving us in awe of the power of the author's prose, but in disgust at its occasional pornographic content. So rare are the points of connection with either form or content that the integrity of this whole endeavour unfortunately might be overlooked.

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Brian Singleton is Head of the School of Drama, Trinity College, Dublin.

**DOLDRUM BAY** by Hilary Fannin

Peacock Theatre  
7 May–21 June 2003;  
Reviewed 14 June 2003  
BY PATRICK LONERGAN

ONE OF THE BEST PARTS OF LAST YEAR'S Abbey programme was a series of readings of work in progress by Michael West, Hilary Fannin and Siofra Campbell, given over three nights at the Peacock. The series offered us an insight into how the National Theatre develops new work

— and audiences were encouraged to contribute to this process in post-show debates with writers, directors and Abbey personnel. Fannin's *Doldrum Bay* was generally considered the most successful of the three readings — but it was also the most controversial.

The play's driving force is a plot about two advertisers hired to devise a recruitment campaign for the Christian Brothers. This deliberately provocative idea was considered offensive by some members of the audience, who stated that the Christian Brothers have made many important contributions to Irish life, and didn't deserve to be satirised. Presumably unintentionally punning on the play's maritime title, one spectator even expressed his hope that the play would "sink without trace". Others disagreed, arguing that Fannin was being too kind to an institution that had brutalised generations of Irish children. The resulting debate was an exciting reminder of the power of theatre to stimulate both thought and passion.

The play's artistic strengths were also clear. A series of quasi-naturalistic scenes interspersed with monologues, *Doldrum Bay* was lucid, witty and compassionate. The script certainly needed more work, but the prospect of a full production of *Doldrum Bay* was very appealing. It has however been insufficiently developed since its reading, and has been presented in a style that fails to capitalise on Fannin's many strengths.

Magda (Ali White) is struggling to cope with the imminent death of her tyrannical father — and with the infidelity of her novelist husband Francis (Risteard Cooper). This couple is contrasted with Chick (Owen Roe) and Louise (Karen Ardiff). Magda and



Francis have financial security and social status, but are barely on speaking terms with each other; Chick and Louise are both suffering from severe depression, but touchingly rely on and improve each other. Pointing out that affluence isn't the same thing as happiness, Fannin shows this group suffering because of the disappearance of authority figures from their lives. The male characters clearly feel betrayed by the church — just as Magda resents her domineering father. Yet the death of these authorities means that the characters must take responsibility for their own lives — which clearly terrifies them. This

TOM LAWRENCE

**WHY DO I HAVE  
TO GROW UP?**  
*Owen Roe in  
Doldrum Bay*

may be a group of forty-somethings, but their dilemmas are decidedly adolescent, as Francis's undignified pursuit of the student waitress Java (Ruth Negga) illustrates.

Fannin has hit gold with Francis and Chick, both of whom are delightful characters. But she seems much less comfortable with Magda and Louise, whose motivations and emotional lives are never properly explained. And she also seems to have become more uncomfortable with the Christian Brothers plot, to which she has now adopted a cautious approach.

This makes the play less provocative and also deprives it of its credibility. It's unnecessary for the characters to unrealistically rehearse the good things the Brothers did, and we certainly don't need to be convinced that the Catholic church perpetrated abuses: the speech by Mousey (Darragh Kelly) about an ordeal he experienced at the hands of a Father Iggy is entirely superfluous. Having these char-

ters move abruptly from praising to damning the Christian Brothers might ensure that all views are represented on the stage, but it undermines the play's flow severely. People might wish that some playwright would defend the Church — which has, it must be said, become a target for cheap shots. But that's not Fannin's problem: *Doldrum Bay* really works when the characters express their sense of outrage, and she should

have been encouraged to prioritise truthfulness over fairness.

Also disappointing is the style of production. Although the script says the action should be set on a beach, we have a very functional, naturalistic set, which is skilfully designed by Jamie Vartan — but which lacks visual impact. The style of direction employed by Mark Lambert compounds this problem: the blocking is unimaginative and the movement lacks credibility.

The problem here is that this undoubtedly promising play wasn't ready for a production. Fannin needs to develop her characters further, and seems to have lost faith in her treatment of the Church. Whereas the reading of Fannin's script provoked debate, this production leads only to one question — why wasn't she given time to get this very interesting play right?

#### **ELECTION NIGHT** by Donal Courtney

Bewley's Café Theatre

May–June 2003; reviewed 5 June

BY PETER CRAWLEY

SOMETIMES EVEN A NIGHT IS A LONG time in politics. Plays about politicians, on the other hand, can find it difficult simply to fill an hour. Donal Courtney has learned from such noble failures as Marina Carr's *Ariel* or Sebastian Barry's *Hinterland* that hefting a sub-Faustian premise onto the tale of an ambitious politico, or drafting in ghostly spectres to recount the familiar events of a public figure just won't do. Instead, the Killarney playwright attempts an altogether more daunting task — to make Irish party politics interesting.

Retreating to an empty bar above a polling station on what seems to be the

night that will cap their unspectacular career, Kerry Fine Gael TD Tomás Cahill and his advisor Denis scrub-up for the post-mortem. "Christ," tuts Denis (Micheál Ó Gráigáin) to his moping boss, "you've been watching too many movies." Any hopes for a juicy scandal or a car chase vanish with the utterance, and Courtney denies his story the possibility of drama at almost every turn. It's more likely that his characters have been watching too much TV, for there seems to have been a transfusion of ideas from *The West Wing* to Leinster House. Here is a drama of discussion.

One consequence is that Edward Coughlan's clean-cut back-bencher is devoid of the reliable corrupt-as-hell clichés. His admission of having "pulled a stroke or two" is a simple gesture of political realism rather than an announcement of moral turpitude. In fact, Cahill's seat is falling to a single-issue candidate who has lost her daughter in a traffic accident, more of which later. Making political discussion and personal politics the focus, director Joan Sheehy treats us to such unusual dramatic climaxes as the advisor righteously hollering, "Where does she stand on taxation?!" Different fare for sure, but at this point the audience is restless for even a glimmer of conflict.

Alas, not even whiskey will loosen their tongues. Ensconced away from the public eye, Emmet Kirwan's idealistic, junior-spin-doctor Henry sheepishly enquires if it made a difference that his candidate was running against a woman.

No, it most certainly didn't. Either the bar is bugged or this party is far too decent to ever gain office. Instead of conflict, drama, we get reminiscence.



Remember The Fox?  
Bat the Dolan? The  
College Ents Officer?  
No, no, and no.

"Welcome to the petty world of politics,"  
Henry is told.

So gloomily fatalistic is the wetter-than-wet Cahill, that when he is dutifully informed that it ain't over till the fat lady sings, he responds, "she's well into her final verse." To Courtney's credit he's able to supply a steady stream of defeatist similes to his Fine Gael: "We had more negatives than a one-hour photo-booth," Coughlan sighs. Then, presumably consulting his watch, he decides to give the true version of prior events. Before you can say "dramatic irony", Cahill decants a shameful history of liquoring up his dinner guests, making them drive home, sketching out a map that will avoid Garda attention and insisting that they not brake for children or plot contrivances.

**CLEAN-CUT BACK-BENCHER**  
*Edward Coughlan in Election Night*

Courtney supplies not only a twist but a double twist, but it hardly compensates

for the previous lethargy of his curious brand of political theatre. A requiem for Fine Gael may be a timely and unusual gambit for a lunchtime one-act, and the commitment of Joan Sheehy's cast invests the material with essential, earnest vigour. Micheál Ó Gruagáin's performance is a lucid representation of a rural pharmacist with a tense relationship to the capital. Answering his mobile with an uncompromising "G'wan", he suggests a moral ambiguity that Edward Coughlan's starched politico sadly doesn't. Indeed, when Cahill wonders whether he is his advisor's puppet, the performances leave little room for doubt.

Conversely Emmet Kirwan's bright-eyed performance isn't commensurate

with the dimensions of his stage. If his character needs to mention "the fox", his fingers rise to his head with vulpine swiftness, to suggest ears. If he is asked to drink whisky, he winces, shudders and stares, disoriented, into the mid-distance. Perfect for the balconies perhaps, but in the teensy café theatre Sheehy might have encouraged less.

Kirwan does portray inextinguishable idealism in the face of energy-sapping resignation, though. Even more idealistic is the playwright's notion that political behaviour is dramatic in itself, and that the theatre can probe further than any Tribunal. Following the forfeit of intrigue and suspense, his is an ambitious proposition — that the stories behind close ballots must be recounted.

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Peter Crawley writes on theatre and music for publications including the Irish Times and is news editor of this magazine.

