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New ways of making theatre

Doubt and faith
John Patrick Shanley & Stuart Carolan

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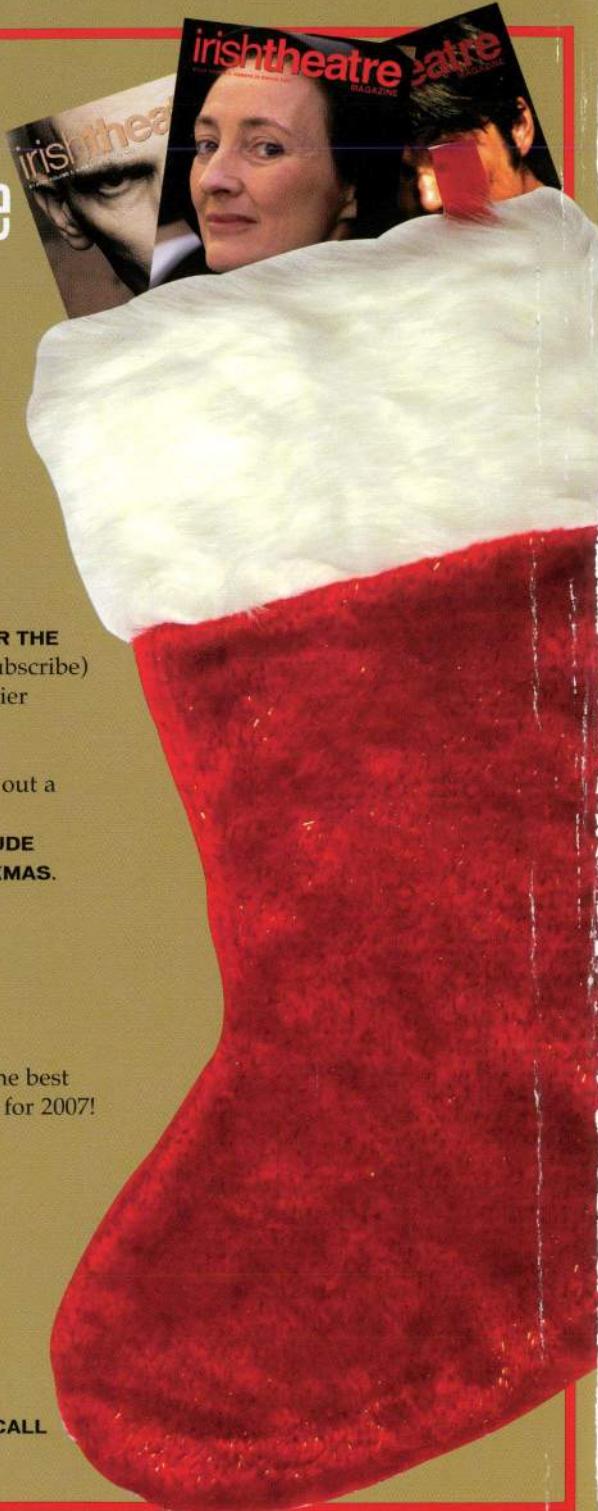
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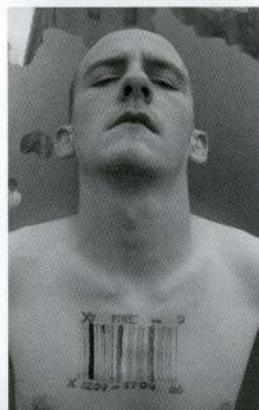
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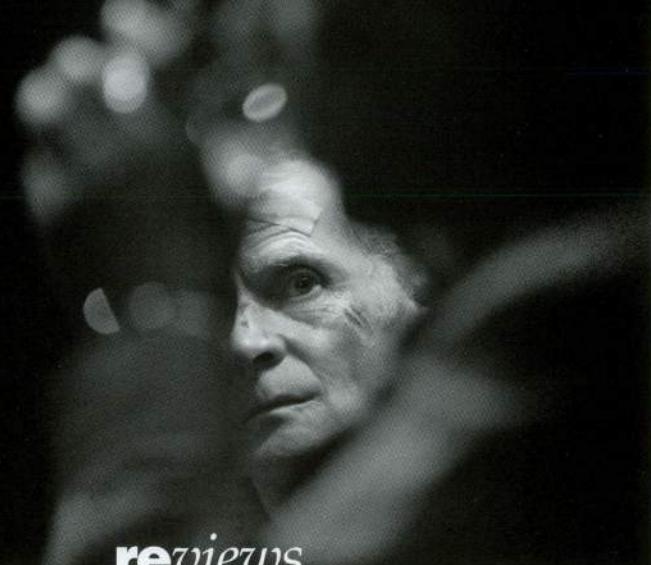
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ON THE COVER: *Brid Brennan in Doubt*.
Photo: Colm Hogan

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



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Breaking out of Isolation

OUR FINAL ISSUE OF 2006 inevitably features some retrospection, casting a critical eye over the autumn festival season in Dublin. After the much-noted paucity of Irish productions in the Dublin Theatre Festival (DTF) last year, this year's event struck a better balance, although it laid itself open to the criticism of putting some new work on stage before it was ready. Four of the Irish productions are discussed in detail, along with two international shows, in an edited transcript of our annual ITM Critics' Forum. Additional DTF reviews, as well as comprehensive Dublin Fringe Festival reviews, are published on our website, www.irishtheatremagazine.ie

Rough Magic's Associate Director, Tom Creed, spoke from the audience at the Forum about the recurring theme he perceived in many of the DTF productions, in both content and form: a sense of emotional numbness and of disconnected, isolated lives. He elabo-

Solidarity and a sense of strength in numbers are currently prevailing

rates on this in ThinkTank, Page 18.

Yet if that's the philosophical mood European playwrights and designers are reflecting in their work, the impulse among theatre artists here seems to be to battle against it. Solidarity and a sense of strength in numbers are currently prevailing, as touring networks (NASC and NOMAD) help venues and companies support each other, and directors are banding together in a new professional association. As Rachel Andrews reports (Page 56), possibilities of practitioners breaking out

of the company model and pooling production and administrative resources are being actively explored – led by Project Arts Centre. It's fitting, as it celebrates its fortieth birthday, that Project continues to strive for the collective empowerment envisaged for it by its radical founders back in autumn 1966. Many Happy Returns.

Comments on anything in this issue may be sent to: editor@irishtheatremagazine.ie

what's news?

Directing energies

ACTORS HAVE ONE. SO DO PROFESSIONAL DANCERS AND, more recently, stage technicians. Now Irish theatre directors are forming a professional association of their own. Currently in its early stages of formation but due to be formalised next spring, the Association of Theatre Directors Ireland began life as an attempt to revive a long-defunct directors' section of Equity.

With an interim committee formed six months ago that includes David Parnell, Liam Halligan, Ciaran Taylor, Michael Scott, Jim Culleton, Jo Mangan and Rachel West – with Parnell as acting chairperson – it has since decided to carry on without Equity affiliation, and has thirty-five members.

Their principal concern, Parnell says, is that the Arts Council appears to be re-examining the way it funds theatre, placing a growing emphasis on project funding, while fewer new companies receive revenue funding.

Forming a company has traditionally been the method new directors use to forge a career, and Parnell contends that this may no longer be viable. (See *Our Flexible Friends* report, page 56)

Directors do not necessarily object to that, he added, mentioning the importance of directors not becoming associated with a single company. "But we did at least want a voice at the table if we are to have a conversation about the way theatre is funded in this country."

It is expected that the ATDI will

function as a support group and a lobby group for the profession (they are already in contact with similarly concerned organisations such as Theatre Forum and the Irish Theatre Institute), examining options for "mid-career" directors, proposing apprenticeship models for emerging talent and advocating for professional director training at third level. In the longer term, it intends to investigate directors' contracts, royalties and tax issues.

There is a certain irony that the theatre professionals most familiar with calling the shots are relatively late to form a professional organisation within an increasingly union-conscious sector. Parnell explains that though the association is learning to walk before it can run – it is currently funded only by a nominal membership fee – it is already close to finding its stride. "There was a gap in the market where directors' direct needs weren't being addressed," he says, "and this might be a way of doing that."

Further information from: associationoftheatredirectors@eircom.net

FLYING HIGH

The Dublin Theatre Festival waits for no man and Loughlin Deegan, appointed Festival Director in late October, has immediately stepped into the flow of activity, currently double-jobbing while he serves out

three months' notice as producer of Rough Magic. "One of the things I presented to the board in interview was an awareness of the urgency of someone who could hit the ground running and start travelling and planning immediately," he told *ITM* from London, where he was attending the Barbican's 'Bite' season, with



LOUGHLIN DEEGAN

commitments in Montreal and Paris to follow.

It is a job that he has coveted for a long time, he says. Deegan originally came to the arts with a degree in business from DCU, before moving into arts management, working for The Belltable and Druid Theatre Company. He has since worked as (among other things) a playwright, section editor of *Irish Theatre Magazine*, director of the Irish Theatre Institute's

Irish Playography, literary manager of Rough Magic and, since 2003, the company's executive producer.

"I've always had a very focussed and clear view of how my career progressed," he says. "The aberration, I suppose, was writing plays."

The 50th anniversary festival raises the stakes for Deegan's début, having already applied to the Arts Council for double its 2006 budget (which, at €773,000, was the highest it has ever been), aiming for an event bigger in scale than any previous year. Former festival director Don Shipley told *ITM* that plans for the anniversary had advanced to the stage that between 20 and 50 per cent of the 2007 programme could be locked down.

Although Deegan admits that "there's already a very clear vision [in the festival] that I am buying into, which doesn't necessarily have to be completely reshaped", he said that Shipley had not signed off on any projects before the new director was in place. "Essentially, what I've inherited is a lot of very good ideas and projects in an advanced stage of negotiation, many of which I'm very excited about featuring in the 50th anniversary programme. There's a very evolved programme but a form of commitment hasn't yet been made."

Among the plans already hinted at by his predecessor are a new Frank McGuinness play and, perhaps, a production from Michael Keegan Dolan.

Unwilling to confirm any such projects or to be drawn on matters of artistic policy this early in his tenure (he starts full-time in January), Deegan is positive about striking a balance between international and domestic work. "Some of the projects that are on the table from Irish companies are enormously exciting. One of the things that I found most assuring was the strength and quality of the Irish work that is being proposed."

WATCHING THEIR FIGURES

Meanwhile the Dublin Theatre Festival reports buoyant returns for 2006. With an increase of €150,000, nineteen per cent up on last year's takings, marketing and development director Ross Keane can claim it was the Festival's most lucrative year to date, "with a lot of shows well exceeding the targets we set for them".

That *The Exonerated* was one such hit may not be surprising, banking as it did on the twin appeal of minor celebrities and a death-row docudrama. And even those left uninspired by Stuart Carolan's meditation on lost faith in *Empress of India* could expect a Druid production to do good business. Interestingly though, Keane does not credit the two sold-out nights at the gargantuan Point Theatre of *Came So Far For Beauty* as a significant contributor to the Festival's box office.

A co-production between several different partners, including American



The Spiegeltent: still the star of the Dublin Fringe Festival

producers Pomegranate and venue owners MCD, the star-studded Leonard Cohen tribute's profitability seems to have been diluted by its number of stakeholders. "Because it was of such huge scale we needed a lot of assistance to have it come to pass," says Keane. "The way the financial deals were done, it's sort of taken it out of the equation for the box office receipts. The nineteen per cent increase is based on mainstage productions, comparable to last year."

This year was also significant in the enthusiastic uptake for foreign language theatre, traditionally a harder sell. The Hungarian company Katona József's production of *Rattledanddisappeared* was the first show to sell out, while even Omsk State Drama Theatre's *The Vacationers*, though technologically hampered and poorly received, secured enough advance sales not to significantly dent the Festival's prof-

its. (Presumably the people who left the show early, frustrated by the erratic super-titles, did not demand their money back.)

Meanwhile the Dublin Fringe Festival, which struggled with a chronically muddled and frequently altering programme, reported a drop in takings from €340,000 in 2005 to €320,000 this year. This, however, represents less than a seven per cent decrease, in a year when the Fringe shortened its run from three weeks in previous years to a fortnight. One contributing factor was the perennially popular Spiegeltent venue, enlarged this year, which recorded a twelve per cent increase in fabulous, glittering revellers.

THE MCGRATH EFFECT

When Fergal McGrath left his first job, as a manager of Fyffes PLC in 1992, the company's revenue had risen from £1 million to £4 million. By the time he finished his second, as



Enda Walsh (centre) with Bernard Farrell (left) and Conor McPherson at the Abbey..

general manager of the Galway Arts Festival, its box office had gone from £250,000 to £1 million. Using strictly mathematical criteria, his decision to step down as managing director of Druid counts as an early departure – the company's turnover has merely risen threefold (from €700,000 in 2002 when he joined to €2.1 million when he leaves in January). "I usually go when the turnover has quadrupled," he admits facetiously, but only just, adding that his budget for next year "could see it go to €2.8m".

This would be a good time then to invest in Magma Films, the independent production company based in Galway where McGrath will begin work as managing director next year.

"The whole idea of going into film was appealing and it will allow me to bring a lot of what I picked up in Druid and from working in the arts. So it's an interesting progression. Over the past year I've picked up a lot about film production from some of the ancillary projects for DruidSynge. So it probably gave me a taste for it."

He will not sever his ties to the company completely, however. One outstanding objective is the refurbishment of Druid's building, something he intends to oversee next September, "when Druid go on the road".

Subject to funding, he says, "Druid will be as busy in 2007 as in 2006" – no small claim, given that the compa-

ny has been in production for 46 weeks of this year – but as *ITM* went to press McGrath was unable to confirm in print which productions they will be travelling abroad with during the international festival season.

A WRITER'S ASSOCIATIONS

In not entirely unrelated news, Enda Walsh's recent association with Druid looks set to continue: he will direct the Irish premiere of his play *The New Electric Ballroom* for the company next year. Originally developed for the Kammerspiele in Munich, it was conceived as a companion piece to *The Walworth Farce* (premiered by Druid this year) and the association should encourage Walsh's hope to see the plays staged together.

He spoke about this when he was named the Abbey Theatre's new Writer-in-Association, receiving an award of €15,000 – a €4,000 increase from last year's prize – sponsored by Anglo Irish Bank. Walsh, like last year's recipient Conor McPherson, has had no professional dealings with the Abbey, having emerged with Corcadorca, then the Dublin Theatre Festival (*Bedbound*), and frequent work in London and Germany.

RETURN OF THE NATIVE

In the middle of 2004, a year that was already shaping up to be the Abbey's *annus horribilis*, but which had not yet become the financial catastrophe that

marked its centenary, the theatre found itself in the unusual position of responding to a rumour. Contrary to speculation, Ben Barnes, then artistic director, would see out his term until the end of 2005, a statement read, and then take up "international offers in North America and elsewhere".

This, of course, did not quite prove to be the case, as the artistic director elected to "step aside" in May, 2005, when the full extent of the centenary's €1.85m deficit was revealed. But the idea that Barnes had relocated to Canada persisted, his only communication with Ireland an echo through the pages of Canada's *Globe and Mail*: "Anything I would say in a Canadian interview would find its way back to Irish media and be printed in a context irrelevant to what I said," he told the paper late in 2005.

Now that he has taken the position of artistic director of the Theatre Royal in Waterford, a professional return that has attracted remarkably little comment, he can set the record straight, choosing to reply to *ITM*'s questions by email.

"This is perhaps a good opportunity to say that contrary to the media rumours of 2005, subsequently repeated from time to time, I did not move to North America following my departure from the Abbey," Barnes writes. "I have, however, directed a number of productions in the US and Canada and, indeed, have

a number of upcoming assignments there which I had already committed to prior to taking this job."

The job in question, vacated by Michael Hunt who left for Wexford Festival Opera, puts Barnes back in familiar territory as a director who has a long association with local Red Kettle Theatre Company. Barnes is already proposing to extend the tight resources of a venue that functions primarily as a receiving house.

"The Theatre Royal is in receipt of modest, but much appreciated, funding from Waterford City Council and the Arts Council," he said. "This funding enables the theatre to programme a small range of more challenging work throughout the year. If we can increase this funding I would like to see that strand of visiting work complemented by the Theatre Royal staging its own productions which might then tour in the South East and further afield."

He hopes to direct for the theatre himself "in time", but first he will address the "serious shortcomings of the stage and backstage facilities", with plans to refurbish the 600-seat venue in "the short term to medium term".

"What I am obviously keen to do is to develop a strand of more challenging work, but this cannot happen in a vacuum." To that end Barnes intends to build up an audience for such work, while being optimistic

that the Arts Council's new Touring Experiment "will be helpful in making more work from around the country available to theatres like the Theatre Royal". So begins another stage in a tenacious theatrical career.

BACK ON THE ROAD

Having abandoned direct touring support for production companies in 2000, the Arts Council has existed for so long without a touring policy that any attempt to reinstate one was bound to seem hesitant. Even so, the long delay in adopting a position on touring in the Partnership for Arts strategy had begun to cause concern among production companies and venues alike, many of whom suspected that the issue had been put on the longest of fingers when it failed to materialise in recent drafts of the strategy.

Now, finally, comes The Touring Experiment, a welcome but tentative step towards getting performing and visual arts back on the road. Two million euro may seem like a considerable investment in what is being presented as an "action research programme", but, divided among art forms over a period of two years for what is widely understood to be a costly enterprise, it remains to be seen what impact the initiative can make on regional venues starved of product, and theatre companies anxious to extend the lives of their shows.

Encouraged by the potential of the



The Source Arts Centre and Library, Thurles, designed by McCullough Mulvin architects.

scheme, eager production companies have already started assuring venues that if they book them, they will come. "There will be an awful lot of disappointed companies," said one sceptical venue manager. "Two million can only go so far."

Given that a theatre production with a cast size of eight, a team of technicians and a large set may cost up to €250,000 to tour for seven weeks, it is unlikely that the Experiment will be able to fund many large-scale revivals – which, given that new work is notoriously difficult to sell to audiences, are exactly the kind of productions that regional venues such as Thurles's new arts centre (pictured) are crying out for.