#### FANDO AND LIS

**adapted from a play by Fernando Arrabal**

Project Cube

28 April–10 May; reviewed 10 May

BY JULIE SHEARER

WHEN WAS THE LAST TIME YOU WENT to a play that was "strictly over 18s"? Inured as audiences are to screen sex and violence, theatre seems to have lost its capacity to shock, to offend, and, it could be argued, to challenge social mores. Sex on stage often makes us giggle or squirm with embarrassment and violence is rarely convincing. Yet there are those who believe that theatre should have the power to provoke exaltation and outrage, ecstasy and rioting in the streets. In the late 1960s in Paris, Fernando Arrabal wrote *Fando and Lis* as part of his experi-

ments in *Théâtre Panique*, which intended to shock the senses, particularly by using sadism and blasphemy. Subsequently when cult film director Alejandro Jodorowsky's 1968 version premiered at the Acapulco Film Festival the audience tore the theatre apart and it was promptly banned.

Director Selina Cartmell and her company, Siren Productions, staged a new adaptation of Arrabal's play and, although we live in more apathetic times, they defiantly took up the gauntlet thrown down by these avant garde artists, creating a wild, vivid and viscerally disturbing piece of theatre.

Even as the audience entered the intimacies of the Cube theatre in the Project they were forced to cross boundaries, albeit imaginary ones. The stage was set up in traverse, with the audience on two sides of a virulent green strip of astro-turf. Most theatre-goers are hesitant about crossing into a performance space, especially as this one was already occupied by two actors in suspended animation and the skeleton of a little dog, but there was also a sign right in the middle commanding us to "Keep off the Grass". We had to disobey in order to get to our seats and, from the beginning, Cartmell and designer Gaby Rooney both demanded that we acknowledge the bounds of convention and compelled us to break them.

Part sadomasochistic love story, part spiritual quest, the story follows Fando and paralysed Lis as they journey in search of the mythical, paradisal land of Tar. Theirs is a passionate but abusive love, which gradually corrupts them as their search becomes more frustrating and hopeless. Tadhg Murphy (Fando) and Fiona O'Shaughnessy (Lis)



gave wonderfully charismatic performances and made the most of the contradictions in their roles to disconcert our expectations. Beautiful and childlike, Murphy plays Fando with a radical air of innocence and unnerving charm that survives even the scene where he chains Lis to her cart, strips her and offers her for sexual exploitation to passers-by. Likewise, O'Shaughnessy had an air of melancholy underlying effusive

#### THEATRE OF PANIC

*Crowley, Dennehy,  
O'Shaughnessy,  
Murphy, Clarke in  
Fando and Lis*

energy, never playing the victim but choosing instead to create a vibrant, positive character whose death at her lover's hands was more unbearable for being inevitable.

Ned Dennehy and Donncha Crowley were both hilarious and sinister as Fando's mother and father respectively and as two Godot-like fellow travellers on the road to Tar who bicker amusingly over inconsequentialities. The nihilism of

a fruitless journey and their participation in the abuse of Lis darken the clowning of this double act.

There is a great deal of black humour in every layer of the production, which subsumed various other art forms to its richly imagined world. In particular Rooney's witty, intelligent set and costume design - from the suburban pastiche of Fando's home to the crude hand-made quality of Lis' cart with its cunning multi-functions - was an integral part of the theatrical experience. Denis Clohessy's music also had a truly dramatic function, assaulting the senses and becoming much more than merely incidental. Finally, adding dance to this concoction of art forms and imagery, Ella Clarke was incredibly evocative as Fly. Masked and wordless, she expressed the slapstick humour of a buzzing irritant and the menace of a scavenger and harbinger of disaster.

With a singular, coherent vision, Selina Cartmell's direction tied these individually brilliant elements together, to create something daring, original and much needed in Irish theatre at the moment. Esoteric, surreal, graphic, and sometimes a little pretentious, it was not a comfortable night in the theatre (even to say what it was all about is difficult) but it was undoubtedly entertaining. Siren Productions have created a multi-dimensional work, evoking images that continued to filter through the mind for a long while after. *Fando and Lis* asked much more of its audience than the price of admission, inviting us to risk the passions of "theatre of panic".

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*Julie Shearer is pursuing an M.A. in Drama Studies at UCD.*

**HEDDA GABLER by Henrik Ibsen**

**translation by Michael Meyer**

Loose Canon Theatre Company

Project Cube

20 May–7 June 2003; reviewed 3 June

**BY HARVEY O'BRIEN**

RUNNING IN CONJUNCTION WITH A reworked version of their production of *The Duchess of Malfi*, Loose Canon's *Hedda Gabler* seemed, on the surface at least, considerably tamer. Ibsen's intimate character drama concerns the post-marital boredom of a previously incendiary socialite who has now turned to creating mischief among those she envies; a kind of antithesis to Jane Austen's *Emma*. The play usually lends itself to a naturalistic representation of lives lived in the repressive shadow of social expectation. Michael Meyer's mannered translation reinforces the sense of a stilted world populated by arch characters, and makes the task of engaging with the plot a wearying experience. Yet even Ibsen was frustrated with how his work was perceived by the theatrical establishment by the time he wrote *Hedda Gabler*. He had begun to subvert what had become his own conventions, forcing his audience to ask questions which he had then refused to answer, proffering enigmas and leaving loose ends where closure had been before.

Having played games with Webster in *The Duchess of Malfi*, where the original words were retained but were twisted by the direction and performances into an out-of-body experience, Loose Canon and director Jason Byrne are obviously eager to explore the space between text and interpretation. They seem concerned with maintaining a distance from a literal reading, throwing the focus instead onto



the actors and their encounters with physical and psychological space. Seen at its most explicit with *The Duchess of Malfi*, this combination of dramaturgical philosophy and theatrical technique is still visible in their *Hedda Gabler*, though perhaps only if you know what you are looking at.

Confronted initially by a minimalist, abstract set, notably lacking the portrait of General Gabler which typically looms over his daughter's story, the audience may be confused at first by what seems like the uncomfortable naturalism of Bryan Burroughs' performance as

**PRIVATE RAPTURE**  
*Deirdre Roycroft in  
Hedda Gabler*

George Tesman, the dull but well-meaning academic husband of the title character. His voice wavers alarmingly, his gestures seem both tentative and forced, and the rhythms of the dialogue seem designed to create the impression of a character so stiff and ineffectual as to border on parody. It takes some time to realise that all of this is deliberate, and that the schism between desire and convention which informs all of Ibsen's work is being portrayed in terms of characters who seem to be physically at odds with everything around them, and themselves.

In interaction with other people, most of these characters behave as if there were force fields between them. Hand gestures are frozen mid-air, hovering between posing and moving, as if uncertain and fearful of what actual contact might do to them. In the opening scene Tesman holds the telephone receiver inches from his head, reluctant even to admit to the intimacy of holding it to his ear. Only Hedda, portrayed by Deirdre Roycroft, seems to revel in touch, acting as if electrified by reaching out to other people whom she means to manipulate or destroy. Sometimes she seems to drift into a charged private space, wallowing in orgasmic and onanistic raptures which seem to have little to do with the on-stage action but which cast reflections on what is hidden beneath it.

This sense of controlled, ritualised behaviour masking a world of passion and desire is entirely appropriate to themes with which Ibsen was most concerned and enlivens the otherwise relatively tiresome psychological and socio-logical dimensions of the play as written. In some senses Ibsen's is a world in need of excess and in quite a subtle way Loose Canon have found a way to invigorate his work without negating him entirely. The only problem may be the fact the play still runs to more or less its full length (in spite of the omission of a few characters); without the pleasures of conventional naturalism to tide the audience through the plot, the skill and technique demonstrated by the company do not sustain the production.

If audiences try to follow the narrative without tuning in to the performance aesthetic, they are probably going to be given to inappropriate laughter. This is particularly true of Karl Quinn's performance as

the odious Judge Brack, sporting a period moustache and a checked suit that scream pantomime villain. Audiences may be as bewildered by the strangeness of the method as they are likely to be impressed — if they have a predisposition to it.

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#### **THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST**

**by Oscar Wilde**

The Gate Theatre

8 July— 27 September, 2003; reviewed 11 July

**BY SUSAN CONLEY**

"THE VERY ESSENCE OF ROMANCE IS uncertainty," quoth Algernon Moncrief (Alan Smyth) with great authority, making this critic's heart go pittypat. There's a lead if ever there was one, since a production of Oscar Wilde at the Gate, while it might strive for romance, will certainly fail according to that definition. One can be certain of seeing a highly polished production, since text-based theatre is the essence of what they do so well. One can expect with reasonable confidence that watching the show will be something akin to being handed a fistful of brightly coloured helium balloons — or more appropriately, an armful of lilies swathed in tulle.

And so it was. If failing to provide us with uncertainty, the Alan Stanford-directed production of Wilde's best-known play was as elegant as it should be, as familiar as ever, and beautiful to look at.

But apart from being handed the perfect lead on a silver salver, what's a critic to do? It's easy enough to natter on about Bruno Schwengl's canny design of the set



— the flat and inorganic garden was particularly in-spired, considering our cast of character's attitude towards the countryside; gush about the lusciousness of his costumes, with Fiona O'Shaugnessy (as Gwendolyn Fairfax) looking a particular picture in giddy hats and lengths of ruffles; commend Alan Smyth for carrying off his embroidered smoking jacket and curly blond wig with aplomb. It seems almost too straightforward to admire Declan Conlon's (as Jack Worthing) indolently arched brows, the way in which he very slightly looked down his nose at every utterance, including his own; almost too effortless to compliment him on his exquisite timing.

Then of course there was Susan Fitzgerald, who fulfilled every audience expectation, and then some, as the

TOM LAWREN

**POISED TO DELIVER**  
*Susan Fitzgerald in The Importance of Being Earnest*

imperious Lady Bracknell. Fitzgerald's signature style of vocalisation and delivery were especially well suited to her character's sense of absolute authority on every subject, and one could feel the punters quiver with anticipation as she prepared to deliver her judgment on Jack/Earnest's lack of lineage: "To lose one parent, Mr Worthing, maybe regarded as a misfortune; to lose both looks like carelessness." The laughing response was as much one of relief as of amusement. It's all so dependable in the end.

But why? Is it because we've all been given this play at an early age, because it is usually a cornerstone text for drama societies and scene study, because it is so light and stylish and arch and confectionery? Or is it because, under its pampered skin, it is hiding deep and dark doubts about identity and self-worth?

Professor Terence Brown's programme note plants a discursive seed, and his reference to the many references to texts throughout the course of the play diverts one's attention from the endless stream of witty ripostes. How easily our protagonists believe what they read, like Algernon, who hasn't actually proposed to dear Cecily, but becomes emotionally invested in the fiction she's created in her diary. How slyly information is exposed — lives change based on the inscription on a cigarette case. How quickly one would exchange one name for another, at any cost, even that of crossing the threshold of a church; while that action has

some lofty, spiritual undertones, presumably the newly christened would have received written documentation that the event took place.

Most interesting is Jack/Earnest's displacement from his rightful life by the misplacement of a manuscript. If there is anyone who could be accused of rewriting his destiny, it's Jack Worthing, in his ready willingness to change his name to please Miss Fairfax, and ...

One can almost feel the lilies begin to wilt, and the balloons to deflate with an exasperated hiss. Much of the enjoyment to be had from an evening's *Earnest* is the pure pleasure of listening to finely wrought lines delivered with assurance. "In matters of grave importance," proclaims Miss Fairfax, "style, not sincerity is the vital thing." If there is a nutshell in which to fit the Gate's production, it is that. If not sincerely seeking to illuminate a text (that, in fairness, glows with its own lightness), they have at least done it in great style.

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*Susan Conley is a novelist, film-maker and critic, and is art director of this magazine.*

**JACK FELL DOWN by Michael West**

TEAM Theatre Company

On tour; reviewed at The Helix on 12 June

BY DEREK WEST

TEAM HAS BLATANT DESIGNS ON ITS audience. This is, after all theatre-in-education. The company knows the story has to hold the attention. They employ physicality, energy and exuberance as the main means of communication. It's "in-yer-face" acting, a creative way of saying "Pay attention".

TEAM engages its audience with the conventions of theatre. The actors wear

street clothes, not even conceding in dress that they are playing the parts of children. The setting is an abstract, open space, the markings on the cloth vaguely indicative of sea and sky. The props would fit in a Green Bag. If the company has designs on its audience, it's not particularly through the actual design (by Sabine Dargent). She has been remarkably restrained because, as she asserts in her programme note, she "felt the set should create an open space for the imagination". Through an act of collaboration between the cast and the children in the audience, the empty space comes alive with people and places.

The characters set down a ground rule: anything that is said is true. From this premise, the tale of Jack (he who fell down) and Owen (his best pal) is spun. There are delightful flights of fancy. Again and again the audience is obliged to visualise settings and incidents — the van, the street, the old lady's door-step. There is a solid, insistent line of narrative that takes us to the cliff top for Jack's demise — a poignant echo of the Dover cliff-top scene in *King Lear* and similarly evoked by words alone. This is a powerful rendering of a fundamental dramatic principle — where less is more, where there has to be a suspension of disbelief on the part of the viewer and a creation of other worlds through the mediation of the actor. This is admirable.

TEAM favours collaboration: writer Michael West has worked with director, Mark O'Brien, and a cast of four and the production shows signs of workshopping. The actors occupy the physical space in the story. The repetitions, the emphases and the vigour clearly belong to the realm of the performer. The philosophical content belongs to the play-



wright, but also the Education Officer, Muireann Ahern, and a raft of people who have contributed expertise.

TEAM emphasises themes and, in this case, it's the biggie: death. The initial approach is oblique, via a hamster who gets squished in a pocket. The young audience is then brought through an exploration of the carefully-signposted themes in order to confront the fact that Jack did fall down, never to rise. The structure of the play brings matters to an impasse: Jack is dead: can his pal Owen return to the beach they both loved so well, but where the fatal accident occurred? At this point in the school sessions, the children had to address the issues of bereavement, commemoration, resurrection and contribute their thought, feelings and ideas to the resolution.

The writing is to order, inextricably

**BIG THEMES** de Bhaldraithe,  
*Daly, McMahon, Kelly in  
 Jack Fell Down*

bound to the mission of the company and its worthy determination to use the art form to allow the children to

confront death. TEAM wears its didacticism on its sleeve; it is earnestly educational. Yet the cumulative drive and commitment of the company ensures the message is an important one and that it creates surprise and a sense of engagement.

Adult theatre, in the main, thrusts a programme in your hand, parks your bum on a seat and leaves you to it. TEAM pursues its goal with zeal. The company's work consists of preparation, through a copious, well-researched teacher's pack, performance and workshop. If it is to succeed, the entire package must resonate through the classroom for some time to come. The problem for TEAM is that there is no guarantee that

## reviews

the teacher will stay with the themes after the little white van has turned the corner and moved on to the next gig.

It is not appropriate to assess the work of TEAM simply as "a show at the Helix". The intervention of theatre-in-education into the life of the school has to be sustainable; otherwise it's just a delightful distraction. To its credit TEAM has worked very hard to ensure that there is collaboration between the teacher and the drama, as well as imagination and insight. Long may it continue.

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Derek West is Chairman of the Arts and Culture Committee of the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals.

### KILT by Jonathan Wilson

Dark Horse Theatre Company

Andrew's Lane Studio

13 June-5 July 2003; reviewed 26 June

BY HEATHER JOHNSON

DARK HORSE THEATRE COMPANY deserves all the support it can attract if its directors continue with their commitment to introduce Irish audiences to new work such as *Kilt*. Written by Canadian playwright and actor Jonathan Wilson, the play tells the story of emigrants Tom and his mother Esther as they return to Scotland for the funeral of Tom's grandfather Mac. The central character, Tom, is a confident, gay, Canadian who works as a stripper, wearing his grandfather's kilt. Arriving to take him to Scotland, his mother, a dance-school mistress, discovers his vocation and this exacerbates their tense relationship. The contrast in their respective forms of dance reflects the estrangement between mother and son.

More through allusion than performance, dance functions throughout the

play as a motif both of self-expression and self-control. Wilson's paramount concern is with identity, and with a particularly North American fantasy of psychological completeness and resolution. Tom and his mother's trip "home" to Scotland occasions a metaphorical journey towards revelation (of family secrets) and reconciliation (with the past and between family members). Wilson's plays explore issues of healing, self-worth, and a sense of self as developing, yet his characterisation here does not plum psychological depths. Contrived plotting — as when Tom fortuitously happens upon his grandfather's lover, David, while wandering around Glasgow — stretches plausibility.

Much hinges on the central performance by Adam Fergus as both Tom and Mac, as the action alternates between the present-day Scottish homecoming and the story of Mac at the second World War warfront in Africa, and Fergus successfully negotiates the frequent shifts between North American drawl and Scottish brogue. Accents prove significant elsewhere in this production. Though suitably pinched, Ruth Sheeran's Esther slips in and out of a Miss Jean Brodie dialect, while Annette Tierney as Aunt Mary displays a fine sense of comic timing through her Scottish intonations. Language at times also proves to be sensitive to location: at one point Mary asks Tom, "Are you mad?" To transpose this from the Canadian stage, the director could have intervened with the simple change of "mad" to "angry".