Though it is unlikely to provide an immediate panacea for the sustained

deficit in national touring, there is still reason to be optimistic about the Touring Experiment. The Arts Council has formed partnerships with the Irish Theatre Institute and IMMA, handing the project's evaluation to Belinda Moller, while commissioning Temple Bar Trust to manage the entire process. We'll know in January what it can discover and what scale of productions it can assist,

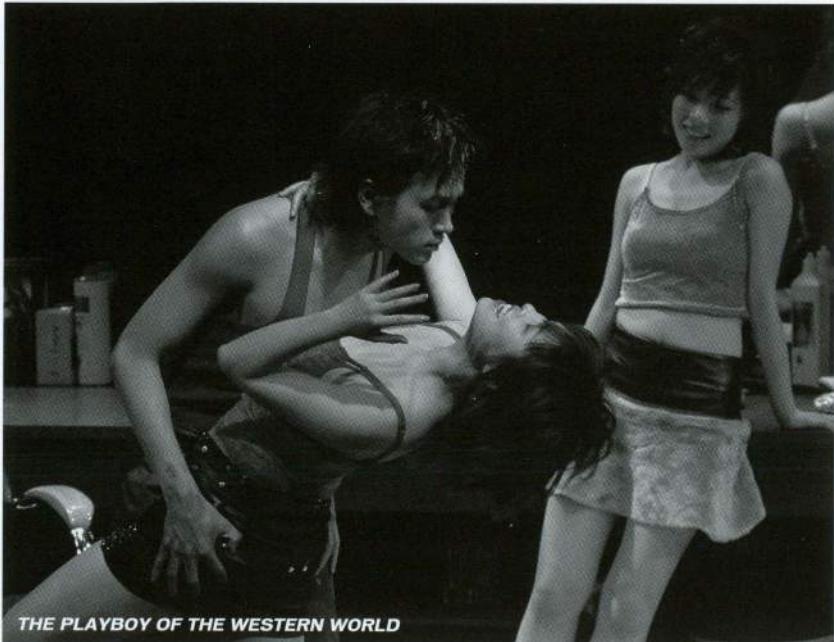
but sources suggest that this will simply be the first stage in examining the demands of touring over the next five to ten years.

Garry Hynes, writing recently in the *Irish Examiner*, may not have been premature in calling for the "next step" of The Touring Experiment to be "multi-annual funding [which would] allow companies and venues security in planning, programming, relationship and audience building".

Multi-annual funding remains the holy grail of all funding matters, which is why the long-term aspect of the Touring Experiment, and the equally tentative (and still unelaborated) Regular Funded Organisations funding platform give some cause for hope.... pending the results of the experiment.

opening nights

TANYA DEAN marks your diaries for the winter months ahead



THE PLAYBOY OF THE WESTERN WORLD

PINOCCHIO by Paul Boyd runs at the Lyric Theatre, Belfast from 28 November – 13 January, along with **SANTA CLAUS... WHAT THE REINDEER SAW** from 6 December – 13 January.

Ballet Ireland presents **A CHRISTMAS CAROL**, touring from 4–23 December to: Royal Theatre, Castlebar; Roscommon Arts Centre; Civic Theatre, Tallaght; Glór Irish Music Centre, Ennis; An Táin, Dundalk; Burnavon Arts Centre,

Cookstown; Iveagh Movie Studios, Banbridge; Ardhowen Theatre, Enniskillen; Draíocht, Blanchardstown; Solstice Arts Centre, Navan; Dunamaise Arts Centre, Portlaoise; and Siamsa Tíre, Tralee.

An Grianán Productions presents **JACK & THE BEANSTALK**, adapted by Little John Nee, running from 6 – 22 December in An Grianán Theatre, Letterkenny; and from 28 December

- 19 January in the Civic Theatre, Tallaght.

Richard Brinsley Sheridan's **THE SCHOOL FOR SCANDAL**, directed by Jimmy Fay, runs in the Abbey from 6 December - 27 January.

Druid's production of **THE YEAR OF THE HIKER** by John B. Keane continues its tour, running at the Dunamaise Arts Centre, Portlaoise, from 11 - 16 December.

Tolstoy's **ANNA KARENINA**, adapted by Helen Edmundson, runs at the Gate Theatre from 5 December - 3 January.

Bewley's Café Theatre presents **REBECCA'S ROBIN** by Deirdre Kinehan from 11 December - 6 January.

Pan Pan's production of **THE PLAYBOY OF THE WESTERN WORLD** by J.M Synge (translated into Mandarin by Yue Sun, with a Chinese cast) runs in the Project Arts Centre from 13 - 16 December.

Crooked House will stage **THE LIQUORICE WITCH** by Constance Cubicle in Riverbank Arts Centre , Newbridge, from 13 - 17 December.

From 16 December - 6 January, Cork Opera House presents **ALADDIN**, written and directed by Bryan Flynn.

Axis Arts Centre, Ballymun presents

ALADDIN from 4 - 21 January.

From 8 - 20 January, Project Cube will host BDNC Theatre's production of **TWO FOR DINNER FOR TWO**, directed by Ciaran Taylor and devised by Ciaran Taylor and the Company.

Serendipity Productions presents John Osbourne's **LOOK BACK IN ANGER** from 8 - 27 January in the Andrews Lane Studio.

LITTLE RED RIDING HOOD runs from 11 - 14 January in the Royal Theatre, Castlebar.

Fairbank Productions & Play on Words Theatre presents **TOM CREAN - ANTARTIC EXPLORER**, written and performed by Aidan Dooley, in the Everyman Palace Theatre, Cork from 15 - 20 January.

Everyman Palace Theatre Cork presents **DUBLIN CAROL** by Conor McPherson, touring from 22 January - 3 March, to: Civic Theatre, Tallaght; Everyman Palace Theatre, Cork; Siamsa Tíre, Tralee; Town Hall Theatre, Galway; Glór, Ennis; and Watergate Theatre, Kilkenny.

Second Age Theatre Company's production of Shakespeare's **OTHELLO**, directed by Alan Stanford, tours from 31 January - 16 March, to: Theatre Royal, Waterford; Concert



OUT OF HARM'S WAY

Hall, Limerick; Helix Theatre, Dublin; and Town Hall Theatre, Galway

14

Cork Opera House presents a triple bill from Diversions Dance Company on 11 February.

The Abbey presents Shakespeare's **JULIUS CAESAR**, from 15 February.

Caryl Churchill's **A NUMBER** opens at the Peacock on 6 February, followed by **KICKING A DEAD HORSE**, a new play by Sam Shepard, from 15 March.

Cork Opera House and Town Hall Theatre Galway present **THE LIEUTENANT OF INISHMORE** by Martin McDonagh in the Pavilion Theatre, Dun Laoghaire from 19 – 24 February.

Big Telly Theatre Company presents **THE COUNTRY BOY** by John Murphy, opening at the Ardhownen Theatre in Enniskillen on 2 February before touring until 10 March.

CoisCéim Dance Theatre's production, **OUT OF HARM'S WAY**, will play at Cork Opera House from 26 – 27 February.

entrances & exits

TANYA DEAN notes movements behind the scenes in Irish theatre

LOUGHLIN DEEGAN has been appointed Artistic Director and Chief Executive of the Dublin Theatre Festival. His former position, Executive Producer with Rough Magic Theatre Company, has been advertised. He replaces **DON SHIPLEY** who has moved to the Stratford Festival, Canada, as co-Artistic Director.

FERGAL MCGRATH will step down as Managing Director of Druid Theatre Company in January to move to Magma Films... **DR. PAT DONLON** is the new Director of the Tyrone Guthrie Centre in Annaghmakerrig, and will replace **SHEILA PRATSCHKE** when she takes up her role as Director of the Centre Culturel Irlandais in Paris in January.

BEN BARNES has been appointed as the new Director of the Theatre Royal, Waterford. Barnes was the Artistic Director of the Abbey Theatre from 2000-2005... At the Lyric Theatre, Belfast, **MARCUS COOPER** is the new Fundraising Director and **SUSAN PHELAN** has been appointed Marketing Manager.



HUGH O'REILLY has been replaced as General Manager for Upstate Theatre Project by **PAUL HAYES**, formerly community arts officer with Meath County Council.

NIALL DOYLE, (pictured) Director of Music with RTÉ, will assume the position of Chief Executive Officer with Opera Ireland from Spring 2007... **ALI ROBERTSON** is stepping down as Artistic Director of the Cork Midsummer Festival and moving to Oxford. His position has been advertised and the festival is also seeking an Acting Festival Manager.

KARL WALLACE is the new artistic director of the Belltable Arts Centre, Limerick... **DONAL SHIELS**, CEO of St Patrick's Festival, is the new special advisor to the Minister for Arts, John O'Donoghue.

PATRICK MICHAEL STEWART has replaced **CIAN O'BRIEN** as Administrator at Focus Theatre, Dublin... **POLLY O'LAUGHLIN** is leaving her position as theatre director of the Pavilion, Dun Laoghaire in January.

RTÉ lyric fm

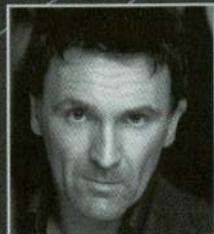
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Livin' Hope

New theatre companies outside Dublin have to fight for recognition, but they need to be supported if the next generation of theatre artists is to emerge, writes **PADRAIC MCINTYRE**.

LIVIN' DRED WAS FORMED in 2003 by Aaron Monaghan, Mary Hanley and myself and is based at the Ramor Theatre, Virginia, Co. Cavan. There is no other professional theatre company in counties Cavan, Monaghan, Leitrim, Roscommon, Longford and Westmeath. Our main policy was to create and tour high quality professional theatre in our region, the north midlands, and Livin' Dred has worked for the last three years producing four shows - two of which were nominated for Irish Times Theatre Awards - without any funding from The Arts Council.

It is interesting to note that eighty per cent of revenue funding remains in Dublin. A mere eighteen per cent goes to the other urban centres such as Cork, Galway, Kilkenny, Sligo, Waterford and Limerick. A miserly two per cent goes to - for want of a better word - rural counties, namely Tipperary (Gallowglass) and Louth (UpState and Calipo).

Even so, Livin'Dred approaches 2007



with renewed optimism, having applied for Once Off Production funding. We are also very involved in the establishment of NOMAD, The North Midlands Arts Develop-

ment, whereby eight venues and our company have come together to develop a touring strategy for professional theatre in the north midlands region. Livin' Dred will provide the first production for NOMAD: Tom Murphy's *Conversations on a Homecoming*

Like all other companies in the country, Livin' Dred waits apprehensively for the letter that will decide its fate for 2007. This year, hope springs eternal as we feel there is beginning to be a recognition that emerging theatre companies have to be supported, even if they are based outside Dublin, if there is going to be a new generation of Irish theatre-makers.

Reconnecting with the world

We need to be unafraid of dealing with big ideas in the theatre, argues director **TOM CREED**, as he surveys some recent European plays and productions that grapple with a prevailing social malaise.

*'I suddenly felt so empty
almost as if I was bored
Really empty
really stiff
that's how I felt.'*

-Jon Fosse, *Dream of Autumn*
(translated by Kim Dambaeck)

*'my TV looks across at me so strangely,
what's it up to? It wants to get close to
me, it wants affection, my TV wants
love, my TV wants intimacy, but I don't
want it, I don't want intimacy with any-
one, it wants to touch me, but I don't
want to be touched'.*

-Falk Richter, *Under Ice*
(translated by David Tushingham)

If it is true that the role of the theatre is to reflect the concerns and preoccupations of our time, then the experience of seeing many productions over a short time during the recent Dublin Theatre Festival

gave an impression of an overriding numbness in contemporary European living. These productions showed myriad lives isolated, imprisoned and numbed by everyday pressures and it became apparent to me that the thrust of much contemporary theatre is this attempt to examine how we might conduct our lives in the face of such forces.

In Mark Ravenhill's play *Shopping and Fucking* (1996) one of the characters sums up the postmodern condition as follows: "A long time ago there were big stories. Stories so big you could live your whole life in them. The powerful Hands of the Gods and Fate. The Journey to Enlightenment. The March of Socialism. But they all died or the world grew up or grew senile and forgot them, so now we're all making up our own stories." This echoes the way theorists such as Jean-Francois Lyotard have

depicted the collapse of the traditional systems which until recently governed how people lived. Without these grand narratives to cling to, and with the growing multiplicity of social, cultural, economic and emotional pressures to make sense of, it is all too easy to be paralysed by the enormity of it all.

I have recently been directing Jon Fosse's bleak and beautiful play *Dream of Autumn*, in which traditional constants like home and family have ceased to be relevant, and it is only in the temporary, in-between places, like graveyards and cheap hotel rooms that any kind of meaningful human contact can be attempted. Jon Fosse portrays a world familiar from much contemporary literature, theatre and cinema, where loneliness and emptiness are the norm and any spark of real connection with humanity is to be embraced as if one's life depends on it. *Dream of Autumn* is a cry from the dark heart of contemporary Europe, where lost souls pine for each other in the night and pass the time in lonely places in the hope of meeting a kindred spirit.

In Falk Richter's 2004 play, *Under Ice*, directed by Rachel West at Project



in early 2006, the characters are paralysed by the capitalist system in which they work and which infiltrates every aspect of their identities. Richter portrays consultants dehumanised by a world where downsizing and maximizing profits are the norm, where lives are lived in constant trans-

sit and feelings of community are imposed by compulsory adventure weekends and absurd team-building musical theatre workshops. The main protagonist fondly remembers falling into the deep freeze in the supermarket, which he found warmer and more relaxing than his daily life. Encounters with the opposite sex are reduced to meaningless transactions, "quick and relatively expensive given the rather brief moment of climax".

The productions of *Hedda Gabler* (seen at the Abbey during the Festival) and *A Doll's House* by German director Thomas Ostermeier show a keen understanding of the monetary forces that trap Ibsen's heroines in their unhappy middle class existence. Having found themselves robbed of their independence and dignity by their dependence on their husbands for financial stability, they resort to affairs with family friends



Jane Brennan in Tom Murphy's Alice Trilogy

in an attempt to extract some meaning from their lives.

This sense of numbness and isolation is reflected in contemporary European scenography as well. Designers such as Victoria's Pol Heyvaert, the Schaubühne's Jan Pappelbaum and the Deutsches Theater's Olaf Altman construct minimal and abstract spaces which make physically present the inner landscapes of the characters that inhabit them. The scenography of Romeo Castellucci's *Tragedia Endogonidia* project, seen in its Brussels incarnation in Dublin in 2004, displays a clear sense of this shattering absurdity and numbness represented spatially on stage. In an attempt to reimagine

the role and meaning of tragedy in a contemporary context, Castellucci presents scenes of absurd isolation and meaningless brutality under flat and emotionally arid lighting. And Michael Thallheimer's provocative minimalist style, seen in his DTF production of *Emilia Galotti* as well as in much of his recent work at Berlin's Deutsches Theater, strips the vestiges of naturalism away until only spare and violently heightened performances remain. On exposed and monolithic sets, he presents characters at the edge of sanity trying to come to terms with the extremity of their situation.

It strikes me that the sublimely political act of much contemporary theatre

is to hold this mirror up to our own lives, challenging us to see elements of ourselves represented on stage and examine how we fare when faced with the crushing numbness of much of everyday life. Far from cynically presenting a world without humanity or hope, many of these theatre-makers are deeply concerned with how we might make sense of the world around us and carry on in the face of its paralysing effects.

Irish theatre is full of stories about individuals trying to come to terms with the pressures of the world around us. I think especially of the work of Tom Murphy, whose latest play, *Alice Trilogy*, presents a woman becoming increasingly numb to the world as she goes through life, and displays many of the characteristics I have identified in my recent encounters with contemporary European theatre.

Pan Pan's recent production of *Oedipus Loves You* shows us Sophocles' characters living in suburbia and resorting to psychoanalysis, rock music and incestuous love to deal with the crushing soullessness of their lives.