Donnacadh O'Briain's reticent direction contributes to a production that is curiously passionless. Peter Daly and Liam Burke, playing Captain David Lavery when young and old respectively, were likely cast for their vague facial



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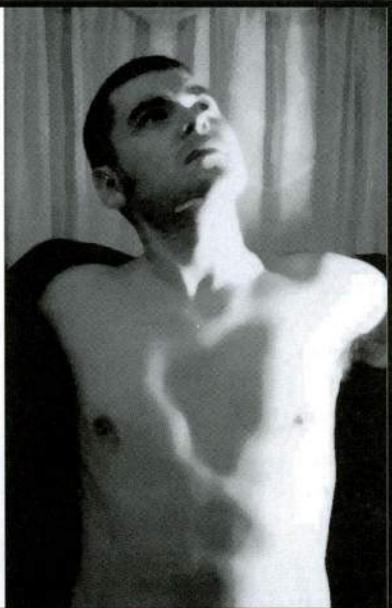
# revelations

by darren donohue

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resemblance, but are regrettably associated through similarly weak performances. Both actors move stiffly, and without strong physical presence they cannot carry a sense of muscular sensuality or spontaneous passion. Daly briefly appears as Tom's one-night stand in the opening scene, emerging naked from Tom's bed, but this easy physicality does not carry through to Daly's next appearance as Mac's wartime lover.

In his limited exploration of fixed notions of masculinity, Wilson intends the wartime affair to challenge conventional perceptions of "manly" soldiers. A *frisson* of fear caused by nearby explosions throws the captain and Mac together. When the former later apologises for showing weakness in the face of bombings, the play too easily conflates this admission with a predisposition to a

**A MAN'S A MAN  
FOR ALL THAT**  
*Daly and Fergus  
in Kilt*

"feminine" tenderness or a dependency on the masculine strength of another. The portrayal of the older man David caressing Tom's head and speaking softly is markedly feminine when contrasted with the repressed secret that Tom's father died a football hooligan. *Kilt* concerns itself more with one half of the spectrum of masculinity while evading real engagement with the other.

The "skirt" of the title may operate as the play's sign for the character of the gay man from the second World War to the present day, but it is ironic that a kilt is the central emblem in a story about identity that is never really about Scotland. Scotland facilitates the narrative of familial reconciliation, just as the war zone in Africa becomes the stage of Mac's gay initiation. These are merely spaces of cultural otherness

where new identities become possible.

The play remains unaware of its use of stereotype; its view of Scotland consists of tired associations: kilts, whiskey, Calvinist priggery. *Kilt's* conclusion confirms its Romantic conception of home from a distinctly transatlantic perspective. On the banks of the Clyde, David eulogises Mac with a reading from Robert Burns ("A man's a man for a' that"), and Tom executes a brief Highland-fling flourish to close the play. Wilson's often-witty drama, with its uneven challenge to preconceptions of identity, is ultimately clouded by its descent into cloying sentimentality.

#### **LOVE - A DEVISED PLAY**

Corcadorca

Guy's Building, Cork

17-28 June; reviewed 18 June

**BY PATRICK COTTER**

CORCADORCA AND ITS DIRECTOR, Pat Kiernan, have earned a reputation for exciting, site-specific work - most notably for *Passion* by Conal Creedon and Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. *Passion* was a portrayal of Christ's passion, dramatised on Cork's Patrick's Hill, which made a steep and characterful Calvary. It was hailed as a success and won kudos for Kiernan, who topped that achievement with his magical midnight production in Cork's Fitzgerald Park of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. I will treasure forever my memories of that production and the look of joy and wonder on my two small children's faces during the course of the performance.

*Love*, which I will not remember so fondly, is a devised play. There's nothing especially wrong with devised plays, but those that do not involve a writer or a dramaturg are usually disasters, and

*Love* was no exception to that rule.

It started charmingly enough. The audience had gathered in Paul Street outside a big, metal gate. It was a summery evening and everyone exuded good humour before being handed a blood-red programme and led into the grand shambles of the old Guy's printing works, a beautiful example of 19th-century industrial architecture.

The audience was greeted inside by the sound of John Lennon singing *All You Need Is Love*, then someone who looked like a young Paul McCartney hugged members of the public as they filed passed. As we continued along a narrow gangway we passed a young woman who looked like an escapee from Baum's *Yellow Brick Road*, gesticulating wildly, chattering incomprehensibly. The entrance to Davey Dummigan's set was like an art installation, with luminous, psychedelic colours, headless dolls suspended from the ceiling, giant sunflowers drooping overhead.

In the first chamber the audience found itself in the centre of the room, surrounded by the cast. Some stuck their faces out of holes in the wall, others hung out over high partition walls, others were rolled in on trolleys. They all delivered short monologues on the subject of "the first time I fell in love". The actors were convincing here, almost as if they were relating their own, true, stories. All of them were innocent and full of humour and the audience laughed frequently. Each monologue was punctuated by Valentine card ditties recited in chorus.

In the second chamber, the audience was halted just inside. The lighting was sparse and vari-coloured. Beyond a partition one could hear the cast sing a kids' song off key, and there were percussion sounds and wild, flickering shadows.



The whole thing reminded one of the improvised playacting we all did as kids, until the percussive sounds and voices broke into an unmistakable rhythm which culminated in a clichéd orgasmic climax.

Next the cast rejoined the audience and played a little club scene, divided into the opposite sexes viewing each other across the dance floor. The women displayed themselves ostentatiously and the boys strutted in a testosterone-charged way. This little scene was broken by a mature gentleman arriving on a push-scooter, expressing arrogant disdain before pushing off again, pursued by women, in a Beatle-mania fashion.

#### **EROTIC EXPERIMENTS**

*Julie Kelleher and Peter O'Brien in Love*

At this point our attention was drawn to an outlandishly large, high-rise bed upon which various cast members farcically

displayed their knowledge of the *Kama Sutra*'s preliminary chapters: girl on top, anal penetration, fellatio, cunnilingus, etc. This was titillating for teenagers in the audience, risqué for anyone who might have been cryogenically sealed since the 1960s, but pretty pointless to anyone else.

Next was a list of "things I love": "I love making people laugh; watching people; Judge Judy; Eskimo kisses; Italian eyebrows; the sound of my own voice", without any special insights. There fol-

JANICE O'CONNELL

lowed clichéd situational scenes of teenagers' angst relationships in language that was completely dull and unimaginative — a universe away from Corcadorca's greatest triumph, Enda Walsh's *Disco Pigs*. I kept thinking throughout that if a writer had been involved, clichés could have been avoided, situational scenes could have been invested with insight and statements could have been made less bald by imaginative language.

The inexperienced cast were full of energy and gusto. The sound production was slick and professional. The set was a work of art. The direction and orchestration of all these assets were faultless, yet they were to no avail for lack of a script.

#### **A NIGHT IN NOVEMBER** by Marie Jones

Lane Productions

Liberty Hall

29 May-19 July 2003; reviewed 29 May

BY BRIAN LAVERY

IN JUNE 1994, AS THE WORLD CUP DREW to a close in the US, Marie Jones was already busy writing. This play — about a middle-class Ulster Protestant who finds himself drawn, against his best instincts, towards the warm and fuzzy national pride displayed south of the border for the Republic of Ireland soccer team — premiered less than two months later, at the West Belfast Festival in early August, 1994.

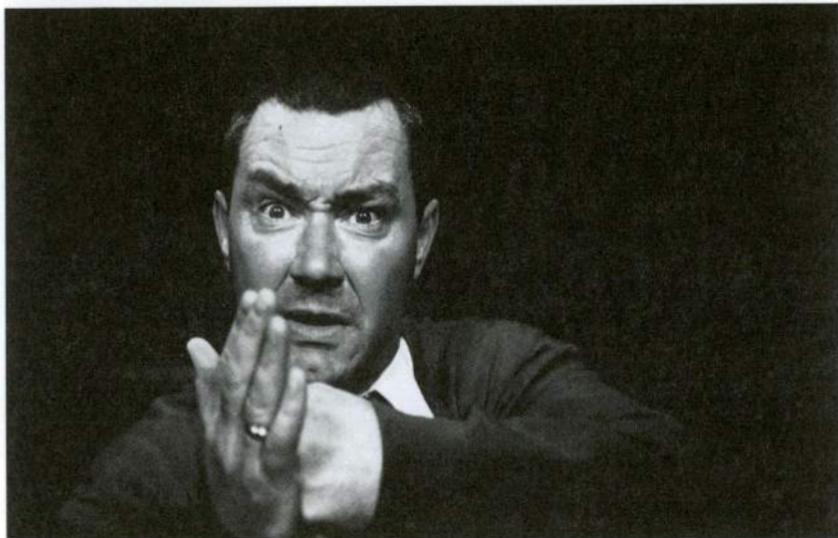
Sadly, the play remains relevant. The identity crisis experienced by Kenneth Norman McCallister as he is pulled, like a moth to light, towards the kitsch and clatter of Jack's Green Army would still apply to many Northern Irish people in his situation. Or perhaps, as extreme Catholic and Protestant voices steal supporters from moderate elements, the

thought of a loyalist partying with Fenians is even more inconceivable now than it was a decade ago.