Michael West's *Everyday*, created with Annie Ryan and Corn Exchange for the Dublin Theatre Festival, paints a portrait of a modern Dublin which resembles every other dislocated Western city in which a beating by the canal might result in someone's only

genuine encounter with another human being. The characters are united in their loneliness and solitude, and

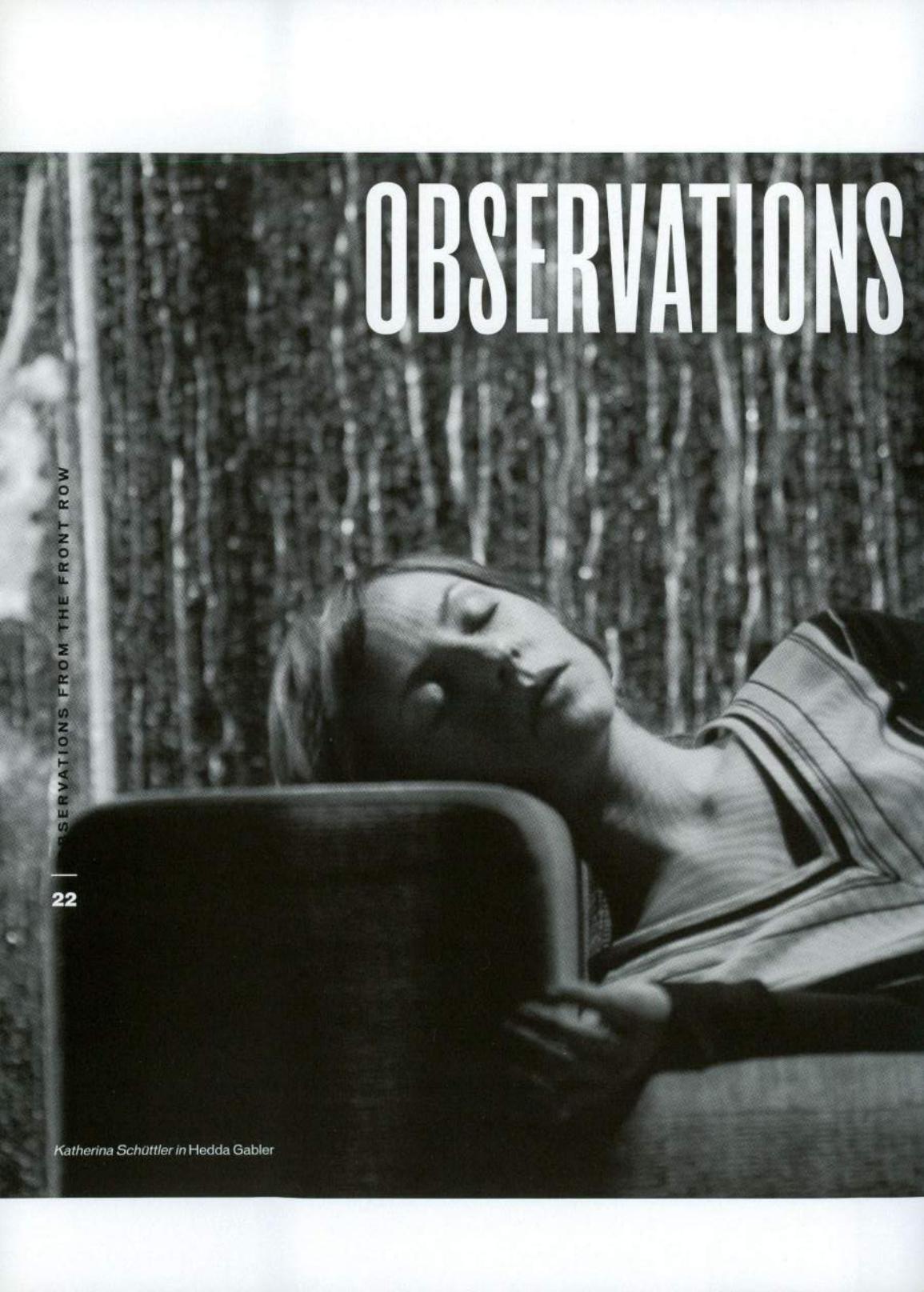
I think especially of the work of Tom Murphy, whose latest play, *Alice Trilogy*, presents a woman becoming increasingly numb to the world as she goes through life, and displays many of the characteristics I have identified in my recent encounters with contemporary European theatre.

the hope in the play arises from the glimmering possibility that, at the end of the day, and if only for some of us, real human contact is attainable.

Irish theatre at large has much to learn from our European counterparts about how we should go about revitalising the work we make and how to reconnect with the world at large. We need to become unafraid of dealing with big ideas in the theatre, and find styles of design and performance which capture the essence of how we experience the world and present it on stage. It is not enough to revive popular classics to fill our theatres: we need to examine how these plays can connect with and reflect the concerns of today and drag the theatre kicking and screaming into the present. 

Tom Creed is Associate Director of Rough Magic and joint Artistic Director of Playgroup. He most recently directed the English-language premiere of Jon Fosse's Dream of Autumn for Rough Magic at Project, Dublin.

OBSERVATIONS



— OBSERVATIONS FROM THE FRONT ROW

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Katherina Schüttler in *Hedda Gabler*

FROM THE FRONT ROW

The seventh annual **IRISH THEATRE MAGAZINE CRITICS' FORUM** was held on 12 October 2006 at Project Arts Centre, Dublin. Our three critics presented their views on a range of productions, Irish and international, from this year's Dublin Theatre Festival. Here's an edited transcript of the discussion.

BRIAN SINGLETON (*Chair of panel; Head of Drama at Trinity College Dublin*): The festival kicked off with the Schaubühne's production of *Hedda Gabler*, in this auspicious year, the centenary of Ibsen's death. It's a play much talked about, of course, particularly in relation to the representation of women. Helen: what do you think is the relevance of *Hedda Gabler* one hundred years after Ibsen's death, in the post-feminist era that we're supposed to be living in?

HELEN MEANY (*journalist and critic; Editor of ITM*): We can certainly debate about whether we're in a post-feminist era, I don't think so. Certainly Ibsen's play, written 115 years ago, focuses on Hedda's position in society as a woman, specifically as a married woman in a provincial town with a certain amount of pressure on her to have children, which were not forthcoming, and a sense that she had married beneath her. This production updates it to the present day, to affluent suburban Berlin, to a very sleek domestic setting where Hedda's got the house that she wanted, and she seems to be an educated, cool, sophisticated woman. It was fascinating to see how it was staged, but the question in my mind watching it was about the character of Hedda: would a woman like that today be in this position, would she have married Tesman, would she have been at home all day simply doing nothing? There's a great line where she says, 'the only thing I'm good at is boring myself to death'. So you might think: well, do something else - she's obviously able to use a laptop, her technical skills are clearly up to the minute! That for me left a slight question mark over the updating of it. I thought in every other way, in the way they altered the script to make

it extremely contemporary, it worked very well, but there's still the central issue of what is the matter with Hedda Gabler, I mean what is it that's driving her, what is making her so frustrated and destructive?

This production seems to be saying that all these characters have an inner emptiness, which we see in the anomie, the soulessness that they all share. Ibsen's outward look at the society around him has been turned inward, and the production seems to be saying we're all just floating around now with a lack of purpose because we're not connected to a wider society. The urgency of the need for social change, or political change, has been turned inwards and that for me is a huge difference. It all works really well – apart from the characterisation of Hedda.

BS: Do you not think though that it's the director putting her under the spotlight, a bit like a lab rat and watching her behave, as opposed to her having some agency of her own? Do any of those characters have any agency?

HM: I agree that their agency seems to have been taken away from them, but if her destructive actions are still driving the plot, then we have to ask what is motivating her.

PATRICK LONERGAN: (*lecturer in Drama at NUIG; reviews and books editor of ITM*): They have changed the characterisation of women throughout the play though. And we have two woman characters cut from the play - Tesman's aunt who dies in the course of the original, that's gone completely, and a maid is gone as well. So I think there is a definite intention to focus much more on what Hedda does, and some of the changes are actually designed to show the kind of agency that we're talking about. So for instance, in the interactions between herself and Brack: in the original she turns him down flatly, whereas here we see that she might actually be willing to have an affair with him, initially. And it seems to be the lack of control that she's objecting to towards the end. So I agree with what Helen has said, but I think there is an awareness of that in the production as well.

PETER CRAWLEY (*theatre critic and journalist; news and web editor of ITM*): Ibsen said that his play was about a woman who was a victim of a society, where a woman cannot be herself. I think that Thomas Ostermeier's production makes *Hedda Gabler* a play where no one can be themselves because of the contemporary society that we find ourselves in, and so that's where you get this accentuation of surface and this fantastic revolving set, the perspex box. And the consequence of it seems to be to drain them of humanity. Hedda is always looking for beauty, and the show itself seems to suggest that beauty exists only in the impossible romanticism of a Beach Boys song, and the kind of thing you acquire from Ikea, like the sofa they sit on all the time. And Hedda herself has all the characteristics of a psychopath. In the text she's always regretting her ca-

sual destructiveness; here she barely flinches and, bizarrely, I found her a more sympathetic character because of that, I could invest in somebody who was irredeemable more than I could if this was a period re-enactment.

I do find it a bit of a problem when we start wondering whether Hedda is relevant simply because of the fact that Ibsen died a hundred years ago: you have to make her relevant. And the strength of this production was that it took fantastic liberties with the text while remaining pretty faithful to the spirit of the original.

BS: One of the most important features of it is that there was no interval and it wasn't divided into acts, it was divided into scenes that ran inexorably on, as the set revolved around and around. Also, we saw the dead Hedda at the end covered in blood, which you wouldn't have seen in the nineteenth century. Is that something we need to see?

HM: I thought that worked incredibly well. I loved the fact that we could see her spinning around and that the other characters just say, oh look, she shot herself, and they continued working on the book. The real marriage was between Tesman the scholar and Mrs Elvsted , his new amanuensis, and the only child was the book they were reconstructing, the child they had given birth to. I know that this symbolism is quite heavily underscored, but it sat so perfectly with the sense of coldness, the glacial quality of the entire production. It was a real master stroke.

BS: Cold, glacial - and a Beach Boy's song. Patrick, what did you make of that, in terms of the sound that accompanied the revolve of the set - why the Beach Boys? I couldn't understand that.

PL: I think because, as Peter has mentioned, its part of that world, it's the Ikea kind of aesthetic that's being reached for, and there is, I think, an obviously ironic sense in which the lyric, "God only knows what I'd be without you" is used, which is a big part of Hedda in terms of the manuscript, obviously. In terms of the relationships the characters have, God only knows what I'd do without those things is something that each of the characters is saying. But I thought it added to the dreamlike sense between the scene changes very effectively, while also being true to the setting, and enacted in that ironic way.

PC: It's a very wry satire, I think, and that is bound up in the ending. Hedda says - in this production the line is translated as – 'everything I touch turns to something ludicrous and trivial'. It is her final comeuppance that her most defiant act, which is to kill herself and to shock those in attendance, goes unrecognised and she herself succumbs to the ludicrousness and the triviality.

PC: Did you think though, she does? Not to be too graphic about it, but she does actually blow her brains out all over the notes that they're using and the books,

so it's not quite that straightforward.

BS: She's making a statement in death.

PL: Absolutely.

FESTEN Gate Theatre

BS: *Festen* is the stage adaptation by David Eldridge of Thomas Vinterberg's 1998 cult film of the same name, which translates as 'a celebration' - but there's nothing more ironic than the title, given what the play reveals.

PC: *Festen* is the quintessential defining text of the Dogme '95 film movement, a ridiculously conceited film movement which asks directors to sign a vow of chastity, which is how they refer to it. It's pretty much a spent force at this point. But *Festen* has had an enduring afterlife as a piece of theatre and it's not difficult to see why, partly because of the strictures of the Dogme movement, which asks that their stories have a unity of time and space. They didn't over embellish anything, it was kept meaty and concise and it works very much like a revenge tragedy, it has all those unities. The Polish production [which came to the Abbey in 2004] for my money is the strongest adaptation because it accentuates the revenge tragedy nature of the show. That production really positioned the son, Christian - the very easily cowed but avenging figure - as a contemporary Hamlet, and played up his craziness, his ludic qualities.

David Eldridge's version is less satisfying for me because the English translation feels very leaden, it feels like a literal translation. Eldridge doesn't seem to be able to refrain from a more heavy handed symbolism, where you get the single child who book ends so many scenes with laughter and represents the innocence that seems always at stake and forever lost.

Selina Cartmell's production for the Gate felt less like adapting the text to suit a space and far more like adapting the space to suit the text. She was more interested in making the Gate itself, the theatre, conform to what she was staging. And *Festen*, which is all about this strange, entirely irrepressible ritual, the quaint tradition that seems to exist at the Danish birthday party, very easily mapped on to the Gate theatre, which itself has all these wonderfully quaint traditions, like the front of house manager who comes on in a bow tie and tuxedo to introduce the show and gives you every outward impression that it's he who runs the Gate and not Michael Colgan. Everything here seems to be at play with the Gate theatre, right down to the set design, and actors who spill out from the proscenium or move from the auditorium to the proscenium.

A lot of that I found quite interesting, but at the same time I felt the Gate theatre, while it has a long tradition of being predisposed to experimentation, was

Owen Roe in Festen



willing to experiment but could only go so far. I think Selina Cartmell was very brave in seeing how far you could push that particular theatre but I felt it very quickly found its limits.

BS: The limits to the use of the theatre, because of the architectural space.

PL: It's not just the architectural space that's limited, there's also the issue of the Gate's ethos. It is, I think, the most expensive theatre in Dublin and presents itself as offering a 'high quality product'. So, while *Festen* is a very interesting production and, in many ways, a very successful one, they need to attract the people who actually want to see plays like this. Perhaps it might have been better served if an effort had been made to attract a broader audience than the Gate's core audience, through pre- or post-show talks, by engaging in Outreach, and offering discounted tickets for students in advance.

BS: This was a company of actors that worked really well as an ensemble, I thought, with very disciplined performances.

HM: Absolutely, and the strength of this production was in the stage pictures that Selina Cartmell creates. It was extremely well composed: she and the design team created these painterly tableaux, wonderfully lit by Paul Keogan. But I thought that more attention was paid to the visual qualities than to the performances. Having seen the film and the Polish production that came to the Abbey, I felt that this *Festen* lacked passion, lacked real emotional engagement with the profoundly harrowing thing that is being unearthed, bit by bit. As you say Peter, it's a revenge tragedy, but also a family tragedy, with terrible pain and grief: a dead sister, abused children. Owen Roe was extraordinarily good, as always; there were a couple of really good performances, but I found the crucial figure of the son, Christian, to be disappointing. For me he didn't have that 'antic disposition' that he needed. He is such a pivotal character, we have to wonder about him a bit, can we trust him, is he making it up.

BS: Is he a Hamlet figure?

HM: I think he is, yes, and I didn't feel that here. Also, in the film we get a lot more of the sister's perspective, she seems to be crucial, and I thought that there was a lightness of touch about the way Cartmell directed her [Simone Kirby], which for me didn't sit with that character. So I was a little bit disappointed in that - as she's another absolutely key figure - and with the direction as a whole: the constant roller-blading of the little girl was irritating and very heavy-handed symbolically. Overall, it was not as good as it could have been, I think; it didn't have the intensity that I wanted from it.

PC: I think that's Eldridge's problem with the little girl, that's his instruction.

HM: Yes, but she could have been cut a bit; we didn't have to have her coming on

quite so much.

PC: The serenity of that stage picture that you're talking about is a complete creation of the stage. Going back to its origins, the Dogme film movement with this ridiculous hand-held camera is so puppyishly energetic, the camera bobs around with undirected energy.

HM: In the Polish production at the Abbey that giddiness of the camera was given a theatrical analogue; it was recreated by the constant swirling movement of bodies all around the stage, by the choreography of the ensemble. I found this staging to be too static and sedate - and nothing to do with the Gate's ethos or the Gate audience - it was the way it was directed.

PL: There is a difficulty though, isn't there, because this play does have a lot of relevance to contemporary Irish life, the way in which it shows a family who appear to have been aware that child abuse was taking place and refused to acknowledge it, and that's what the dramatic power of it is, it's a refusal to acknowledge something that's staring everyone in the face. That has universal relevance, but it's particularly pertinent in Ireland today. There is a risk with this play that if you were to push it any further it's just going to seem melodramatic, rather than something more meaningful. So I think it's a difficult balancing act.

PC: When Mark Lambert sings that bizarre little ditty about pilchards, he sings it almost as an Irish trad melody. In that one moment I began to crave to hear what someone like Marina Carr would do if she were to come to the material fresh and do a production that somehow managed to get Denmark and Ireland to meet more half-way.

BS: Let's call on her! I think it had extraordinary resonance, as you say Patrick, for contemporary Irish life and I do recommend it. I was a completely naïve spectator, I hadn't seen any of these other versions of it, and if you've read my review on *ITM* online you'd know that I loved it. [www.irishtheatremagazine.ie]

EMPERESS OF INDIA Abbey Theatre

BS: There have been complaints to the Abbey about this play (staged by Druid) particularly for its use of bad language. It is Stuart Carolan's second play, following *Defender of the Faith*, and I think it's got touches of the difficult second album syndrome, would you agree?

PL: Yes, it has been controversial, and it's a play that has really divided audiences. I've reviewed this play already [in the *Irish Times*] and I found I had a mixed response to it, where there were some things I liked, others I didn't. As a result I spent most of the last month fighting with everyone I know, because most people either loved it or hated it. There were leaving at the interval,

when I saw it, saying this is the worst thing Druid has done in the last ten years – others said this is the worst thing Druid has ever done. And then you had the *Irish Independent* review, which called it almost perfect. Charlie McBride in the *Galway Advertiser* said it was bringing the work of Druid full circle, and people have been weeping and embracing after performances...

BS: Father-son relationships recur endlessly in Irish theatre. In terms of that relationship here, is there anything redeemable in it?

HM: I wouldn't wish this relationship on anyone. This is even worse, even more painful, than the one in Stuart Carolan's first play, especially in the destructive nature of the way the father, played by Sean McGinley, speaks to his sons, particularly the youngest son. And then there's the amount of old pain and grief he's carrying - and the sons are now carrying because of their missing sister - so the sense of loss is passing from one generation to the next. They're in the position of almost having to take care of him, and yet we're not quite sure what exactly - other than the nine years of grief - is wrong with him. Is he ill or is he just old? There's so much pain; it is an extended study in grief and its effects.

PC: The way I understand it in terms of the father-son relationship is that our fathers are supposed to be our models for God and that when they let us down what chance does religion have. I think the most laudable thing about the *Empress of India* is that it tries to depict a world in which God does not exist and such things as the soul are extremely doubted. All those things that supposedly give our lives meaning, shape and structure have fallen by the wayside. The inevitable consequence of trying to depict those things within a play, it seems, is that all those things that give a play meaning, structure and shape have also collapsed. And so what you get is a very shapeless reiteration of a theme, that goes on and on. It's bizarre, I find, to hear that people are complaining about the bad language and the on-stage nudity in a play which somebody actually squats over the Virgin Mary and holds her at knife point – which is the kind of thing that would have attracted more reaction twenty years ago.

In a way that almost enforces Carolan's point that we are living in a world where a church can be converted into a theme bar and where sex occurs without love, and all those things that used to give us meaning have eroded. But what's Seamus's problem, is it that he's a man, is it that he's old, is it that he's ailing? To judge from what Carolan has written, he's an actor, and he has an extraordinarily bleak view - not only of religion - but he also seems to be questioning his belief in theatre. So Sean McGinley speaks the words: 'I am an actor, I pretend to think, people put words in my mouth' - which I find a very cynical view of theatre. With that foundation it becomes very difficult to build something with

Aaron Monaghan and Tadhg Murphy in Empress of India



meaning. This is encapsulated in the set design, in the mirror that hangs over everything, which seems to represent a scenographic shrug: what else can I do but reflect what happened?

PL: I think the mirror goes back to the points that Peter has been making about emptiness, and about people who are make-believe people, using make-believe words. All we get in this play are surfaces, where things refer only to themselves and the play is full of references that go nowhere. We've got practically a 'greatest hits' of Irish and American drama in there, there are references to *Baile-gangaire*, the *Steward of Christendom*, Martin McDonagh, lots and lots of Beckett. And you ask, what is the purpose of all these things, and I think the answer is, they just refer to themselves. I found that quite interesting, that was what was engaging me for two-thirds of the way into it. He is creating a universe where there is no certainty, where everything is surface, and when you move beneath the surface you've got a hollow centre. The play is giving a very interesting take on a world where things just seem empty.

HM: Yes, there was a lot of reiteration of that emptiness. But I don't agree with the idea that when you banish God you inevitably banish structure from a play - I just don't see that it follows. Why could we not have a well-written, well-structured play about the absence of God and the loss of faith? I don't know that the form mirroring the theme was as inevitable as we've been suggesting. I think the play is shapeless, the writing is, at times, repetitive and laboured, and needs more work and development. It feels as if scenes were in there that could easily have been taken out. Maybe it needed more work in progress; maybe Stuart Carolan needed more dramaturgy; maybe he needed to write a few more drafts of the script.

The subject matter is huge, but it could be written about in a more interesting way. I feel that it's derivative of, particularly, Tom Murphy, but it doesn't have the same mythic quality. You feel that it's straining towards that but hasn't earned it. So you have a sense of self-importance which is overpowering, but we don't have the writing to actually support it.

PL: I think it's a play in which there's too much going on, and a lot of the symbolism behind it is quite heavy handed. The lead character's name is Lamb, so there's obviously a Christian theme: we have Maria as the one female figure who speaks at length. And then the production adds to that symbolism, so you've got the statue of the Virgin Mary with its back turned to the audience. There are some very obvious moments, particularly during the sex scene, where you've got the Virgin Mary and the not-so-virgin Mary being juxtaposed. Also, the presentation of the sister was particularly tricky: the decision was made to

put her on stage although she delivers no lines, and I think this makes her into far too literal a figure. It might actually have been better to have omitted her.

BS: Well, it's certainly the most talked-about new play of this year, and I'm sure the debate will continue.

THE BONEFIRE Project Arts Centre

BS: *The Bonefire* by Rosemary Jenkins, produced by Rough Magic, is set on the eve of the 12th of July celebrations in Belfast. Essentially it's a black comedy. Who do you think it's for?

PL: As I watched this play I said to myself: so this is what it must be like to be English and watch Martin McDonagh in London. It's a very interesting play because she's giving us characters that she just doesn't like. There is no sympathetic character here, and it's interesting for a writer to write about people whom she clearly has contempt for. But there is a possible difficulty anyway in bringing such a play to Dublin, because I think it's fair to say that within the Republic you don't need to be too persuasive to get people to say negative things about Loyalism. It's not a constituency that is spoken off with much respect. So that is a tricky element of the play.

But she's taking a theme that we get in most Irish dramatic treatments of republicanism and militarism, which is that in plays, particularly by O'Casey, we always see that the reason why the Republican character, the man, is killing people and blowing things up is not because he believes in a cause but because of some sense of sexual dysfunction. This has been going on since the 1920s, and has recurred time and again. It was a feature of *Defender of the Faith* by Stuart Carolan as well: that the problem is always sexual and not to do with a cause. And in this play we get a very challenging statement whereby she suggests that somebody's decision to join a Loyalist paramilitary group is not based on his allegiance to one cause or another - he actually starts out as a Republican - it's because joining allows him to feel manly, to feel masculine. We get that even in the punning title, the *Bonefire*, as in, firing one's loins. This is a play about how men can strut and pride themselves on being men, often through acts of violence against women. And she gives us the woman character, who, unlike her predecessors in Irish drama, is not going to be a victim necessarily, although she is subjected to terrible violence; she is quite complicit in many of the things that happen to her. Jenkins is certainly moving the characters around in lots of interesting ways.

So it took a new perspective on stuff that we're already familiar with. There are lines in this play that are very familiar, especially from McDonagh, and I think that might be a problem, that we've heard a lot of it before. The ending

has problems as well, but I think she's an interesting writer and I'm looking forward to seeing what she does next.

BS: Did you laugh?

PL: I did, but I'd laughed at those jokes already in other plays. For example, the line about drugs: that drugs keep our youngsters in all-night raves when they should be out rioting on the Short Strand. In Martin McDonagh's play the line is where somebody is torturing a drug dealer: 'I'm torturing you because you're selling drugs to our youngsters when it's out pegging bottles at coppers they should be'. So the problem with a lot of the jokes is that they are taken from elsewhere, or, if not taken from elsewhere, then we have heard them before, so the observations aren't new.

BS: If you look at the set behind us, it's like the set of *Give My Head Peace*, the BBC sitcom set in Belfast, in a Protestant, Loyalist community.

PC: I don't think it's quite as insufferable as *Give My Head Peace*, which is dealing with Northern Ireland in a vicious way. It's an interesting comparison, but *Give My Head Peace* is so exaggerated and grotesque you can't invest in any of the characters. I thought that one of the tensions in the *Bonfire* was that it was presented to us, to begin with, in just a slightly distorted but reasonably naturalistic way. And so it invited us to see these as characters that were not just cartoons.

Jenkinson is a very witty playwright. This is a play that has gone through, I think, a two-year process. It felt as though she has reworked the text through innumerable drafts, and worked on every gag until it was diamond cut. It's a relentlessly epigrammatic text; it's billed as a comedy of manners, which is pretty much close to the mark. And the comedy of manners is a style that's never really prioritised plot or character. The problem with her writing is that I think the humour gets the better of her, and it becomes so accelerated and grotesque that what happens to the characters almost seems beyond her control. Eventually, when it takes a turn for the very nasty, we snap out of it. I think the production tries to facilitate us switching gears. But, unlike the Martin McDonagh plays where violence occurs without consequence, we have to see violence taking effect. But Jenkinson is unwilling to go there; there's always another gag.

BS: Wasn't it interesting that during the violence, the extreme violence, they came off the set and came down into the audience, and that was a very significant moment I thought, a troubling moment.

HM: Yes, they walked out of the sitcom set and then were standing in a row in front of us. It was a very awkward moment and that's where everything began to change. I realised this is very serious stuff, this is horrific. Then we go on to

Andrea Irvine in The Bonefire



the revelation of the gang rape and you realise that the Anne character [Andrea Irvine] was a victim, her brother raped her. It becomes grotesque, and the problem is: how do you marry that to the humorous style, the gags?

I found a lot of the lines very funny actually. I think she's a clever writer: there's a lot of parody - of TV-speak, jargon, all the clichés on Northern Ireland - all being sent up by Anne. But she continued doing that even as the violence was being enacted, so we're asking how does the style match the seriousness of the content? And that's partly down to the way the play is structured: maybe there's another way to incorporate those violent scenes, rather than placing them at the end and continuing with the jokes. Maybe that's something to think about in terms of the way it was constructed.

I also feel that the direction [by Lynne Parker] could have been more surreal. There was a derangement in the logic of a lot of the jokes; there was a sense that the characters' thinking was utterly distorted by years of exposure to extreme violence and the perversion of language around that. This was a very topsy-turvy world, but there they were in the sitting room. So maybe the style of physical presentation just wasn't appropriate or really serving the writer.

BS: Do you think this could play in Belfast?

PL: Possibly so, because just as Martin McDonagh's *Lieutenant of Inishmore* isn't really saying anything about the IRA itself, I think it would be a mistake to see this as any kind of sociological lesson about Loyalism. I think the gap between the reality and the fantasy or the grotesque isn't always as clear here as it might be. But I don't see that it could be a problem having this play in Belfast, because they're going to know that this is a fantasy.

The structural issues that Helen has alluded to could be more of a problem, because it's a play that works towards lots of revelations. It would have been more interesting to have started the play with the last scene and then worked back. I think that would have been more successful because then the audience would get the sense that all of these revelations were the pay-off for the jokes and the pay-off for the drama up to this point.

BS: It's certainly a play that's going to resonate for a while. I'm the only one on the panel from the North, and I did laugh, actually. I went with the humour because, as you've said, it was the quality of the craft of the writing and the finely tuned gags that held me. But once we got to the sexual violence: that was it, I was out of here.

AALST Project Arts Centre

BS: *Aalst* is based on a true story and it's reworked into what we describe as

'faction', fiction from fact. Peter, what about the form of this, it was roughly an hour, and had two people sitting at microphones.

PC: It's such a bleak and disturbing true story to adapt. I think the form was certainly one of the most interesting things about it. 'Faction' for me is more rewarding than docu-drama or verbatim theatre, which we see this year in *The Exonerated* or we saw last year in *Bloody Sunday*. My problem with docu-drama or verbatim theatre is that theatre is made to perform a function that society at large is no longer doing, which is to deliver truth. So in an age where you doubt the truth of the media or the truth of politics, an arena where you usually expect to encounter fiction fills that void. Docu-drama for me means that you become a witness rather than a person who can critically engage, and 'faction' nudges it back into an area where you can destabilise the truth.

So it blurs the actual events of the murder of two children by two parents in the small town of Alst, near Flanders. It presents it in such a harsh and ultra-realistic way that it's unclear whether or not it's a TV studio or a courtroom. Everything is mediated through microphones, there's a disembodied voice who prompts the murderers into their confessions and that seems to be extremely real. It was able to extend the facts of the story into this darker terrain.

BS: And they repeated the same story over and over again, they gave disturbing new details.

HM: They did. and then a voice-over was inter-cut, a third person commenting on them and their love for each other in a saccharine way, which I understand was taken from the TV documentary that was made about the murderers in Belgium. So we weren't ever sure what the source material was. The disembodied voice asking the questions was sometimes almost empathetic, and trying to say: well, could you help us, could you help me understand how on earth you could have done these things, and tell us more about your childhood – about the fact that the couple were so damaged by their own childhood experiences.

PC: I thought it was like the council for the defence.

HM: Except that it wasn't as formal or as strict as a council for defence would have to be, so it didn't seem to me to be coming from a legal perspective. It was almost psychotherapeutic at times, or somehow hovering between the two. So we were constantly asking: who is this, where are we, what's this based on? If this is not verbatim, what is it? Are they inventing things? And who are we in the audience, we're being drawn into their stories, we're thinking: my God, what a terrible childhood, of course they couldn't look after their children. Our sympathies are being drawn on. We're working very hard in the audience, we're asking: are we witnesses to something, are we complicit, are we voyeurs,

and I found that really interesting. They kept pushing us into the kind of questioning that was disturbing and unsettling, but made you very active as an audience member.

PC: But surely the final scene made you even more disturbed because we get to see them, when they reveal that they're playing characters.

HM: I really disliked that, as a twist. I felt it was very contrived and we didn't need it. They start to speak to each other and say something like, 'that was a good line; that will go down well, you'll get a few more years off'. It was reminding us in the audience that this is a performance and that they were speaking lines, but we already knew that, so it seemed rather clumsy and obvious. I would have preferred if we had just been left with all those questions.

BS: Do you feel as if you were a prurient tabloid reader, Patrick?

PL: Yeah, it definitely adopts that tone. As Peter has mentioned, verbatim theatre is very much in vogue at the moment and it does present to people the idea that what they're seeing is the truth and I think that's very tricky. If you put together a verbatim script you are necessarily going to omit some information and you place one piece of writing, or rather testimony, beside another for the sake of dramatic effect. We need to be very careful about seeing something such as *The Exonerated* as pure, unvarnished truth. There is an aesthetic there, there is an editorial mind at work on the whole thing.

Aalst is taking those issues on board and giving us the kinds of things that we're used to have to mediate them, such as the tabloid style of reporting, the legal system and so on. I thought it was very, very effective. The full title of the play is *Aalst: A True Story*, which of course it's not. It is not the murder case, it presents characters with different names and slightly different circumstances. And then, as Helen said, we learn at the end that everything we've just watched has been another performance. So there are layers upon layers of fiction here, and I think that our willingness to accept so many of those layers as the truth should alarm and unsettle us and make us question things. Also, it was brilliantly performed, one of the best pieces of acting in the festival by the two actors.

HM: Yes, stunning.

EVERDAY Samuel Beckett Theatre

BS: *Everyday* is written by Michael West in collaboration with the Corn Exchange company. Helen has reviewed this in the *Irish Times* and interestingly ends up with a note about its desire to present 'the everywhere' being an obstacle - well not an obstacle, but perhaps something that if they hadn't done and had been more particular about the contemporary Dublin experience, it would

Andrew Bennet and Derbhle Crotty in Everyday



have been a better play. But my question is: surely there's so much particularity going on that it creates an overall sense of the particular?

HM: Well, we certainly have particularity in the sense that we're presented with isolated, atomised figures in the city, but I felt we were in almost the archetypal city rather than Dublin. Now I know it's taking on the subject of changing contemporary Dublin - something that a lot of writers and theatre companies are grappling with - and trying to come to terms with it. It's all happening so fast, there's been so much change, and so much of it hasn't been digested or processed. It's a difficult thing to do and this is a very ambitious attempt.

There are lots of really admirable aspects to this production, but what I didn't find was the sense that this was actually the city that I live in. Maybe the use of the company's version of Commedia dell' Arte didn't help in this case, because Commedia - as far as I understand it, and my knowledge is really only based on what Corn Exchange has done with it - Commedia works with stock figures. And even though in this production the company has moved away a little from the formal way that they presented Commedia in the past, we're still left, particularly at the beginning, with the establishment of certain types - the harassed, put-upon mother and so on. I felt that they were too broad-brush, a little bit stereotyped, and that meant that something was lost. It was a little bit bland in the end, rather than a particular portrait of Dublin. But these things are very subjective.

BS: But if you're going to use Commedia, you are going to get those broad brushstrokes aren't you?

PC: Inevitably, if you're dealing with stock characters. I understand Helen's point but I found the play more disarming, I felt that as soon as I saw the Grand Dame sort of slapping on the makeup I couldn't not invest in her, I was enjoying the spectacle and then found myself surprised that I was drawn into the poignancy of her situation. The way Corn Exchange have developed the Commedia style has a theatrical grammar, where they adopt little bits of productions that they've done throughout their history. They've made it a very subtle form, they've taken film logic and added it in, and used mime to be able to construct space very quickly and be able to get into those little corners. There's a moment in *Everyday* where somebody peaked through a peep hole in a door and the way the performer Simon Rice has been able to simulate the affect, I found endlessly enjoyable. And so I found myself emotionally investing in characters almost unaware that I'd been lured in. I do agree it makes Dublin seem like every town or every city, but in a way that is Dublin now: Dublin is an archetypical city.

HM: I know that that was the point they were making, that we've lost our sense of place and that everybody, like these characters, is worried about and afraid of

change. But I think that we have to see what was so special that was being lost in the first place.

BS: But they all go through some sort of transformation.

HM: They do, but that seemed to me to be contrived – the lovers being reconciled at the end and so on - a little bit forced. In other words, I didn't get emotionally involved.

PC: I think the construction of those little journeys towards self realisation had such a light touch that I was able to buy into that. I felt that the lovers may reconcile tonight but tomorrow they may be back to the start.

HM: I can see that they had to find an end point. If something is using such a fluid form to look at disconnection and connection, how do you say this is over?

BS: But they were dealing with very, very important issues that many contemporary plays don't deal with, such as race, class, sexuality, all these subjects, they're all there in the text.

HM: Yes, it was very ambitious in that sense. And parts were very funny: I liked all the in-jokes ...

PC: Yes, there were a lot of inter-textual references to the company's previous work and the actors' previous incarnations as well.

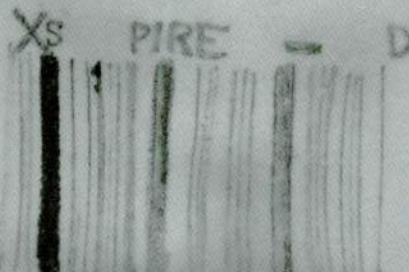
HM: I think maybe it was simply too long, that we had some doubling of characters that we could easily have lost. Also, talking about the grammar of Commedia, I thought the syntax was breaking down a bit here. Instead of that wonderful way that they used to play outwards – two characters would look at each other and then there would be a drumbeat and they'd look outwards, and their faces would express their inner emotions, horror or fear. The things that they were hiding would be thrown out to the audience. But once you introduce interior monologue into that, then we are being told what they think and so that whole discipline no longer has the same purpose. In *Everyday* we had interior monologue, third-person narration and a little bit of playing outwards with the masks. I felt it was a bit diffuse, the impact of the form was being diluted.

BS: It was beautiful to look at and listen to.

PC: Absolutely. I think the development in Corn Exchange's style is to abandon that percussive nature. Here they took Conor Linehan's music, which guided the whole thing through and gave the piece great grace and fluidity. Also, there was a very generous set design from Chris Stone, which allowed for the construction of space, and lighting by Jane Cox which again aided that sense of a city being built up around you and dissolving when it needed to.

BS: Well, if you haven't seen it, please go and see it: it's not often you get something like this in the theatre.

XSPIRED



X 1209 - 1709 06

Nights on the Fringe

Criss-crossing the city over two intense weeks, our insomniac reviewers sought out the best Irish productions **DUBLIN FRINGE FESTIVAL '06** had to offer.

Tom Donegan ventures into the shadows of urban Ireland

IN THESE APATHETIC TIMES it was heartening to see young Irish practitioners take on the contemporary world, in a series of works in this year's Fringe festival that sought a fresh perspective on the lives we lead.

Brokentalkers' *On This One Night* saw company impresarios Gary Keegan and Feidlim Cannon escort a small group of intrepid participants through the Dublin streets and into the mysterious bowels of a quayside office building. Evolving through a series of increasingly surreal encounters designed to estrange our everyday experiences and expectations, the piece makes a bold attempt to reimagine the city we have just navigated from inspiring and troubling angles.

The journey unfolds like a feverish dream haunted by warped spectres of the post-modern condition: a girl in a red cocktail dress and bandaged hands tells us how she became a celebrity stigmatic, prompting a religious rebirth that saw Dublin's churches filled once more. A jovial chap clad only in speedos and swimming armbands fondly remembers the day he stole a child from St Stephen's Green and took her to the cinema. A transsexual American jazz musician offers a largely positive view of life in Ireland, subsequently under-mined by a tragi-comic vignette portraying a young man committing suicide under the instruction of a self-help video.