Sadly too, *A Night In November* is light entertainment wrapped in political dressing. That's not to slight the dressing: Jones wrote the play in a tumultuous political environment, and as an Ulster Prod herself, she knows her material well. But her script and Tim Byron Owen's direction move things along too fast, with a relentless momentum towards the tournament. On the way, Kenneth's loyalist baggage is hastily discarded as a mere memory from the first act. Audiences are encouraged to forget about any awkward questions it raises, and in Liberty Hall this spring they were all too eager to do so. Jones does pull some wonderfully dry humour from life in Northern Ireland before the ceasefires. When he first appears, Kenneth is so petty and insular that he checks under his car for explosives every day — even though he works in the dole office. "I'm not even important enough to be on a hit list," he whines.

The night of the play's title occurs before the World Cup, when Kenneth goes with his chain-smoking father-in-law, a diehard loyalist, to the qualifying match between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. The rabid crowd at Windsor Park make Kenneth's sitting room sectarianism look open-minded. For once, feeling threatened by his own people, he considers the plight of Catholics in the stands, suffering taunts about the U.F.F.'s murder of seven people at Greysteel only weeks before.

Afterwards, Kenneth tentatively and timidly reaches out to Catholics in his midst, even testing the waters of friendship with his Catholic boss. Much soul-



searching ensues, and the character is most compelling when he writhes and squirms with discomfort, knowing that his newfound sympathies are at odds with who he thought he was and he eventually "outs" himself to his wife. When neighbours come over and his tongue-in-cheek comments reveal that he might not be quite so loyal after all, their confrontation is delicious.

In the second act, Jones abandons this meaty territory for a string of one-dimensional caricatures. Even Kenneth, once he arrives at the chaos of Dublin Airport (where the sheer number of Aer Lingus flights to New York meant that extra check-in desks were in the car park) is simplified down to a wide-eyed, insecure culchie.

Marty Maguire, the play's one actor, performed it for most of last year, from

#### **NOT SO LOYAL**

*Marty Maguire  
in A Night in November*

two venues in California to London's Tricycle Theatre and then the Edinburgh Fringe. He is a master of Jones' caricatures. (He plays women like Conleth Hill in Jones' *Stones In His Pockets* — shoulders and hips askance; one arm bent at the elbow; limp-wristed, extravagant hand gestures; doe-eyed lashes fluttering — and does it almost as well.) He throws himself into the chest-thumping exuberance of the second act so passionately that every single night has been rewarded with an instant standing ovation, even before the actor himself can come back on stage for a bow.

Audiences, caught up in the energetic finale, apparently don't stop to think about what happens on stage — as Kenneth himself doesn't. He doesn't have to realise that his newfound friendships are empty, or that he is the recipient

of unbridled generosity only thanks to the colour of his t-shirt and a slightly looser definition of nationalism. And Jones manages to ignore the fact that the Republic of Ireland's seemingly ecumenical faith in its football team is based on an unthinking belief in an ephemeral ideal that has little bearing on real people's lives. Come to think of it, a bit like loyalism.

*Brian Lavery reports from Dublin for the New York Times.*

**THE ODD COUPLE by Neil Simon**

Produced by The Civic Theatre

On tour; reviewed 16 May 2003 at  
The Pavilion Theatre, Dun Laoghaire

BY SUSAN CONLEY

AS WITH THAT OTHER GREAT NEW YORK institution, take-away Chinese food, the feelings of satiety inspired by a Neil Simon play wear off fairly sharpish. In the case of the former, one can blame the MSG; with the latter, the rapid-fire banter and cracking one-liners that leave one gasping for breath reveal, once normal oxygen intake has resumed, that joking aside... well, there's just the jokes.

But hey, you want serious, go see Albee. You want deep, get that Ibsen guy. You want comedy, then Simon is your man. During the 1966-67 season, he had five hits on Broadway, and one of those was *The Odd Couple*. Despite his popular success, his early works were greeted by a universal critical sneer, and he was summarily dismissed as no better than a *schtick-meister*.

This notion is not without justification. Simon is *non-pareil* when it comes to lining up ducks only to shoot them down. His pacing has a connect-the-dots quali-

ty that faithfully arcs when it needs to arc, and his plotting drops the necessary bombs with the kind of regularity you could set your watch to. Within the first fifteen minutes of the Civic Theatre's production, we know every single man on that stage, and especially, the man that is not there. Felix Unger hangs over these early proceedings like an antiseptic cloud, and the worry that his friends express about his welfare is the first indication that Simon is delving into deeper waters than one might originally think.

In the intervening years between the mid-Sixties and the early Noughties certain seismic societal shifts have been absorbed and have become fully incorporated into the cultural fabric. One of them is divorce; the other is codependency. While the show is dated in many ways (cigarettes are 38 cents a pack; a cab ride ran you \$1.30; rent on a spacious apartment is \$120 a month), it's positively revolutionary in its treatment of what happens when a neurotic control freak moves in with a slob with a drink problem. It's a boilerplate for a self-help book, but told via one-liners.

The plot is as basic as it gets: opposites repel with hilarious results. Oscar (Michael James Ford), a disgustingly sloppy bachelor, lives on his own in an eight-bedroomed (!) apartment in Manhattan. The weekly poker game is held amidst the detritus of numberless meals, and the only fresh sustenance to be had is the liquor. Cigar smoke perfumes the air, and the fellas are fully individuated varieties of the late twentieth-century hen-pecked male: they do what they're told by their wives, but make sure that they kvetch about it constantly. Felix (Nick Grennell) is late for tonight's particular session, and when it becomes known



to his pals that his wife has kicked him out, the tension begins to mount, and all express acute degrees of worry about him. It falls to

Oscar to put him up for the foreseeable future, and it's clear from the start that Felix's neatnik tendencies are going to rub Oscar up the wrong way.

And they do, with loads of mostly predictable laughs along the way. The ensemble is extremely well cast, and delivers strong performances to fill out the odd couple's universe; David O'Meara and Jack Walsh, in particular, sport the most convincing Noo Yawk accents. It's in the leading roles that director Sighle Tóibín hasn't quite hit the mark. Grennell is positively operatic in his nasal and fussy portrayal of Felix, brandishing his feather duster with gusto; and yet his crying bout

#### **GETTING TO BE A HABIT**

*White, Walsh, O'Meara, Grennell and Ford in The Odd Couple*

early in the performance fails to convince. Ford's performance as Oscar starts out rather promising, but is not sustained.

His choirboy face, folded into a squint, isn't enough to convey Oscar's slightly menacing personality, and the bit of a stain on his vest isn't enough to impress us with his slovenliness. Together, they drum up several funny moments, but the production took the text's issues at face value, counting on the audience's identification with the material.

This identification was total and complete, perhaps because the effects of divorce are only beginning (in the legal sense, anyway) to be felt on this side of the pond. Simon gets at the superficial essentials of relationship, with the added bonus for self-help fans of distilling the basic nature of code-

pendency, perhaps without even knowing it. Every Oscar needs a Felix, and vice versa, and even if they've "broken up" at the end, Simon has thrown some light on something dark that adds surprising resonance to this endlessly flowing stream of gags.

**RUNDOWN by Mark O'Rowe**

Purple Heart Theatre Company

Bewley's Café Theatre

22 April–10 May; reviewed 9 May

BY PETER CRAWLEY

THERE COMES A POINT IN MARK O'Rowe's 1996 one-act play where, quite out of the blue, one character challenges another to an arm wrestle. It is probably the most gratuitously violent scene the Dublin playwright has ever written.

Not that the wincing, groaning display of fisticuffs by Les Martin and Owen Mulhall is as shocking as O'Rowe's premise for *Angela's Ankle* (a snuff movie), the brutal climactic images of *Howie The Rookie* or any horrid event described in his recent *Crestfall*. In fact, it's less terrifying than the elbow-to-elbow warfare waged on any school desk. But it is indefensible nonetheless: a desperate, unheralded and unmotivated action, symptomatic of characters — and an author — simply killing time.