Well-established tropes of anti-theatrical performance abound, with performers adopting a confessional

On This One Night

Brokentalkers

Revisions

Making Strange
Theatre Company

Xspired

Performance Lab

Danny and Chantelle (Still Here)

Gentle Giant
Productions

Dedalus Lounge

Pageant Wagon

style of address, appearing as live and on-screen entities, and launching into song and dance sequences at will. Left unstructured by linear narrative the meaning behind such activity becomes a matter of interpretation. But although it might have seemed disconnected and arbitrary, there was more than enough of substance in this inventive and strangely beautiful offering to reward open-minded consideration.

Attempting a similarly deconstructive approach, Making Strange's *Revisions* marked a bold change in direction for the company who last year took the Spiegeltent by storm with their award-winning production of *Hedwig And The Angry Inch*. Devised by the ensemble cast under the direction of Megan Riordan, the piece was symptomatic of both the positive and negative characteristics engendered by such creative processes.

Featuring a mixture of native and international actors, the text centred on the theme of multiculturalism in Ireland and the strained relations it produces; the company's desire to present the complexities of the issues at hand evidenced in the wide array of monologues, comic vignettes, songs, chalked messages and expressionistic choreography employed. With its tone and structure never properly defined, however, such activity only served to produce more ambiguity and confusion, and though there were moments of clarity, the overall impression was of a surfeit of ideas not properly filtered.

By contrast, Performance Lab's latest devised offering, *Xspired*, was nothing if not disciplined in its evocation of the underbelly of Celtic Tiger success. Told through a mixture of direct address, movement and scene enactments, the piece offered up the experiences of marginalised young people - including junkies, criminals, pole-dancers and a supermarket shelf-stacker - struggling to remain afloat in a whirlpool of capitalist excess and social decay.

Though there was nothing particularly original about the combination of fears and frustrations expressed, these characters were underwritten by an authenticity that kept them clear of cliché; the use of some well-crafted location filming also contributing to the piece's credibility as social document.

However, despite the best efforts of the young ensemble, the play as a whole suffered from the overuse of repetitive structuring motifs that required us to sit through the same action again and again as it was circulated around each actor in sequence. This made it almost impossible for the narrative to build any real dramatic momentum, the pointless death witnessed at the climactic finale failing to acquire any greater significance as a result.

Though the case it made for the challenges of growing up in Dublin in 2006 was effective, *Xspired* failed to transcend its inherent bleakness, with no real so-



DEDALUS LOUNGE

lutions being proffered to the problems raised. A missed opportunity, but a worthy effort all the same.

Embracing the zeitgeist rather than railing against it, Philip McMahon's impressive first play, *Danny and Chantelle (Still Here,)* is more celebratory in its scrutiny of the youth of today. Performed within the site-specific environs of The Pod nightclub, the piece spins the tale of two close friends "joined at the hip. Joined at the hoop" as they roam the city's familiar haunts in search of hedonism's holy grail.

Although not the most original production on offer – the concept and realisation owing a clear debt to Enda Walsh and Mark O'Rowe – McMahon's text fizzed with freshness and urgency that were instantly appealing. As the eponymous pair, he and Georgina McKevitt roamed the dance floor competing energetically for our attentions, wringing every last laugh from the sassy slang and in-*yer-face* mannerisms of their characters' "howya" argot. As the odyssey progressed, other acutely drawn nocturnal creatures began to appear, the young actors slipping between gay drug-dealers, coke-fuelled vamps, horny D4 girls and sexually confused Ballymun boys with hilarious effect.

While all this is very enjoyable, it was the unconventional dynamics of Danny and Chantelle's relationship that conveyed the piece's most significant observa-

tion. In a city full of transient encounters and drug-induced camaraderie, their fierce loyalty offered some grounds for optimism; for though the dawning of a new day at the conclusion finds them contemplating an uncertain future, there's no doubt that they're stronger for facing it together.

Replacing manic clubs with old-fashioned pubs, and bragging youth with thirty-something cynicism, Gary Duggan's new play *Delalus Lounge* covered similar territory but in an altogether more grown-up fashion.

Over the course of Christmas week, an already shaky friendship triangle is put to the test as old alliances buckle under the weight of past secrets and present circumstance. Jaded wide-boy Daragh (Stephen Kealy) is a stealing, dealing parasite, whose opinion that "these days everything is disposable - especially people" hangs over the entire piece. His mate Danny (Steve Gunn) is lost and confused, having recently been dumped by his girlfriend, his only plan for getting his life back on track involving establishing his own Freddy Mercury tribute act. Delphine (Aenne Barr) would seem to be doing okay, having recently secured a managerial position at a decent restaurant, but it soon becomes clear that she has serious problems of her own.

With emotional and sexual tensions running high from the outset, it was inevitable that things were going to get messy for this trio before they get better, relations spiralling in ever-decreasing circles of desire and desperation. Alternating between naturalism and audience-directed soliloquy, the sharp, brutal text painted a disturbing picture of the city beyond the local's walls. But while the pessimism underpinning tales of adulterous TDs, public-toilet blowjobs and S&M orgies is undeniably potent, the action also featured enough that was poetic and positive (including some hilarious renditions of Queen numbers) to offer some grounds for the possibility of things changing for the better.

As matters came to head on New Year's eve, Danny and Delphine found a renewed solace in each other's company, and though it was strongly implied in the closing image that Daragh may have jumped to his death, Duggan is far too able a playwright not to leave us with the faint hope that redemption - on both a personal and societal level - might still be achievable.

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Donald Mahoney hangs out on the absurd edges of the Fringe

FOR TWO WEEKS IN SEPTEMBER, the 'F' word was bandied about town, as if "Fringe" was a self-evident condition that sold itself. On the basis of this year's festival at least, a consensus on the meaning of 'Fringe' for Irish theatre compa-

nies seems difficult to arrive at.

An Evening with Prionsias O'Ferfaile had an acute sense of the absurd. Seeing it, as I did, the day after the organisers of the Fringe attempted to dye the Liffey pink, it was difficult not to reserve some consideration for a production willing to invest time and money solely into lampooning Irish Fringe forays. Co-writer Liam Hourican plays the title character, a self-important playwright on the margins of Irish theatre, looking to relaunch his stalled career by staging his life story. Curiously, he chooses the Dublin Fringe Festival as his launching pad, and even Prionsias's own considerable genius cannot rescue his masterwork from an inept cast and a meddling Fringe director, Miss B (Leonor Béthen-court). While the show is essentially an extended jab at the self-regard of the Dublin theatre world, it's a jab that loses its impact eventually.

Staged outdoors in Temple Bar on a Friday afternoon, *An Image of the Rose* seemed drunk on the potentials of Fringe theatre. One wonders how long it took Whiplash to imagine adapting Shakespeare's *Henry VI* as an epic car-park clash between a thirty-strong cast of surly English and French punks. Its hard rock score was performed live, providing the soundtrack to multiple battle scenes that borrowed from *Braveheart*, professional wrestling, and Nine Inch Nails music videos. The decision to stage a one-off, free, lunchtime performance in Meeting House Square was inspired, probably attracting a larger audience than any week-long run at Liberty Hall. Similarly the location was a clever selection, as the cast bore an overt resemblance to the black-clad teenagers who haunt the square noon and night. And though the original text had to be spliced to allow for the fight scenes, it was the smaller touches that made this such an enjoyable diversion, such the boy who would be king, Henry V, played by a child who rides into camp on a tricycle. The liberties Whiplash took with the script bolstered a glanced-over truth of theatre: no one loved a bloodbath more than Will Shakespeare.

If creative control were critical to the organisers of the Fringe, DoppelGäng would have been asked to take a year to hone the script, employ a technology consultant, and enlist a chorus before tackling *Oz: A Fairytale Plot*. Instead, the yellow brick road felt more like an endless highway. DoppelGäng have a sterling

**An Evening with
Prionsias O'Ferfaile**

Volta

**An Image
For the Rose**

Whiplash

**And They Used To
Star In Movies...**

Bewley's Café
Theatre

Oz: A Fairytale Plot

DoppelGäng

**The Happy
Suicides - The Last
Days of Tony
Hancock &
Kenneth Williams**

Third Dimension

**The Pitchfork
Disney**

Shiny Red Chocolate
Paper



AND THEY USED TO STAR IN MOVIES

reputation for camp theatre, and a re-imagining of *The Wizard of Oz* seems eminently doable. But from the moment Dorothy's house crashes to the ground, Oz feels lost. Heavily indebted to *The Wiz* and *Wicked*, the wild transitions between Dorothy's journey to the Emerald City and the muddled psychodrama between Glenda the Good and the Wicked Witch of the West are off-set by lip-synching and dance routines. The cross-dressing witches may have been true vamps, but glamour was not enough to salvage Oz. Moments of high camp proved the only respite from a mercilessly long musical simply not ready for the stage.

Mickey Mouse as an alcoholic ruining the career that passed him by in a Los Angeles lounge - it doesn't sound very dangerous, but thirty years ago, Campbell Black's *And They Used To Star In Movies* was Fringe epitomised. Yet, that fact alone doesn't justify Bewley's Café Theatre's decision to stage it. Today, Mickey Mouse is primarily identifiable as corporate iconography, and the sight of Mickey (Alan Howley), wearing mouse ears and Bahamas shorts as the lights rise, is a curious sight to say the least. The production nicely recreates 1940s' Hollywood, but even as Minnie, now a lounge singer divorced from her mouse, and a flamboyant Donald Duck, now a Broadway star, join Mickey to drown their sorrows, these cartoon characters still fail to assume the human dimensions that would make their desperation anyway meaningful. Despite its moodier touch-

es, *And They Used To Star In Movies* is just like any Walt Disney film - sentimental and nice to look at.

The Happy Suicides pledged tea and sandwiches with the price of admission, although they weren't on offer the evening this reviewer was in attendance. It proved to be proper preparation for a play that aimed to bring out the maligned OAP inside us all. Written by John Staunton, it portrays former funny men Tony Hancock and Kenneth Williams long after the laughter has stopped. Emphasis on the word former, for while Hancock, (Paul O'Flaherty) and Williams (an incorporeal presence here, voiced by Shane Larkin) glance back on their comedic prowess and the industry that shunned them, the only laughs in this forty-minute production are the bitter ones the characters reserve for their own demise.

Written fifteen years ago, *The Pitchfork Disney* has played nearly every Fringe festival there is by now, and it's starting to show signs of greying. Presley and Hadley's parents have been mysteriously absent for some time after a car accident and the twins survive on a diet of chocolate and barbiturates. As the two retell a story of an apocalyptic event, the play brings back memories of heroin chic and an end-of-Cold War paranoia that belong to the early 1990s. But the energy of Philip Ridley's script covers any accumulated rust. Credit is due to Shiny Red Chocolate Paper, who took a bold leap with this production.

Many companies seem to approach the Fringe as if obliged to reinvent theatre; their efforts regularly fail. But when the twins are eventually joined by Cosmo Disney, one half of the cockroach-eating, mass-murdering vaudevillian team of the title, this reviewer experienced a unique sensation at this year's Fringe: suspense - and its intense moments proved truly memorable.

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Ian Walsh mixes the lurid with the sensational.

THE CONTENT OF THESE PRODUCTIONS reads like a summary of day-time TV shows. There were women trying to be men, men trying to be women, men killing men who like men, women torturing men and men beating women, obsessed lonely men loving dead women, men cheating on women, wives who like bears ... What was wonderful about some of the productions was that they managed to marry the sensational with the cerebral, to create powerful, thought-provoking drama that could also wrench the heart. Others, however, never got beyond simplistic and clichéd analysis of their chosen subject.

One such piece was Tu Pie Are Theatre Company's self-indulgent *Heaven*

Scent, written by John Kieran and directed by Brendan Murray in Players Theatre. This play supposedly explores the 'eternal battle of the sexes' and featured Adam and Eve imprisoning each other in a box following the orders of a manipulative devil. The action is cut by news reports from the future in which we learn that men rule women for a time and then women rule men. Both sexes are unjustly served – when men rule they beat women and when women rule they act like bimbos who replace news reports on current affairs with Zodiac readings. The script aside, the performances were strong, particularly PJ Dunleavy who was beguiling as the Devil-Serpent.

The Rainstorm written by Noel Duffy and produced by Tyger Theatre Company similarly had some good acting in a bad production. Performed in the Ballymun Axis Arts Centre, this play tried unsuccessfully to fuse poetry with *film noir*. The plot consists of a lonely community officer Richard Salmon (Neil Fleming) conducting an inquiry into the mysterious death of a teenager Chloe Sutton (Emma Rogan). As the action progressed, (slowly), more was revealed about Chloe's death and more about her investigator's loneliness and obsession with her case. The play structure consists of a monologue by Salmon followed by an interview, and then the pattern is repeated. This becomes tedious quickly and is uninteresting visually. This is something the director, Jessica Curtin was I think all too aware of: there was constant rearranging of four armchairs on stage to seat the actors in new positions. This was distracting, as were the images projected behind Salmon as he gave his monologues to the audience. Duffy's strength is his poetic language and yet by projecting images of roads, fields and flowers in the background Curtin was robbing this language of all its power. Showing video footage of Chloe on the night of her death was also a big mistake – if we had not seen her, the theme of absence in the play would have been better stated.

The theme of loss and absence was dealt with beautifully and skillfully in *The Drowning Room* by Verity-Alicea Mavenawitz and produced by Three Wise Women. This piece, directed by Nuala Kelly and presented in Andrew's Lane Studio, concerns a group of friends who meet to finally mourn the death of their friend, Sean Roche, who was killed for wearing 'poncy fuck'n boots'. They

Heaven Scent

Tue Pie Are

The Rainstorm

Tyger Theatre

The Drowning Room

Three Wise Women

Why Men Cheat

MorWax Productions

The Evils of**Tobacco & The Bear**

Mangiare

The Grandmother

Monkeyshine Theatre

Dr Dillon**and Georgia**

Hungry Ghost Theatre



N AND GEORGIA

meet early in the morning to scatter his ashes now that the trial of his assailants is over, but before sunrise the father of one of the assailants arrives looking for their forgiveness. This was powerfully written and even more powerfully acted. The whole cast gave such strong and convincing performances that the audience left with red eyes and sore hearts. Shane Gately, Peter Byrne and Patrick McGrann gave particularly committed, emotive performances and Declan Gillick was wonderfully enjoyable as a bitchy queen. The staging here was static – actors sitting in a semi circle – but too much movement would have taken from the quick and magnificently vituperative dialogue. What was remarkable about this piece was that it not only demonstrated the painful loss experienced by the victims of urban violence but it also managed to explore how society creates people who do such monstrous acts.

A lot less probing but a highly entertaining look at society's (specifically men's), ills was Morwax Productions' *Why Men Cheat* in Andrews Lane Studio. With its all-male cast this show, written by Peadar De Burca (who also stars), was full of stories of lovable rogues who cheat. We hear of the college professor who likes to grind his students, of the man seduced by a significantly older woman and the hilarious tale of a frustrated narcoleptic that wants to but can't cheat with his au pair. This was physical comic theatre with few props and no

set, just five funny guys (Dominique Monot, Brian O'Gibne, John Leyne, John Tuoy, Peadar de Burca) acting out grotesque and crude stories of infidelity.

Ivan Ivanovitch (Rory Nolan) in Chekhov's *The Evils of Tobacco* (Filmbase) produced by Mangiare Theatre does not cheat on his wife but does complain about her to much comic effect. Ivan's monologue functions as a prologue to another short Chekhov play, *The Bear* in this double-bill, which was punctuated cleverly by director Darragh McKeon with a meta-theatrical parody of am-dram cock-ups. This device worked well and provided most of the entertainment, as the presentation of *The Bear* (another 'battle of the sexes' piece) was a rather dreary affair.

In *The Grandmother* created by Kereen Pennefather and Colm O'Grady of Monkey shine Theatre we meet an old misanthropic widow with a 'heart of stone'. When her grandchild comes to visit, she tries to resist his love for her and his insatiable enthusiasm for life but eventually he manages to melt even her cold heart. This was a fantastically playful piece of theatre aimed at children, in which Pennefather and O'Grady imaginatively use props such as a papier mâché lighthouse, a white sheet and a vanity case to magically illustrate their simple story. Sadly, there were no children at the performance I attended. The lunchtime scheduling of this piece during school term time was a bad decision but hopefully *The Grandmother* will return at a later date.

The performance that most melted my own heart was that of Hungry Ghosts Theatre's *Dr.Dillon and Georgia* (in the T36 venue). This one-man show, written and performed by Phil Kingston, linked the different but equally pained stories of Dr. Michael Dillon, an Irish woman who changed sex in the first half of the twentieth century, and a working-class lad from Manchester who wants to be a lass called Georgia. Both are linked not only in wishing to change their sex but by a vision and dancing. Here dance became a metaphor for the fluidity of identity. Georgia works as an Ian Curtis impersonator and does his signature dance as a way of losing himself and opening a space in which he can imagine himself as something new, something other.

In the climax of the piece, Kingston dances trancelike, first as Ian Curtis and then finally as Georgia and he was stunning. With a bare stage and the presence of one man who seems, shaman-like, to be possessed by troubled souls, the power of theatre as a medium was revealed. In all its primal and ritualistic glory, this production screamed against the banality of daytime TV.

Ian Walsh is a Doctoral Scholar in the School of English and Drama, UCD, researching a PhD on Irish theatre of the 1940s and early 1950s.

Susan Conley assesses which of the shows left lingering impressions IN THE MIDDLE OF THE ALL THE MADNESS, it's part of the critic's job to turn over brainwaves and *bon mots* at a rate of knots, thinking fast and moving on. The ephemerality of theatre in general and the Fringe in particular - given the short running times and the sheer volume of work - must be pinned down like a sometimes gaudy, sometimes tattered butterfly, lovingly mounted or skewered, and then forgotten.