What Purple Heart saw in this material is anyone's guess. Staggering from awkward pop trivia conversations to hopelessly self-conscious homoerotic content, *Rundown* is an anaemic piece of work,

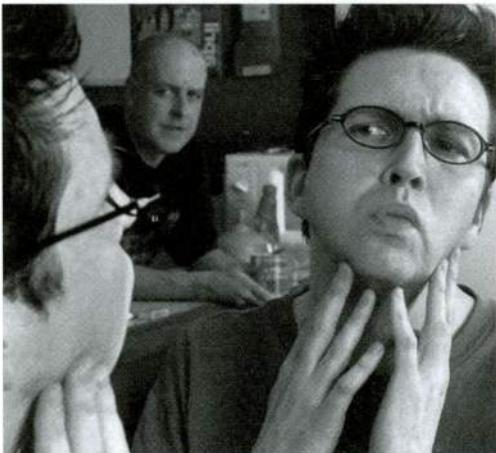
useful only as a sketch of what, until *Crestfall*, had been O'Rowe's sole interest: male behaviour.

Amid the clichéd detritus of contemporary bachelorhood, the lovelorn and recently dumped Robbie (Les Martin) is roused from his sleeping bag by the radio to face a flat in as much disarray as his personal life. Door beads hang knotted together like his matted hair. Stacks of video cassettes and discarded pizza boxes lounge around like surly roommates, while, most classily, a pair of y-fronts are airing on a broom handle. You can't fault the observational powers of Martin Cahill's bric-a-brac stage design. Discussing "energy deficits" and a desire for "natural produce" in his diet with flatmate and sci-fi bore Chris (Dermot Byrne), Robbie is a familiar construction of early O'Rowe: the dude who speaks like a lady.

Here O'Rowe's previously underdeveloped gender politics reach their logical extension.

**DUBLIN NARCISSUS**

Byrne and Martin in  
Rundown



Where his early works treated women as off-stage grotesques or unseen and ambiguous troublemakers, *Rundown* challenges their very existence. Chris's cogently argued but nonetheless inscrutable sci-fi thesis that three good-looking sisters are some kind of phantasmagoric conspiracy (or something) is the bitter solipsism of the rejected adolescent male. Reflecting the cultural logic of *The X-files*, *Star Trek* and *Gladiator*, the scatter-shot and sweaty obsessions of the characters are hardly more mature.

Not only do Robbie and Chris voraciously consume pop culture, they actively distribute it. Awaiting the return of a rented DVD player between desultory talk of nutrition, psoriasis, handsome men and "frisky birds and bitches", the couple receive Mack (an uncomfortable looking Owen Mulhall) into their trashy abode. In the twittering that fills the time before their arm wrestle, director Alex King allows Les Martin to gaze out of a large, imaginary window positioned downstage right. For all the grime that he has injected into their hovel, King has certainly afforded the lads a great view.

Losing the aforementioned arm wrestle, Robbie breathily enquires whether Mack goes to the gym or uses the sauna and finally remarks that he has "a beautiful complexion", all the while tugging at his shirt collar. This, I suspect, is O'Rowe's way of suggesting that Robbie is a little bit fey. King's production worries, however, that we may not have grasped such subtle clues. His embellishments don't serve to make a larger point about the homosocial culture of video nerds, fast-food geeks and blokes who don't get birds (in all senses of the verb). What they do suggest is that it's all sniggeringly funny.

It isn't. Once it transpires that Mack is in a relationship with the girl who jilted the frankly unlovable Robbie, thus breaking his malnourished little heart, a ferociously unthreatening Chris slaps Mack around in retaliation, oblivious to the fact that, as the fittest member of the cast, Owen Mulhall could probably hurl his aggressor out the window. Mack confirms every paranoid adolescent's pathetic fear — Robbie's ex-girlfriend only went out with him "so you'd buy her nachos and shit". What peculiar tastes women have. But rather than dwell on this or any other point, the play concludes much as it began: inconsequentially.

A vitamin-enriched analysis might posit that the three figures represent the male psyche splintered into composite thirds — the needy, insecure, effeminate type; the love-deriding, brawny, obsessional type; and the other one. But it is perhaps more likely that *Rundown* is an unwisely retrieved doodle from a playwright who was feeling a bit under the weather.

#### SHORTS

Fishamble Theatre Company

Project Arts Centre

6–17 May 2003; reviewed 10 May

BY PATRICK LONERGAN

IN 2002, FISHAMBLE INVITED submissions of plays of no longer than ten minutes' duration, intending to present a selection of the best in one production. *Shorts* gives us 14 of the 300 they received, brought to the stage by a crew of almost 50, which includes six directors and eight actors. The aim of this massive project was to launch an unusually large number of new writers simultaneously — an admirable idea,

but one that, unfortunately, ignores the limitations of the short play form.

We've had many great short Irish plays, but even the greatest — *Riders to the Sea* or *Purgatory*, for example — were accompanied by longer works when staged. The only Irish writer whose short work is considered sufficiently rewarding to merit production on its own is Beckett — but his plays are not so much short as compressed, with both language and movement brilliantly refined in a way that, it's worth noting, Beckett didn't attempt until he'd been writing for more than 30 years.

Such plays occupy an important place in the Irish repertoire, but we'd never watch 14 of them consecutively — they'd either be too insubstantial or too intense to make the experience worthwhile. And if that's true of some of the best Irish dramas ever written,

it's worth asking what we're expected to gain from three hours of short plays by first-time playwrights.

Furthermore, writing a short play is a complex task that requires specific techniques. Is it fair to expect 14 inexperienced writers to handle so difficult a form? And if you want to cultivate those writers' abilities, why ask them to produce work that develops few skills that could be used in a full-length play — like plotting, character development or pacing?

It quickly becomes clear that these issues have been given insufficient consideration. We begin in the Project's lobby with Dawn Bradfield's *All the Gloves in the World*, which presents a theatrogoer's attempts to retrieve lost gloves from one of the Centre's front of house

staff — who is pretentious and unhelpful. Performed while the real Project staff continue to work in the

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#### **SO LITTLE TIME**

*Clodagh O'Donoghue  
in Shorts*



same space, the play's central message — that appreciating art is inherently ridiculous — seems to be warning us that we're here to have fun, and shouldn't take the work we're about to see too seriously. Bradfield amusingly sends up the elitism that sometimes accompanies conceptual art, but it doesn't seem to have occurred to anyone involved in the show that laughing at the expense of people who are working nearby might be a form of elitism too. This isn't Bradfield's fault — there's nothing malicious in her script, which is actually quite funny. The problem is the tactlessness of the setting, which again creates an impression that Fishamble haven't fully thought this production through.

Things don't improve much when we get to the theatre. The stage is divided into three areas, allowing the action to move through a series of plays that share nothing except their performance space. Simon O'Gorman's *Meeting Venus* is well written, James Heaney's *Awimbaaway* is visually arresting, Ciara Considine's *The Wedding Dance* and Brian Delaney's *A New Suit* present engaging narratives, and there are many nice touches in the other plays. But the decision to choose works that have nothing in common is a bad one. Momentum developed in one play is dissipated in the next, so that the overall experience is like flicking arbitrarily between television channels. This focuses too much of our attention on the crew's ability to deal with this disparate material. The cast and directors are very strong, but their enthusiasm and skill aren't enough to carry a show that quickly becomes too much like hard work.

*Shorts* is composed of potentially good ideas that have been given insufficient

thought — and the group least considered is the audience. Fishamble might argue that if even one writer emerges from this project, it will have been worth doing — and perhaps that's true. But what about the people who paid to sit through three hours of what can only be called sketches? Surely we deserve something more substantial than this?

The fundamental idea at work here is that there are 14 writers out there, undiscovered, who are capable of writing producible plays. This notion is attractive — and a good example of Fishamble's positive attitude to new work. But it's impossible to judge whether it's realistic: these writers haven't been given enough room to display or develop their abilities.

#### **THE WOMAN WHO WALKED INTO DOORS**

**adapted by Roddy Doyle and Joe O'Byrne**

**from the novel by Roddy Doyle**

The Helix, Dublin

29 April - 21 June; reviewed 21 May

**BY HARVEY O'BRIEN**

*THE WOMAN WHO WALKED INTO DOORS* is an adult pantomime, a cautionary tale writ large through characters defined by extravagant gesture, elaborate costume and direct address to the audience. The play employs stylised exaggeration which invites laughter and terror, veering from the farce of a disco in the 1970s to the balletic, slow-motion depiction of acts of domestic violence.

The story — adapted from the novel by Roddy Doyle, in turn adapted and expanded from the 1994 television serial, *Family* — is about Charlo and Paula Spencer, an urban, working-class couple whose relationship takes on a frightening new complexion when he starts beating her. Unable and/or unwilling to leave her



husband and the father of her children, Paula is torn by feelings of love and respect in tandem with fear and (self) hatred.

Portraying Charlo, Bríain F. O'Byrne employs a comic chicken-walk and a range of childlike facial expressions which strip the character down to a paradoxical cipher of the love/hate relationship. This is Paula's story, and as co-writer and director Joe O'Byrne remarks in the programme, it is a memory play. It is narrated by Hilda Fay in the role of Paula, who, initially in the guise of telling her story to a hapless young Garda, speaks to the audience about her experiences. As such the sense of perspective is all important, and explains the wilful departure from the realism of the television show and the intimacy of the novel.

The play operates mostly on an

#### **HOME TRUTHS**

*Fay and O'Byrne in  
The Woman Who  
Walked Into Doors*

abstract level. Opening against an expressionistic set designed by Kieran McNulty, the action shifts in time and location with the whirligig pace of a freakish

nightmare. Hospital partitions dance around the injured and bewildered Paula as she pleads in her mind "Ask me", while a doctor speaks in pleasant abstractions; two portable wooden cut-outs are wheeled on stage painted and partially costumed to depict a row of guests at the Spencer wedding; at one point, deep inside her despair, Paula is hoisted on wires, floating in front of a plain black curtain.

The play is about how Paula sees her world and her husband, not about who Charlo really is or about the social context of the action. This partly explains the goofy characterisation of the abuser and the absence of genuine

polemical force, but it frequently runs the risk of turning the entire affair into a meaningless theatrical spectacle.

It takes almost an hour before the first act of domestic violence occurs, portrayed with a sudden flash of light and a dreamlike aftermath which is then repeated as Paula tries to make sense of what has just happened. To this point the play has been a characteristic Roddy Doyle laugh-a-thon, fraught with the paradoxes that have dogged his work since the 1980s. Are we laughing with these people, or laughing at them? Given the lack of edge throughout the first half, the audience is given little reason to do much more than applaud happily at the theatrical flourishes and broad comic characterisations.

Only once does the domestic violence happen in "real time", and it is a genuinely shocking moment. The rest of the time Charlo's cruelty is seen and shown as a kind of performance. Bráin F. O'Byrne stands away from Fay punching the air, while interlocking and overlapping live and recorded narration describes the catalogue of injuries inflicted. Even the cathartic climax where Paula hits Charlo with a frying pan employs stylised action which stops short of literal depiction.

O'Byrne maintains his jutting-elbowed stance, jerky neck movements, and monosyllabic conversation throughout the piece, usually to peals of laughter from the appreciative crowd. It is little wonder that, by the end, the actor received a chorus of good natured "boos" followed by an indulgent round of laughter and applause. Panto it is, then. Fay, for her part, captures the complexity of her character's feelings and gives the play a strong physical and vocal centre. The rest

of the cast are largely comic.

Any response to *The Woman Who Walked Into Doors* is complicated by the politics of the subject. The programme comes with a four-page section advertising Women's Aid. This play has a real-world context and the production seems intended to provoke social consciousness. Yet it is telling that in answering the question asked by Women's Aid: "Have you ever felt fear? Real Fear?" the audience will be inclined to recognise the distance between the stage and their lives. An emotional response on this level is impossible in the face of this burlesque cavalcade, however technically accomplished or well meaning.

**TO BE CONFIRMED by Alex Johnston**

**ELYSIAN JUNIORS by Ken Harmon**

Gaiety School of Acting Annual Showcase

Project Arts Centre

16-21 June 2003; reviewed 17 June

**BY DEREK WEST**

PATRICK SUTTON, DIRECTOR OF THE Gaiety School of Acting, clucked around his charges (the graduating class of 2003) on opening night, protective and utterly supportive. This — he made candidly clear — was the actors' night. So far, so good: there is precious little professional education for actors in this country and the Gaiety School has served Irish theatre well, for nearly a decade-and-a-half, by offering challenging training, as well as commissioning a lot of new writing to showcase the emerging talents. On this night then, 18 young aspiring talents were framed in two new plays.

To judge by these performances, the Gaiety style of acting is contemporary, assertive, acerbic and gutsy — at least



that's what we got from the array of characters in both plays. Everyone seemed to relish confrontation, epitomised by aggressive gesture and throat-wrenching vocals.

This may be something to do with the nature of the two plays: Johnston's *To Be Confirmed* plots the disintegration of an inept rock group and this involves much recrimination, finger-wagging and unseemly wrestling on the floor; In *Elysian Juniors* Harmon sets up a bunch of foul-mouthed Dublin Goths to lay the ghost of King (who appears to have laid each of them at some time or other). This also entails accusation, gesticulation and, in the finale, some athletic satanic ritual on the floor and on the benches of the graveyard-turned-public-park.

Forget about finesse. He or she who handles "fuck" the best carries all.

ANNABELLE KELLY

**CLASS OF 2003**  
*Gaiety School*  
 graduates in *To  
 Be Confirmed*

Outstanding in that respect was an astonishingly focused performance by Victoria McQuaid, as a feisty foul mouth in *To Be Confirmed*. Her character may be called

Ophelia, but this lady is in no danger of finding any willows aslant brooks. She is riveting as a kind of vicious ring-mistress to the inept clowns who call themselves "Bugbear". Rory Nolan, as loser-lead singer plays the pseud with engaging consistency; Ronan Rose Roberts as the rock journalist is a commanding, if somewhat self-conscious presence.

The six witchy maidens in Ken Harmon's coven have to struggle hard to assert their individuality. Partly, this is due to the strident nature of their dialogue (think Sean O'Casey sprinkled with liberal doses of the F word — they tend all to sound like Mollser on alcopops). Sarah Burke (Jacinta), who

opens the piece with a lyrical weave of words, is granted a temporary respite from the vehemence and demonstrates a plaintive quality of voice. Of the men, Kevin Marron, as menacing Gatekeeper, shines in a long-distance throat race (demonstrating a vocal strength and range that is impressive); Ciaran O' Neill's Phoebe is delightfully fey.

The evening raises the question: what can a showcase do beyond show? Is a showcase about physical presence? By the end of the evening we are left in no doubt that the class of 2003 is young, lithe, and physically fit. The programme is a casting director's delight, featuring a good head shot of each of the young talents plus contact details for future reference. Vocal range? We know they can make themselves heard and that they have scatological stamina — no problem in finding cast members for *Fair City*. Nuance? If you're planning to produce Chekhov, Friel or Shakespeare, the prognosis is not so certain.

Here the playwrights must stand up and be counted. They've been commissioned by an acting school and they've produced two competent, lively pieces. Alex Johnston's writing is consistently smart and epigrammatic, full of sharp twists and surprises; Harmon's has a more ambitious sweep but becomes an uneasy mélange of styles, running from uncensored soap to Grand Guignol. In the end, however, it's an unsatisfactory exercise, too programmatic. They appear to have listened to the young actors and incorporated some of their strengths into the scripts. They have concentrated on the age range of the class but one is left with the hope that for actors and writers alike the best is yet to come.

### **THE WILD DUCK by Henrik Ibsen in a new version by Frank McGuinness**

The Peacock Theatre

3July-22 August 2003; reviewed 9 July

BY BRIAN SINGLETION

MCGUINNESS' VERSION OF IBSEN'S modern masterpiece is precise, subtle, humane, and occasionally brutal. At all times it remains thoroughly accessible without pandering to the local context. As in his own work, he has written fragile characters, torn apart by the revelation of secrets and lies, portrayed with such a welcome clarity that we are able to see the influence this play must have had on Arthur Miller's *All My Sons*.

*The Wild Duck* features former friends and business partners, Werle and Ekdal, now separated after the exposure of a scam for which Ekdal took the rap and suffered the financial consequences. Now Ekdal is at the mercy of his friend's benevolence for money and alcohol. Werle had palmed off his former mistress, Gina, to be Ekdal's son Hjalmar's wife, unbeknownst to all except Gregors, Werle's son. Further, he is also the real father of the Ekdals' child, Hedwig, which is the greatest secret of all. Gregors' idealistic mission, which provides the impetus for the tragedy, is to expose the truth at all costs, believing naïvely that loving relationships can withstand and transcend his exposure.