Revisiting them two months later, though, is perhaps a better barometer of what impressions remain, long after the Speigeltent has folded up its flaps. It's instructive: regarding the shows, a lingering image or feeling that resonates over time is sweet; regarding a critic's own hieroglyphics, they can be as foreign as those etched on an Egyptian pyramid, should the work in question fail to have made a mark.

Has the passage of time been forgiving? Or has it only reopened wounds well healed?

Antigone Interactive doesn't benefit from a look back over the shoulder. Lightswitch premiered their particular brand of vision in 2004; here, in conjunction with Artichoke Productions, they bring Antigone into their camp, and camp it up they do... well, sort of. While the audience is asked to add a pantomime air to the proceedings ('Is Antigone irredeemably guilty of flouting human authority in favour of the authority of the gods? Oh, no, she isn't!'), and the majority of the cast give arch performances with a familiar set of goofy sound cues accompanying the live action, many of the cast—okay, two: Ben Mulhern and Elin Smaradottir—can't overcome their solid performing abilities. This basic inconsistency makes Sabrina Phelan Bakar's turn as a begrimed, Che Guevara-style, beret-sporting Antigone all the more irritating. Lightswitch have a penchant for encouraging their leading ladies to mug like a female impersonator doing Joan Crawford. Maybe it's funny if you're in on the joke.

The Unfortunate Machine-Gunning of Anwar Sadat floats into consciousness in a tenuous way. The memory of a strong cast and David Horan's usual nimble direction battles with scribbles such as "anachronistic dialogue: mano a mano. Huh? 1916? U2 Song?" A general

**Antigone
Interactive**
Lightswitch

**The Unfortunate
Machine-Gunning
of Anwar Sadat**
CoalFace Theatre
Company

Noise
Painted Filly Theatre

Black Snow
Lost Trolley
Productions

**Underneath the
Lintel**
Landmark
Productions

sort of struggle for power is seen along an Irish continuum, in which the blood-lust, regular lust and general silliness spur the characters on in two different time frames, those of roughly 1916, and roughly present day. Conall Quinn's text aims for maniacal absurdity, and while mania and absurdity take turns, it might have been more interesting if both had fused as one. With the remembrance of the energetic Stephen Swift's star turn, *Anwar* drifts back into the mists.

Equally bemusing (and bemused) are my scrawls on the programme for Painted Filly Theatre's production of *Noise*. Set in a Boston bar, Nick Johnson's script makes sure we all know we're in the presence of jazzmen by liberal use of the word "man"; we also feel we are in the presence of a fledgling writer, as the exposition of the tale—of the death of a man whose entire life seems to have been coloured by unwilling regret for walking out on his girlfriend—is poorly split over an interval. Had dramaturgy ensued, one imagines it could easily have been crafted into a long one-act. Devon Jackson as Eddie floats to the top of the cerebral cortex as a believable and natural actor; otherwise, with a forlorn bleat from a saxophone, *Noise* also recedes.

On the dramaturgical intervention theme, *Black Snow* could surely have benefited from being confronted by concerned significant others. Taking on an enormous project: an adaptation of Mikhail Bulgakov's novel about the developmental arc of a writer, the play's adaptor, Deborah Staunton, was perhaps too enamoured of the piece to make it shine fully. Performed in the cavernous SS Michael & John, with a running time of almost three hours, the challenge of abysmal acoustics (for which a cast member charmingly apologised pre-curtain) and backless benches was a terrible one. It's a pity, since the cast exploded into life in the second act, in which Bulgakov thoroughly takes the piss out of Stanislavsky, allowing for blisteringly funny performances from the cast, particularly Simon Ashe-Browne as the Maestro. Here, the esteem with which the producers appear to be holding the work gets some breathing room, resulting in pure hilarity. Given the size of the work they undertook to bring to the stage, it's impossible not to have respect for their project; however, the scissors need to be longer next time—and sharper.

And coming in to the sharpest focus of all, as if it were yesterday, is Landmark Productions presentation of Glen Berger's *Underneath the Lintel*. Winningly transformed into a dusty and under-utilised auditorium by Paul O'Mahony,



UNDERNEATH THE LINTEL

Project Cube was, if not unrecognisable, made utterly perfect for the needs of the play, a heartbreakingly scavenger hunt of a text that involves us immediately and deeply into the strange and poignant life of The Librarian. Superbly played by Philip O'Sullivan, his monologue/lecture leads us deep into the minutiae of a proscribed life that has suddenly found itself entirely exploded, as a book overdue by decades leads our hero around the world on a wild goose chase... or is it? At a very specific stage, Berger forces us to question the Librarian's sanity, and never has this reviewer experienced such a crisis of fictional conscience. The relief with which we are again led back to sympathy is the sign of a bright and facile writer, one as able with human nature as he is with words.

Following the performance, in the middle of one of those street corner verbal torrents that take the place of conversation at festival time, I expressed the realisation that as much as I loathe the monologue form, I had no such antipathy towards *Underneath the Lintel*, and went on to justify my change of heart via the fact that this character had a story that no one else could possibly tell. Berger's play, O'Sullivan's performance and the production as a whole are still fresh in my mind because it encouraged me—forced me—to rethink and re-view a theatrical form, and thus it is made memorable. It made me change my mind. And my mind is happy to keep it close to the surface, because it was truly unforgettable.



Our flexible friends

Do you have to form a company if you want to make theatre? What about pooling resources with other practitioners, sharing administrative burdens and allowing precious time for research and development? It's already happening elsewhere: at a recent discussion about alternative models of production, international practitioners pointed the way forward. **RACHEL ANDREWS** reports.

THEATRE FORUM IRELAND DESCRIBES ITS GOAL AS "making a strong and practical contribution to the environment in which the performing arts are created, managed and enjoyed in Ireland". Its willingness to enter into the political fray under the leadership of Chief Executive Tania Banotti has seen the Forum's public profile rise considerably over the past few years. However, its more understated activities such as hosting seminars are arguably of more importance to the theatre community. A discussion in Septem-



DVB: *The Cost of Living*

ber entitled "Different Models of Production" took place in a packed room at the Irish Architectural Archive on Merrion Square, with many among the audience travelling from outside Dublin to be there.

The seminar was prompted by an informal discussion at Theatre Forum's annual conference last June, where it became apparent that there were frustrations among practitioners that the only production model adhered to in Ireland encourages theatre artists to operate within the structure of a company, in order to secure Arts Council funding and recognition. Some felt this locked them into a cycle of making work, leaving no time or space for research and reflection; others held the view that the market for funding companies has become saturated, forcing new and existing companies to prove themselves for as long as five years before even making it onto the funding ladder.

"The idea is to see if the current production model is the only way to work things," said Willie White, Artistic Director of Project, who opened the seminar. "We would like to see if it can work better for everyone."

At the table with him were Kristof Blom, who oversees international relations for Victoria, an "adventurous and polyvalent production platform for the performing arts" based in Ghent, in East Flanders (which made its second visit to the Dublin Theatre Festival in October with *Aalst*); Judith Knight, director and

founder of Artsadmin, a management and developmental resource for contemporary artists with studios in East London; and Ilse Vandesande, who works with wpZimmer, another Flemish outfit, based in Antwerp, which describes itself as a “workplace for young artists”.

The international speakers outlined a series of production models, none of which revolves around a company structure. Each pre-empted their talk with the caveat that it is “not easy to describe what we do” but, in the end, there were some recurring themes.

Victoria operates as everything from production house to research space to performance venue, and one of its main objectives is to shape, guide and support young artists.

“We work in a multi-disciplinary way on making everything possible, from the small to the gigantic, from working with young artists to very experienced artists,” said Kristof Blom. He said that Victoria operates as everything from production house to research space to performance venue, and that one of its main objectives is to “shape, guide and support” young artists on the road to artistic maturity and independence. “The most important thing is that we are not a company. We don’t work with a fixed group of artists”, he said.

Speaking about Artsadmin, Judith Knight explained: “We began because we were seeing all this work that was very good, but it would finish its life and have no follow-up. So we thought we would try to start working with a few of those companies and see what happened.” She has developed Artsadmin into a three-pronged organisation, which dispenses money and business advice, produces projects with a semi-permanent group of fourteen companies - among them physical theatre group DV8 (pictured on previous page) – and, from next March when a major refurbishment of its building is complete, it will operate as a centre for the development of new work.

“Until the 1990s, the only way to produce work was to be a company. Then, halfway through the ‘90s, there was an overkill of new applicants, and the idea of a company was redefined. There was an openness about joining together”, said Ilse Vandesande from wpZimmer. (WP means ‘workplace’, Zimmer ‘room’.) The organisation sees itself as an inviting workplace that tries to help new and young artists in every way, from providing facilities to assisting with networking.

There were differences between the models: Victoria never applies for grants on behalf of artists, while Artsadmin regularly makes funding applications for an artistic project. Victoria works under the management of one artistic director,

who is responsible for choosing artists and projects, whereas wpZimmer, which runs as a co-directorship, is neither a "committee nor a fund. We're just a group of people. We do not have a profile that artists have to match."

Nonetheless, each organisation has a similar philosophy, which involves removing a range of burdens from artists' shoulders, and thus maximising their artistic output. To an audience composed mainly of theatre practitioners schooled in the idea that they must be skilled administrators, diplomatic networkers, aggressive promoters as well as creative individuals, it sounded like tantalising stuff. "It's not rocket science. I don't know why other people are not doing it," said Knight.

In Ireland other people are not doing it for historical and structural reasons. Although Project Arts Centre grew out of a co-operative engagement between artists in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the idea that Irish theatre companies - many of whom have only emerged in the past decade - would seek to join forces is still very new. Nor is an environment in which multi-annual funding does not yet exist conducive to the needs of freelance producers who must weigh up the substantial, long-term commitment that the development of an Irish version of Artsadmin would require.

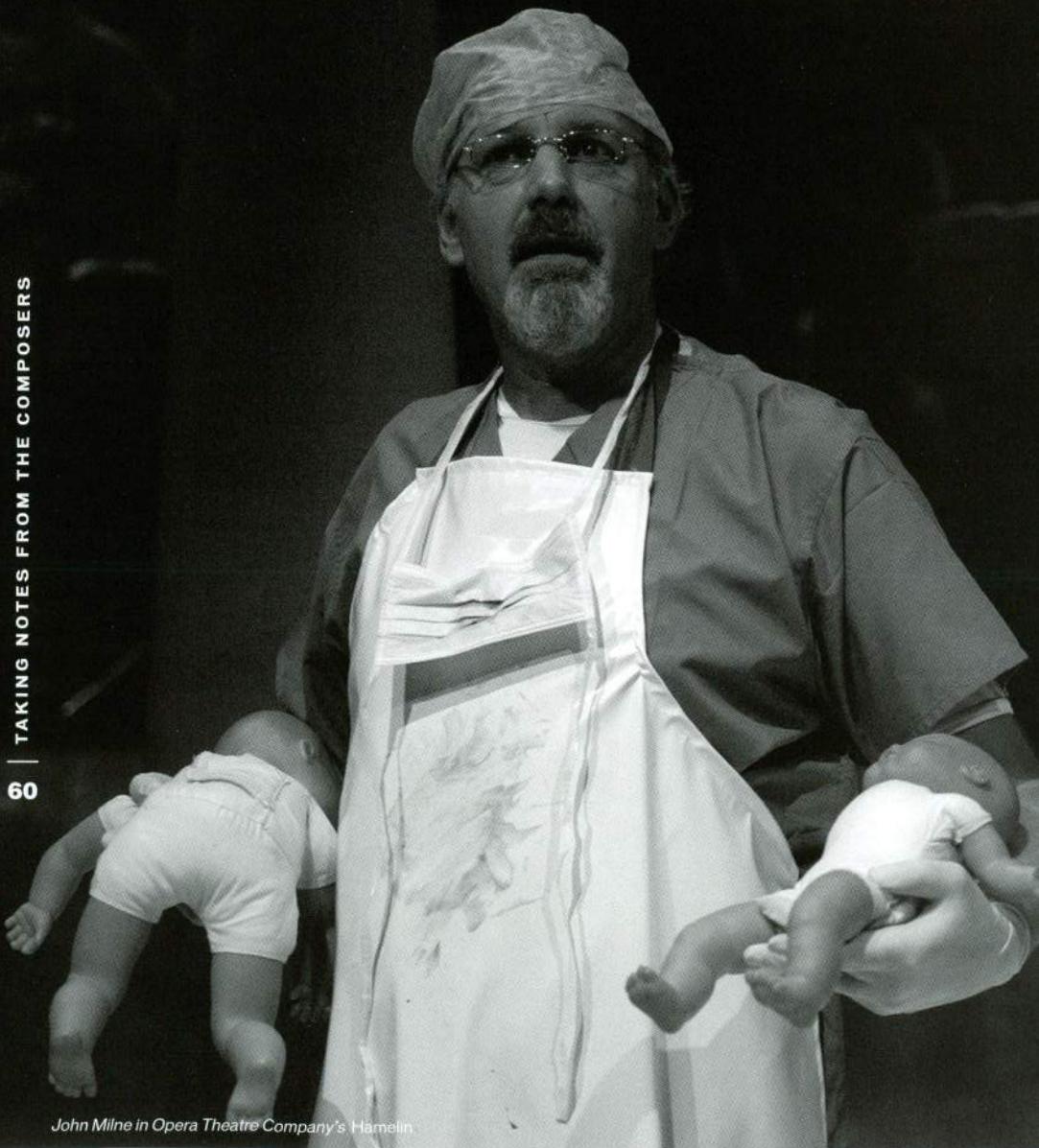
Nonetheless, there has been a shift in thinking among theatre artists here: directors David Parnell and Liam Halligan recently established the Association of Theatre Directors of Ireland, which may, in time, be able to organise such things as shared production services for theatre directors. (See What's News, Page 4).

Meanwhile, under the direction of Willie White, Project Arts Centre has begun operating – and intends to expand - as a kind of miniature hub, acting as *de facto* producer for young or less established artists, taking the administrative burden off their hands to allow them to concentrate on making work. And the Arts Council's announcement of its Once Off Projects Award in September indicates an acknowledgement of the need for more flexible funding structures.

Theatre Forum received significant positive feedback from this seminar, which succeeded in sowing the seeds of change in participants' minds. The challenge, as always, is to convert that thought into positive action. "It was a case of it being a great conversation," said the Abbey's programmer of talks, Dominic Campbell, who is also a freelance producer. "Now who's going to do it?"

Rachel Andrews is a journalist and critic.

Further information about these organisations can be found on www.artsadmin.co.uk,
www.wpzimmer.be, www.victoria.be



John Milne in Opera Theatre Company's Hamelin.

TAKING NOTES FROM THE COMPOSERS

Some of the most talented theatre directors in Ireland have taken the plunge into opera in recent years, at home and abroad. They talk to **SARA KEATING** about what they're bringing to the art form – and what they have learned.

THE COMBINATION OF (USUALLY) DEAD composers, historical settings and classical music has contributed to opera's reputation as museum-piece musical entertainment, something for the Mozart or Verdi enthusiast rather than the current theatre-goer.

However, opera companies operating in the contemporary cultural climate - Wexford Festival Opera, Opera Theatre Company, or Opera Ireland, for example - have their share of challenges that are directly linked to our times; like theatre companies, they face issues of funding and audience development, the latter being of particular importance in light of opera's (un)popular or "elitist" image.

One way in which opera companies are attempting to invigorate both the art form and its reputation is by turning back to opera's theatrical roots – and turning to theatre directors as creative collaborators in opera productions.

The highlight of this autumn's Wexford Festival Opera, for example, was a production of Conrad Susa's *Transformations* directed by Michael Barker Caven, while Conall Morrison's new production for English National Opera of Verdi's *La Traviata*, set in 19th-century Dublin, has recently finished a thirteen-performance

run in repertory at The Coliseum in London. Rough Magic's Lynne Parker, meanwhile, has just finished directing André Previn's opera version of *A Streetcar Named Desire* for Opera Ireland's Winter Season, and Pan Pan Theatre's Gavin Quinn and Karl Wallace of the Belltable Arts Centre in Limerick have been involved in several opera productions in Ireland over the past few years.

Where more traditional productions of classical opera tend to privilege the music above all else, theatre directors tend to approach opera primarily with the narrative in mind.

There are certain practical issues for theatre directors approaching opera which immediately need to be addressed; from the different possibilities of performance for classically-trained singers, to the technical

details in staging that their voices demand. There are also more abstract concerns for the theatre director: most importantly, negotiating the relationship between the music and the drama, the singer and the staging, not to mention finding the balance between the classical repertoire and its contemporary resonances. However, these are issues that have been raised throughout opera's history, and they continue to inform contemporary opera composition.

Where more traditional productions of classical opera tend to privilege the music above all else, theatre directors tend to approach opera primarily with the narrative in mind. However, for the ex-opera singer, Karl Wallace, the experienced cross-over director Gavin Quinn, and Lynne Parker, who was in the thick of rehearsals for her first full-scale opera project at the time of interview, it is the music that is opera's real story. Despite their different experiences and different expertise with that music, the three theatre directors all agree that it is their responsibility to use the theatrical elements that they are more familiar with – the performing body, the stage design and the spectacle – to draw the story of that music out.

GAVIN QUINN: ARTISTIC DIRECTOR, PAN PAN THEATRE



PEOPLE SEE OPERA AS MORE TRADITIONAL than theatre, but opera is the most contemporary of the performing arts. It is more modern than theatre because it is a combination of music, dance, acting and text, whereas theatre is more limited in its language. Opera is the 'total theatre' model.

The creation of a theatre production is quite subjective and difficult to pinpoint; you tend to trawl through the first couple of weeks of rehearsal trying to find the production, and the actors work with scripts in their hands for the first couple of weeks. But with opera there are separate music rehearsals, and the



Natalie Raybould in *Hamelin*, directed by Gavin Quinn

singers come to the first day of rehearsal having learned off the score, so you get to find the production quite early. After those initial music rehearsals, the director is given most of the time, and because the performers are off-book you can start staging and interpreting immediately.

Because of the skill and discipline involved in the training, opera singers have very recognisable skills. They tend to connect to the audience in a very third-party, traditional way, and, often, you'll find the opera singer has a habit of gesture; they do their bit in a particular way and they don't really want to change that. The director's job is to try to find the personality of the performer within the opera singer, to get them to invest their own personality into the character.

Especially with classical opera, you have this issue of people feeling that they know the role – they have played the role five times and this is the way they want to do it. The audience has an expectation and a certain reverence too, so although the music is the most important thing, a contemporary production is really all about the staging. You can always do a concert performance of opera, but the director's job is to stage it, to find significance for the repertoire, even if it is just aesthetic.

There are also technical things that are important for a theatre director to consider, like sometimes the singer needs to be facing the conductor. If a theatre director tries to position the singers with their back to the audience, for example, or move them in a three-dimensional way, that might not work, because the singers have to get their cues from the conductor. The singers also need a certain amount of support for the voice, and you can sometimes get [inexperienced] people designing sets that don't have any hard materials, or they might use soft masking, which just absorbs all the sound. You need to have hard surfaces so that the singer's voices bounce off them, so their voice carries. I've heard horror stories too about theatre directors trying to direct the libretto separately to the music which is ridiculous, because you can't disconnect the singer from the music - the music is what gives them life. Ultimately you need to balance the production with what the music needs.

Gavin Quinn has directed operas for English Touring Opera and Opera Theatre Company, including Hamelin (pictured) and will direct Mozart's Così fan tutte for Opera Ireland's Spring Season, 2007.

LYNNE PARKER: ARTISTIC DIRECTOR, ROUGH MAGIC



THE MAIN DIFFERENCE BETWEEN DIRECTING OPERA and directing theatre is that opera happens in a much more compressed period of time. But essentially the process is still the same; you are telling a story through the behaviour of people in a theatrical mode. My approach is the same as it would be in the theatre, but my method is different. Whereas in the theatre a text is absolutely the root of what I would do, in opera the discipline is applied by the music; the whole phrasing, the emphasis, the dramatic mood, everything is dictated by the music. There is less room to manoeuvre in a way, but you find that once you go with the music, you actually have just as much room to experiment - and you have to be equally inventive.

I have worked with music throughout my career [most recently with Arthur Riordan and Bell Helicopter in *Improbable Frequency*], but I don't have the technical vocabulary of opera and that is something that I would like to learn. Directing opera is profoundly different from directing a musical. With a piece of musical theatre you are making the music respond to the dramatic idea or the text, but with opera it is the other way round - the music drives the engine of the piece, and so, rather than being able to imagine what kind of mood I might want a moment to be, the music has already done that, and that's what I have to work towards achieving. Although it has been useful to have an original text to fill us in on the motivation behind cer-

tain events in the play, it is really all about the music.

Given the piece that is *A Streetcar Named Desire*, André Previn's opera is so close to the original play that the libretto does require a degree of analysis and character work that another style of opera might not. But although I was familiar with the original play, I knew that what I was dealing with was a new thing and that I could not rely on knowing the play to feed the directing process; it had to become a new enterprise. The music pulls towards a more Greek version of the original play; there's a more elemental feel to it, as if the characters are being driven by Fate towards catastrophe.

When the singers come to the first rehearsals they already know the score, but there is still plenty to investigate in terms of character. Beginning with character is exactly what I would do with a theatre piece, but with opera you are doing it in a shorter space of time, and you have to make decisions faster. While that may mean that you are painting things in broader strokes than you might do in a theatre piece, I don't feel compromised by it; because the singers already know the piece so well, they can create a layer of density to the characters in the short rehearsal period, and that's to their credit, but of course we could always do with more time.

KARL WALLACE: ARTISTIC DIRECTOR, BELLTABLE ARTS CENTRE

I actually trained in opera, as a singer, and I worked with the English National Opera chorus for six years. I eventually stopped singing, but I have always wanted to go back to opera in some way, and I was never sure which way I would do it. However, I have always been drawn to making theatre with music in it, and over the past eight years I have worked



Orla Boylan, Colette Delahunt and Sam McElroy in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, staged by Opera Ireland

with new composers or original scores for nearly all the shows that I have done [with Kabosh].

I jumped at the chance to direct *Albert Herring* by Britten for Castleward Opera in 2004. Because of my background in the theatre, I was covering some work with the opera singers that they had not experienced before with traditional directors. Their

previous experience had focused on music and singing as the key elements to the performance, which of course they are in opera. Some of the singers just wanted to know where to stand and weren't concerned

Sometimes too the singers seemed to know the music almost too well; they were singing but they weren't necessarily listening, and getting them to listen to the librettos became a key to them finding quite a lot of information out about the characters.

with how they got to a particular place on the stage, but of course when you are acting, how you move and find yourself in a particular scenario on the stage is quite important, and that was one of the major differences in directing opera. Sometimes too the singers seemed to know the music almost too well; they were singing but they weren't necessarily listening, and getting them to listen to the librettos, to what they were singing, became a key to them finding quite a lot of information out about the characters in the piece and how their characters express themselves.

One of the difficulties I found directing opera is that you don't get to see the piece in full until much later down the line, where in theatre you can run the piece over and over again. In opera you rely on the orchestra and the context of the full score for so much of the sense of the production, but you can't have the orchestra there every day of the week. I also directed *Bohemian Girl* by Balfe at Castleward, and there were some other difficulties with the conception of the production. In Castleward they perform in a really small converted barn, but *Bohemian Girl* is a huge, complex, epic piece of work, and to put it on a stage that's 20-ft by 10-ft is incredibly difficult, especially because the nature of the space at Castleward meant that we were very limited in the amount of orchestra we could have.

But all of these limitations weren't important in my experience of directing opera, because what's so powerful about opera is that the narrative and the melodrama and the spectacle of it can all be conveyed through the music. Music has the power to be incredibly evocative and effective without actually saying anything. It has that power to make people emotionally engage, and sometimes words can't do that. But you do need to bring certain skills in order make it relevant and theatre directors can bring a clear understanding of narrative to that process, because telling a story is really what opera is about.



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 **TOTALLY DUBLIN**

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Taking the temperature

ITM's team of critics assesses the past three months' productions around the country. Some of these reviews were first published on our website: www.irishtheatremagazine.ie



*Maeve Fitzgerald, Patrick O'Donnell, Michael Sheehan,
Charlie Bonner and Christina Hughes in Galloglass Theatre
Company's Way To Heaven*

Getting Real

A group of international plays recently produced here pose some big questions about truth and its representation - from clerical abuse to the Holocaust, to what it means to be Irish. Our reviewers go in search of answers.

PYRENEES

by David Greig

Hatch Theatre Company

Directed by Anabelle Comyn

With Karen Ardiff, Mark Lambert,

Ronan Leahy, Ger Ryan

Project Arts Centre, Dublin

23 August – 9 September 2006

Reviewed 9 September

OUTLYING ISLANDS

by David Greig

Island Theatre Company

Directed by Karl Wallace

With Sam Corry, Ailsa Courtney,

Gerard Murphy, Colin O'Donoghue

Belltable Arts Centre, Limerick

12 - 23 September

Reviewed 14 September

BY PATRICK LONERGAN

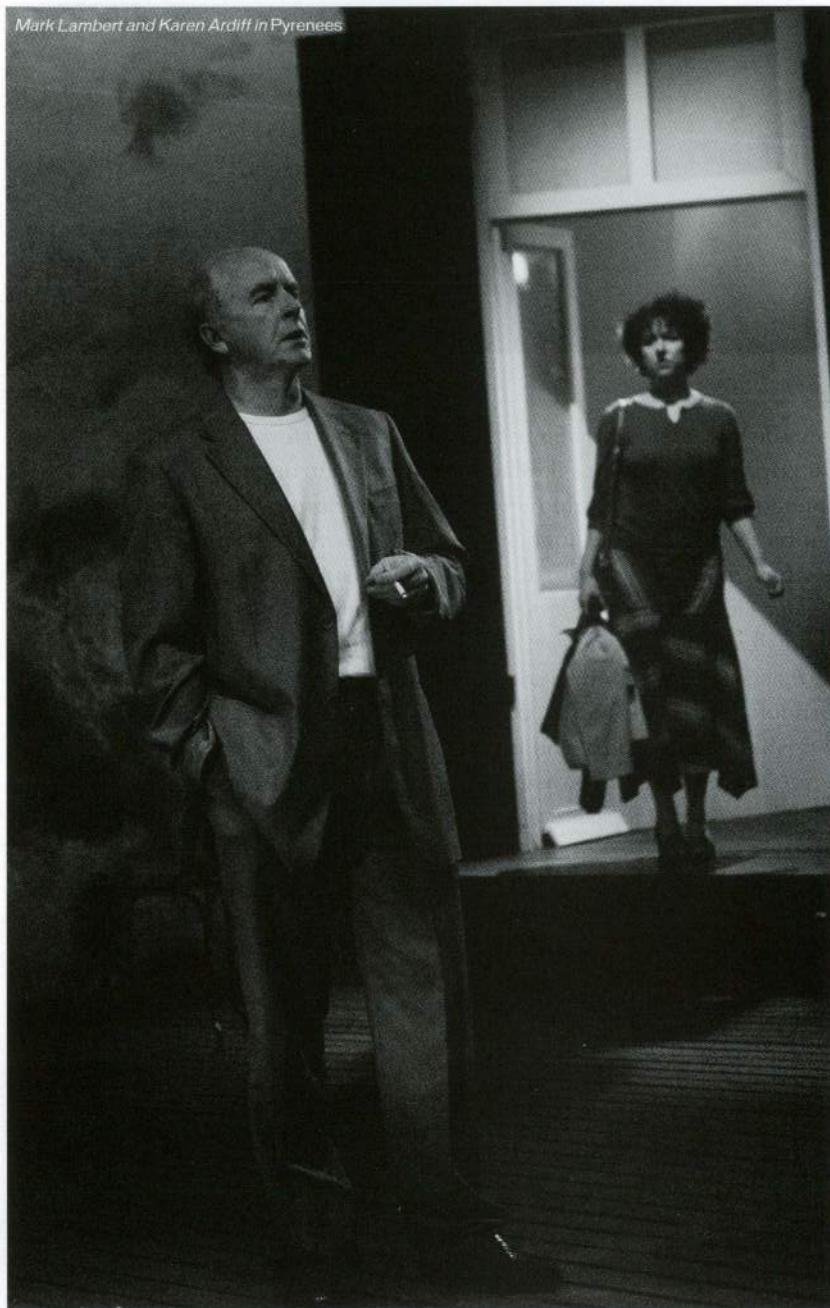
IRISH THEATRE, LIKE THE IRISH economy, is much more interested in exports than imports. This is particularly noticeable in our attitudes towards recent British theatre. We celebrate the achievement of our playwrights in London constantly, and

our government invested huge amounts of money (through Culture Ireland) in bringing Irish theatre to Edinburgh this year. But although we've seen a small number of productions and readings of new British plays during the last five years, most of the traffic between these islands has gone in one direction only.

The near simultaneous production here of two plays by David Greig, one of Britain's most exciting young writers, is a welcome response to this situation. Unlike his flashier counterparts, Greig avoids using cheap shock tactics or deliberately provocative themes, instead producing work with depth and substance. He's also willing to try out different ways of writing, to engage in genuine experimentation. This means that although *Outlying Islands* and *Pyrenees* are very different plays, both share important characteristics: they trust audiences' intelligence and actors' skills, exploring contrasting themes that require and reward serious attention.

Anabelle Comyn's production of *Pyrenees* offers an excellent introduc-

Mark Lambert and Karen Ardif in Pyrenees



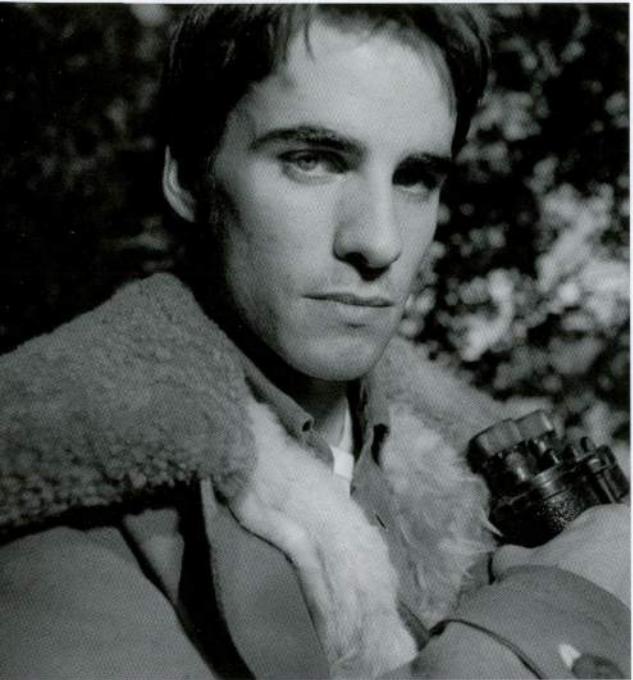
ROS KAVANAGH

tion to Greig's works, giving us a formally exciting play that blends everything from Hitchcockian suspense to European expressionism. It starts with a premise that seems derivative of countless Hollywood movies, from *Memento* to the Harrison Ford vehicle *Regarding Henry*. A man (Mark Lambert) is found unconscious at the foot of a mountain: he cannot remember his name or anything about his past; but suspects he may be British. In an opening scene that alludes to another play about fragmented identity – Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape* – the man is interviewed by Anna, a British embassy official played by Karen Ardiff (who stepped in at short notice for Fiona Bell, who was taken ill before opening night). They seek clues about the man's identity, considering in turn his accent, his preoccupations, his emotional state. Sexual chemistry builds between them, interrupted occasionally by the proprietor (Ronan Leahy) of the hotel they're in. All seems to be progressing well between them until, just before the end of the first act, a woman called Vivienne (Ger Ryan) arrives, claiming to be the man's wife.

Our expectation will naturally be that the second act will answer the questions raised in the first. To a certain extent, this proves to be the case; but Greig's answers raise other important issues. The Man's amnesia

seems partially to arise from a desire to forget who he is, to flee his past – is this possible? Why does the proprietor continue to adopt different identities, at one moment pretending to be a busboy (who will be insulted when no tip is offered to him); at another reverting to his role as the hotel's manager (who will be insulted when a tip is offered to him)? Is Vivienne telling the truth about the man's past and, if so, does that truth matter? And is Anna really from the British Embassy? We also learn late in the second act that *Pyrenees* is a sequel of sorts to another Greig play, *The Cosmonaut's Last Message...* (1999), which will be a huge pay-off to those familiar with that earlier work.

The ultimate effect of the play's second half is to leave the audience even more confused than they were in the first – and this is the play's greatest strength: it provides answers but little clarity, and therefore invites us to consider whether our questions were worth asking in the first place. The play is much more than a standard meditation on the instability of identity; it shows that it's possible to write a successful drama that refuses to meet audiences' expectations about character, plot, and closure. Of course, writers such as Beckett made this point a long time ago – but the difference between their work and Greig's is that *Pyrenees* retains many



Colin O'Donoghue in *Outlying Islands*

of the things that Beckett rejected: characters the audience can fully identify with, a (more or less) naturalistic environment, and a linear plot that's full of suspense and incident. *Pyrenees* manages to be philosophical, playful, and deeply engrossing simultaneously.

Outlying Islands is entirely different. Set in 1939, the action takes place on Gruinard, a tiny Scottish island which has been visited by two British scientists (Sam Corry and Colin O'Donoghue), who have been sent to catalogue and study the island's birds. While there, they interact with

the Gruinard's sole inhabitants, Kirk (Gerard Murphy) and his niece Ellen (Ailsa Courtney).

The play could be seen in the tradition of island plays, from *The Tempest* to Friel's *Gentle Island* – works that create a space where people can interact, free of social constraint and convention. The men's arrival – and their involvement in the death of Kirk – has the effect of liberating Ellen, who gains in power and stature as the action progresses. She becomes something like the director of a play, leading the two scientists in a strange lament for her uncle that

moves from wake scene to *Laurel and Hardy*. That power is eventually asserted sexually, in a remarkably intimate and sensitive scene that brings the action to its emotional climax.

The play also has a more immediate context. As in Friel's *Translations*, in which an apparently innocent map-making expedition is a prelude to military action, Grieg's play reveals that the scientists' expedition has been arranged because the island is to be used as a testing ground for biological weapons: the men are cataloguing the island's birds because the British ministry for war wants to es-

tablish exactly how many creatures they can kill with weaponised anthrax. This political theme comes to the foreground towards the play's conclusion, with interesting consequences for Ellen in particular. Given that *Outlying Islands* premiered in 2002 – at a time when Hans Blix was in Iraq in search of biological weapons – the play is an obvious attempt on Greig's part to use his country's past to examine its present. But the clash he reveals between his characters' natural inclinations and their political duties has considerably broader resonance.

In a bold move that could be seen as an important statement about the future of Limerick theatre, director Karl Wallace and designer Diego Pitarch transformed the Belltable for this production, tearing out the stage and seating, and asking the audience to sit on uncomfortable benches dotted around the auditorium. The actors move amongst the audience, adding to the production's intimacy, and quickly bridging the gap between Limerick in 2006 and Gruinard in 1939. But the production places further demands on the audience by running without an interval. The risk paid off, however: the emotional intensity of the piece was maintained throughout, despite the distraction of the increasingly uncomfortable seating arrangements. It was in fact refreshing to see a theatre company so willing to trust its audi-

ence's intelligence, as well as their powers of endurance.

Annabelle Comyn adopted a considerably different approach to *Pyrenees*: where Wallace brings his audience directly into the action, she instead presents her production on a raised platform (designed by Paul O'Mahony), with the fourth wall firmly in place. This was entirely appropriate to the play's tone and themes. Whereas *Outlying Islands* invites us to explore the difference between personal desire and public duty, *Pyrenees* asks us to examine a situation dispassionately and, insofar as possible, objectively: like most of the play's characters, our job is to piece together evidence, to reach towards conclusions. Comyn's direction keeps us at an appropriate distance from the performance, but never risks alienating the audience.