Hungarian director László Marton's production, like McGuinness's script, is a breath of fresh air. He clears away the clutter of realism and the histrionics of melodrama (into which performances could so easily slide), and pushes his actors through a sequence of beautifully crafted emotional moments. From the opening scene the characters live in the

moment, they talk to each other as they would in real life, often turning away from the audience, forcing us to peer further into their lives. At times this appears uncomfortable as real levels of pitch and tone are not sufficient for public display, but the actors swiftly settle into a base level of composure and subtlety as a rock from which the emotional turmoil gradually begins to explode. Performances in this style are detailed and emotionally rich.

Frank McCusker as Gregors Werle, the son of rich sawmill owner Hakon Werle, slopes around the set in ominous black, stalking the Ekdal family with his idealistic obsession with the truth of his father's sins. He cuts a fine figure as a depressive creature and his intensity is a wonderful counterpoint to his friend Hjalmar Ekdal. Denis Conway, by contrast, as Hjalmar Ekdal, is a lovable, jovial family man who, even in his moment of despair at the revelation of his wife's infidelity and the question mark over his daughter's paternity, still manages to allow his instincts for family to pull him back from the brink. His confrontation with his wife Gina (played by Andrea Irvine) was one of the most electric moments of the play: for a large part of the confrontation he hurled his mistrust and invective at her almost in a whisper leaving us unprepared for the explosion of anger which was to follow. The



**EMOTIONAL AWAKENING**  
Judith Roddy in  
*The Wild Duck*

result was both terrifying and heartbreakingly.

But the discovery of the show was the performance of Judith Roddy which managed to avoid the mawkish sentimentality which playing a 14-year-old might have induced. Roddy gave a terrific display of awakening from innocence, particularly when she discovered that the language of her imagination was also shared by Gregors. Her reaction was one of both repulsion and attraction, and was a defining moment in her character's development, marking the awakening which would eventually lead to her sacrificial suicide.

Ibsen's plays are often laden with symbols and metaphors and *The Wild Duck* is

no exception. The image of the wounded bird in the loft is mentioned by most characters and with such regularity that it could be a metaphor for any one of them. All of them, either through bankruptcy, disinheritance, depression, infidelity, idealism, or incipient blindness have had their "wings clipped" and have crawled into the nest for comfort and security. But tragedy is waiting in the wings.

The opening scene's design (created by Csörsz Khell) prepares us for the theme and content of the play. Its tiny space for multiple entrances and exits creates an impression of entrapment and a society of secrecy. The remainder of the play, however, opens out onto Ekdal's spartan photographic studio, the furniture pushed against the walls, forcing the characters to be there also. The empty space in the middle, therefore, seems at first to be oddly underused but as conflict ensues between the Ekdals, the centre stage becomes filled with actors being thrown to the floor along with Ekdal's belongings. Strangely the loft in which the wild duck resides with the rabbits and pigeons is positioned in a downstage trapdoor which makes for an occasional double-take. The siting of it highlights both its significance and its strangeness. This is further enhanced by Paul Keogan's best theatre lighting design for some time, which does not so much create a brooding atmosphere, but picks out objects and faces and turns them into metaphors too. For example, the very first image of a cold light on a crystal punch bowl and glasses was a startling exposure of fragility.

It is rare to see such intense realism in contemporary Irish theatre, and what some might term old-fashioned and "uncool Hibernia", Marton's production provided an opportunity for some of

Ireland's best actors to create a tapestry of subtext. His own "secret" was in his brave decision to make less than obvious choices of moves and motivations, which was rounded off by having Gregors exiting with the gun Hedwig had used to shoot herself. He sloped off one final time, gun in hand, with a greater degree of purpose — presumably to put an end to his own idealism.

#### **THE YELLOW WALLPAPER**

**by Charlotte Perkins Gilman**

Granary Theatre Productions

Granary Theatre, Cork 1–5 July;

reviewed 3 July **BY ALANNAH HOPKIN**

CAL DUGGAN'S ADAPTATION OF *The Yellow Wallpaper* is better than the original novella by Charlotte Perkins Gilman. An outstanding performance from Jessica Regan, an interesting and atmospheric set by Tony McCleane-Fay, enhanced by moody original music by Irene Buckley combine to produce a memorable night of theatre.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman published her autobiographical novella in 1892. It is narrated by a young woman who is living quietly in a rented house in the country, largely confined to the attic nursery by her physician husband, in the hope that quiet and rest will cure the nervousness, tears and lassitude that have come over her since the birth of her baby. It is a harrowing read, the testament of a fragile woman as her distraught mental state degenerates, apparently quite unnecessarily. Her descent into madness is signalled by her growing obsession with the horrible yellow wallpaper of the room, which gradually takes on a life of its own. The feeling that something terrible is about to happen becomes almost unbearable.

**A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN**

*Jessica Regan in  
The Yellow Wallpaper*



TONY MC CLEEN-FAY

## reviews

able, as the reader witnesses the well-intentioned rest cure imposed by the husband accelerating his wife's decline.

It is a classic feminist text, and Gilman Perkins, having divorced her first husband, went on to become one of the first feminist writers and lecturers. She is best known for *Women and Economics* (1898), which was greeted as the Bible of the early women's movement and translated into seven languages. Her main interest was to free women from domestic subservience. In the 1920s her reputation went into decline, and *The Yellow Wallpaper* remained out of print until it was rediscovered by feminist academics in the 1970s.

The novella is written as a monologue, and is remarkable more for its psychological veracity than its literary skill. Duggan's adaptation keeps the gentle, tentative tone of voice, with its sudden dramatic evidence of obsession, but loses the more clumsy elements of the written narration. On the page the onset of madness is signalled rather too clearly; on stage it really does come as a shock.

The woman, who is never named, is already sitting at a table on stage as the audience enters, while Irene Buckley's dreamy piece of music, *Charlotte's Theme*, is playing. The boundary between the stage and the auditorium is deliberately blurred, by extending the apron of the stage into the audience.

Actor Jessica Regan produces a flawless upper class, New England accent, but immediately establishes her vulnerability by the way her lips move slightly before the words come out, as she folds and unfolds little table napkins. Her modest child-like dress and flat ballet shoes (costumes by Cal Duggan), indicate the way that her husband is treating

her, giving her as little responsibility as a child. Yet the audience sees an intelligent, good-natured woman, bored by her isolation and enforced idleness. Writing is forbidden in case it overexcites her, and must be done furtively.

Her first mention of the yellow wallpaper is marked by a sudden flash of anger, uncharacteristic of the woman we have seen so far. As her obsession with the wallpaper grows and her sanity diminishes, the set is gradually stripped of props. Gentle surges and dimming of lighting emphasise the mood changes, and the decline in her grasp of reality. The penultimate scene is delivered from ground level, and the final scene is played on a bed stripped of bedding, with the actor lying upside down. The ending, with its heart-breaking repetition of one line — "It's down by the front door under a plantain leaf" — is clearer and more convincing than that of the novella.

Jessica Regan's performance is both sensitive and powerful, carrying the audience with her through her terrifying decline. Regan, who is 21, has been a prominent member of UCC's Dramat, and has just completed a season with Graffiti. On the strength of this performance she will go far.

Cal Duggan has worked in many capacities at the Granary, acting in a wide variety of roles, most recently M in Playgroup's production of *Crave* by Sarah Kane. She also has a long list of directing and designing credits. She has succeeded brilliantly in dramatising the novella. The written word has been turned into exciting theatre that uses all available resources to entertain and affect the audience. It is only to be hoped that this production will be revived so that more people can enjoy it.



FRINGE

ESB Dublin Fringe Festival  
22.09–11.10

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# Dublin Theatre Festival

September 29 – October 11 2003



## Robert Lepage *the far side of the moon*

Robert Lepage / Ex Machina  
O'Reilly Theatre, Belvedere College,  
Sept 30 – Oct 9

"Wryly observant, poetic and visually stunning, Lepage again reveals himself as a master illusionist of the stage... a wondrous production"

Sydney Morning Herald



## Rina Yerushalmi *Mythos*

ITIM Theatre Ensemble  
& the Cameri Theatre of Tel Aviv  
Tivoli Theatre, Oct 9-11

"The entire production is a volcano of bursting emotions that grasps the audience in their guts and never lets go"

Plays International



## Calixto Bieito *Hamlet*

Birmingham Repertory Theatre &  
Edinburgh International Festival  
Olympia Theatre, Oct 9-12

"a gripping, intelligent and totally coherent re-imagining of Shakespeare's play"

The Guardian on Bieito's production  
of Macbeth



For further information, please visit [www.dublintheatrefestival.com](http://www.dublintheatrefestival.com)  
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