What both plays have in common is the extent to which they provide genuinely challenging roles to actors. Mark Lambert's performance as the Man in *Pyrenees* is a case in point: he must reveal a personality without having any back story or social and geographical markers to base it on. Lambert's ability to convince us of his character's individuality as well as his amnesia impresses throughout. Leahy's proprietor is at perpetual risk of lapsing into racial stereotype: there is (deliberately) a touch of *Fawlty Towers'* Manuel about him. Yet he avoids

those risks, his nuanced performance often revealing the audiences' own prejudices and expectations. Ardiff and Ryan have more difficult roles: Vivienne is the play's only stable point, its only credible witness, while Anna is a disruptive and ultimately threatening presence. Each actor shows a clear understanding of her character's function, without ever making her role seem functional.

The performances by Corry and O'Donoghue in *Outlying Islands* are also strong, with enjoyable supporting work by Murphy. But the highlight of the production is Ailsa Courtney's performance as Ellen. This is Courtney's first professional production, and it's evident from very early in the action that Wallace has made quite a discovery. Ellen develops dramatically during the play, with substantial differences evident between her inhibited and liberated personae. Courtney presents her character in a manner that coherently and convincingly reveals these different elements.

David Greig's works might seem a difficult sell to Irish audiences: he's a largely unknown playwright in this country who deals with challenging themes that aren't of explicit relevance to local audiences.

Both Island and Hatch Theatre deserve credit, not only for producing his works, but for doing so with great conviction. Taken together, *Outlying*

Islands and *Pyrenees* reveal that, although Greig can be seen as an important Scottish playwright, and as an important British playwright, he is simply one of the finest young dramatists currently working anywhere. Let's hope this isn't the last we hear from him.

Patrick Lonergan lectures in Drama Studies at NUI Galway and is Reviews Editor of this magazine.

DOUBT: A PARABLE

by John Patrick Shanley

Directed by Gerard Stembridge

With Starla Benford, Bríd Brennan,

Aidan Kelly, Gemma Reeves

The Abbey Theatre,

21 October - 24 November 2006;

reviewed 2 November

BY FINTAN WALSH

JOHN PATRICK SHANLEY'S *DOUBT* might well have been called *Belief*. The play that wowed Broadway audiences and earned a Pulitzer Prize, is a reflection on the relationship between the two terms. In a Bronx Catholic school in 1964, Principal Sister Aloysius (Bríd Brennan) is an unwavering monument to belief: she believes in God; she believes she knows best how to run the school; she believes she knows best how to teach; she believes she knows best how to discipline; she believes she sees things that other people do not; she believes



Gemma Reeves, Aidan Kelly and Brid Brennan in Doubt

ballpoint pens are wrong; she believes that Frosty the Snowman is secularist evil; she believes her beliefs to be true, and so they are. When she believes that Father Flynn (Aidan Kelly) has been abusing a child at her school, she believes that it is up to her to take control of the situation and ensure that justice is carried out. But this belief is not shared by those around her: not by Father Flynn, not by Sister James (Gemma Reeves), and not by the boy's mother (Starla Benford). Further, there is no proof. Under these circumstances, you would expect the average person to listen to doubt for a moment. But Sister Aloysius is not content until Father Flynn is forced to leave the school. She believes he must, and so he does.

In this production, Brennan is well

cast in the role of the Principal. Her naturally soft voice and petite frame confound the audience's expectations of the nun's potential, making her actions seem more drastic. Kelly is equally well placed. His Father Flynn is neither a saintly nor paedophilic stereotype, but could plausibly be either. His reaction to Sister Aloysius reflects both a possible doubting of her and of himself. Reeves' Sister James offers relief in the form of non-judgement and youthful ambivalence, as does Benford's mother who has no time for abstractions in the face of domestic violence, relative poverty, and racial division.

While the actors are well cast and give achieved performances, there are occasions when expressions of doubt and belief enter the realm of neurosis

and paranoia. Under Gerry Stembridge's direction these elements in the text are highlighted in the performances. Shanley claims that his play is about doubt quite generally, but explores this idea in the context of religion and paedophilia. In addition to these heavy themes, the play carries the weight of a troubled history, with action taking place the year after John F. Kennedy's assassination. Further, it is subtly implied that Sister Aloysius is still affected by the second World War, as she became a nun after her husband was killed in combat. This thematic and contextual blend paints a picture of a world that is deeply troubled, so much so that its analysis on the level of "doubt" seems at best skewed and at worst reductive. Those hoping for a play that might resonate with Ireland's recent history of clerical abuse in the shadow of the Ferns Report would surely have been disappointed. Dramaturgical nuance would benefit clarity of subject.

While we might hold the playwright responsible for contextual imiscibility, we must hold the production responsible for the mismatch between the visual presentation and the material. For a play about 'improbable constructions', it was a curious decision by Alan Farquaharson to reconstruct a corner of the Bronx on stage, incorporating a garden, a school building, a Principal's office, and a projected backdrop of the city.

The design is unsuited to what is a rather slight play, and it does not help the acoustics either. Sadly, this prioritisation of extravagant sets is fairly typical of the National Theatre's recent budgeting pattern.

Overall this amounts to a solid production of a nifty little play, although you are unlikely to be as dazzled as some of the pre-production hype might have promised. If you don't believe me, doubt me. Or just go see for yourself.

Fintan Walsh is completing a PhD at the Samuel Beckett Centre, Trinity College Dublin.

THE FLAGS

by Bridget O'Connor

The Royal Exchange Theatre in association with

Matthew Gale, Jenny King, Pat Moylan,

Michael Edwards, Carole Winter

Andrews Lane Theatre

Directed by Greg Hervos

27 September – 20 October 2006;

reviewed 27 September

BY KAREN FRICKER

JUST WHEN WE THOUGHT THERE was no more heat left in the Martin McDonagh-fuelled "what counts as Irish theatre?" debates, along comes this transfer from Britain to throw new fuel on the fire. Like McDonagh, Bridget O'Connor is a Londoner of Irish descent, and the choice and treatment of setting and subject mat-

ter for this, her second produced play, seem clearly influenced by McDonagh's wildly popular Ireland-set dark comedies. The new wrinkle here is that this production originated not in an Irish theatre (as did McDonagh's early successes) but at Manchester's Royal Exchange, and its success there apparently inspired that theatre and a cadre of independent producers, including Andrews Lane's Artistic Director Pat Moylan, to present the production on the home ground of the culture it depicts.

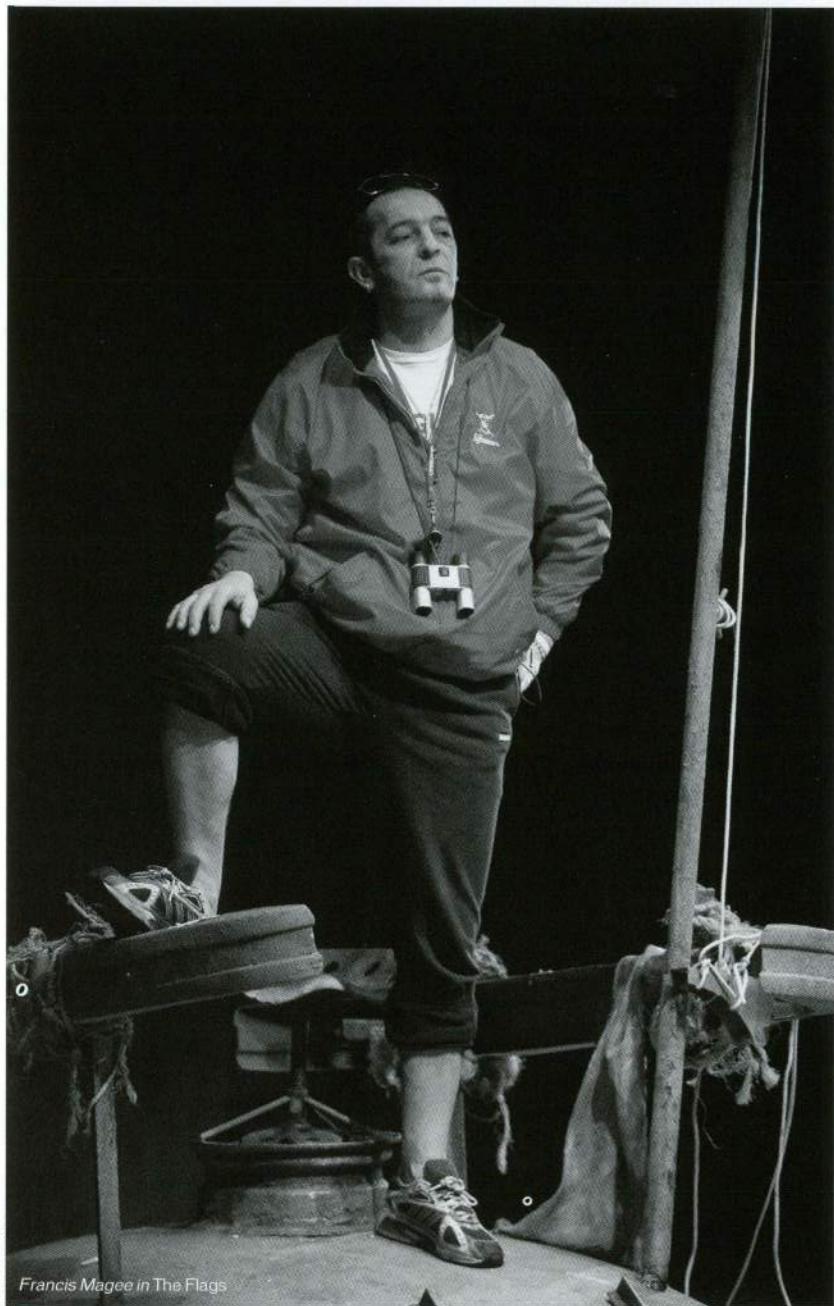
This was a risk, as was opening a commercial production at the same time as — but not as part of — the Dublin Theatre Festival. Neither seems to have entirely paid off for *The Flags*. While the play is a tightly structured piece of dramaturgy, and Greg Hersov's production is crisp, funny, and very well-acted, there is a gnawing sense throughout that we are trafficking in some over-familiar and locally awkward stereotypes, and that the play and production's vagueness about its Irish references were more obvious and problematic here than over the water. Nor did the production generate much buzz; it closed after just under a month of performances.

The play is set "on the second-worst beach in Ireland," staffed by two gormless "Leisure Operatives" who are angling for much more desirable jobs at Banna Strand. JJ (Francis Magee) is the local Lothario who

has recently returned (or has he?) from lifeguarding in California; Howie (the terrific Jamie Beamish) is a loveable eejit evidently modelled on *Father Ted*'s Dougal, an orphan who lives at the local B&B and who provides easy prey for JJ's lies and manipulations. Their boss, Brendan (Kieran Cunningham), is a shifty, puffed-up minor bureaucrat who plays the two lads against each other and winds JJ up in particular by forcing him to date his (Brendan's) sister. The final figure in this gallery of sad sacks is a Girl (Siobhán McSweeney) who arrives on the beach in her wedding dress and, by trying to drown herself, allows JJ and Howie to reveal just how inept they are at their chosen profession.

This is a very well-structured piece of playwriting that sets up the situation efficiently and presents an amusing and engaging central problem (who's going to get the jobs at Banna, and will the competition ruin JJ and Howie's friendship?). There is a high level of complicity between the actors, particularly Magee and Beamish, and they deliver the sometimes funny dialogue with excellent timing. Laurie Dennett's elaborate set is impressively and credibly yukky — a clapped-out metal shed on an expanse of cigarette-butt-strewn sand — and looks great in the Andrews Lane space.

But, but, but. There is something



PAT REDMOND

Francis Magee in The Flags

derivative and unadventurous about the premise of the play's humour: O'Connor leans heavily on the mad-Paddies-getting-up-to-some-crazy-and-violent-shite playwriting model without providing adequate context or justification for her characters' wildly skewed moral compasses. JJ and Howie pass the time by shooting seagulls; the fact that the jobs at Banna Strand are available because their previous occupants were killed in a car crash is tossed out as a laugh line; and the Girl becomes (or does she?) the third drowning casualty that the lads secretly bury under a dune rather than fess up to their culpability in the deaths. Why does life matter so little to these characters? Because (the implicit answer) we're in Ireland, ya' thick.

Just where we are in Ireland is also a detail which apparently mattered little in Manchester, but which rankles in the transfer. The *Guardian* critic who saw (and loved) the show in its original run located the action in Galway, and the production team were happy enough with this assessment to include it in a review quote on the back of the printed playtext. But the script implies that the beach where the action takes place is in Brandon, close to Banna, which puts us in Kerry. A Corkonian theatre friend fretted in the interval about how it could be that two, but not all, of the characters had pronounced Cork accents; fur-

ther confusion stemmed from Magee's accent, which most of the time sounded Dublin but occasionally slipped into an indeterminate something else. Details, of course, but details that matter a lot more in the culture being represented than elsewhere, and which grow more noticeable and irksome as they accumulate.

The clear moral here is that Irish-approximate theatre can work outside of Ireland, but suffers considerably on arrival here. And that maybe we've seen enough thick-fecker characters for the next good long while.

Karen Fricker is a Research Fellow at the Institute for International Integration Studies at Trinity College Dublin, and reviews theatre in Ireland for the Guardian and Variety.

MOTHER TERESA IS DEAD

by Helen Edmundson

Focus Theatre

Project Arts Centre

Directed by Joe Dowling

With Catherine Byrne, Gabeen Kane,

Elizabeth Moynihan, Paul Roe

10–26 August; reviewed 21 August

BY HEATHER JOHNSON

IN *MOTHER TERESA IS DEAD* Helen Edmundson, best known for her adaptations, has written an original play on universal themes: what is the meaning of modern life? How does one live a 'good' life? And can one individual's charitable actions



Elizabeth Moynihan and Paul Roe in *Mother Teresa is Dead*

make any real impact on humanity at large? These considerable themes are explored through the interactions of just four characters.

Jane (Elizabeth Moynihan) disappears without warning from her comfortable Ranelagh home, is discovered by ex-pat Frances (Catherine Byrne) in India, where she is volunteering at a refuge for homeless children run by Srinivas (Gabeen Kane). Husband Mark (Paul Roe) reluctantly flies to India to bring Jane home. Here the play's action begins as the back plot sets up a series of encounters which slowly reveal the nature of the four characters, their values, motives, and relationships. Joe Dowling's direction

keeps these scenes taut. Indeed Focus Theatre is the perfect company to produce a play which is largely character based; the performances are almost (but not entirely) flawless. Sharp dialogue ranges in subject from the difficulties of marriage, to contemporary politics between wealthy and developing countries, to the joys and pain of motherhood, and the actors deliver this dialogue with a real sense of engagement.

Edmundson's script cannily manipulates the audience's response: each character solicits our sympathy and then our discomfort. For example, the Indian aid worker, Srinivas, supports Jane's interest in continuing

work at the shelter and agrees with her view that life should be about grand gestures such as leaving one's family and society to help those in need. Qualifying this altruistic trait we learn that he has an emotionless sexual relationship with Frances, enjoyed the benefits of social class (having attended the College of Surgeons in Dublin), and has a history of adopting and then abandoning worthy projects.

Throughout well-executed scenes between two or three characters, the disoriented Jane (at times played too much like a winsome Ophelia) clutches a mysterious bundle to her breast, creating the play's principal tension line. The resolution of this tension comes in an affecting moment as we learn that it is not, as implied, a dead infant but a passport wrapped in the bundle. Moynihan's performance of Edmundson's script here makes this a powerful moment in the play.

The script nicely captures global frictions and local pathos at the same time. In a bravado retort to Vas's accusations of Western culpability in the events of 9/11 and his warning of a backlash against the West, Mark twice shouts, "I'm real scared!" The lines are nicely delivered to convey their double meaning: at once a playground challenge *and* an expression of fear of losing his wife and feeling disoriented in a foreign country.

Edmundson is clearly interested in existential dilemmas. In recounting the disintegration of her marriage, Frances describes a 'double negative' effect whereby two people can be in the same room or frame while being utterly disconnected from one another. The photographic metaphor points to human isolation and miscommunication; we pass each other, not just in marriage but in society generally, and yet often experience no connection.

Through its cultural association with soul-searching, the location of the play facilitates such introspection. "The soul is exposed in India", Vas explains. The play, while referencing Harold's Cross and Ranelagh, is entirely set in India and seems conscious of its handling of a place remote to Ireland. In order to deflect possible accusations of an Orientalist use of the play's setting, the script includes the line "it's a cliché, but it's true" with regard to the extra-spiritual stereotype of India.

Anne-Marie Woods' striking set aims to express this same sense of the exotic: the small stage is occupied by a crucible of deep, earthy red. This depression provides a physical sleeping area, and creates a symbolic presence around which the actors move. When plainly lit the constituent material can appear a bit drab, but Kevin Smith's lighting of the central space at times beautifully intensifies the red

colouring. The heat of outdoors is conveyed by the colour but also in Conor Hanratty's gentle sound effects, such as crickets. Less suggestive and more intrusive is the swell in music to signal Jane's realisation, as she looks at Frances' painting of Vas, that they are lovers.

The close of the play brings a jarring element. Francis, the older and wiser of the two female characters, announces that there is a Brazilian tradition of two minutes' contemplation before setting out on a journey, and invites the departing Dublin couple and Vas (and the audience by implication) to observe this silence. While this provides a satisfying stillness at the conclusion of the play, the importing of a South American adage into a play focused on India seems forced; in conflating two non-Western traditions, the script's use of the foreign and 'exotic' location comes under scrutiny once again.

In general Dowling directs a memorable production of this engaging play, notable for its complex characterisations and the strong performances by the cast. Where themes such as relationships, parenthood, and the meaning of life might in another play seem contrived or self-important, here they are carried with intelligence and passion.

Heather Johnson is a writer and critic currently based in the United States.

WAY TO HEAVEN

by Juan Mayorga

translated by David Johnston

Galloglass Theatre Company

Directed by David Horan

With Charlie Bonner, David Heap,

Christine Hughes, Michael Sheehan

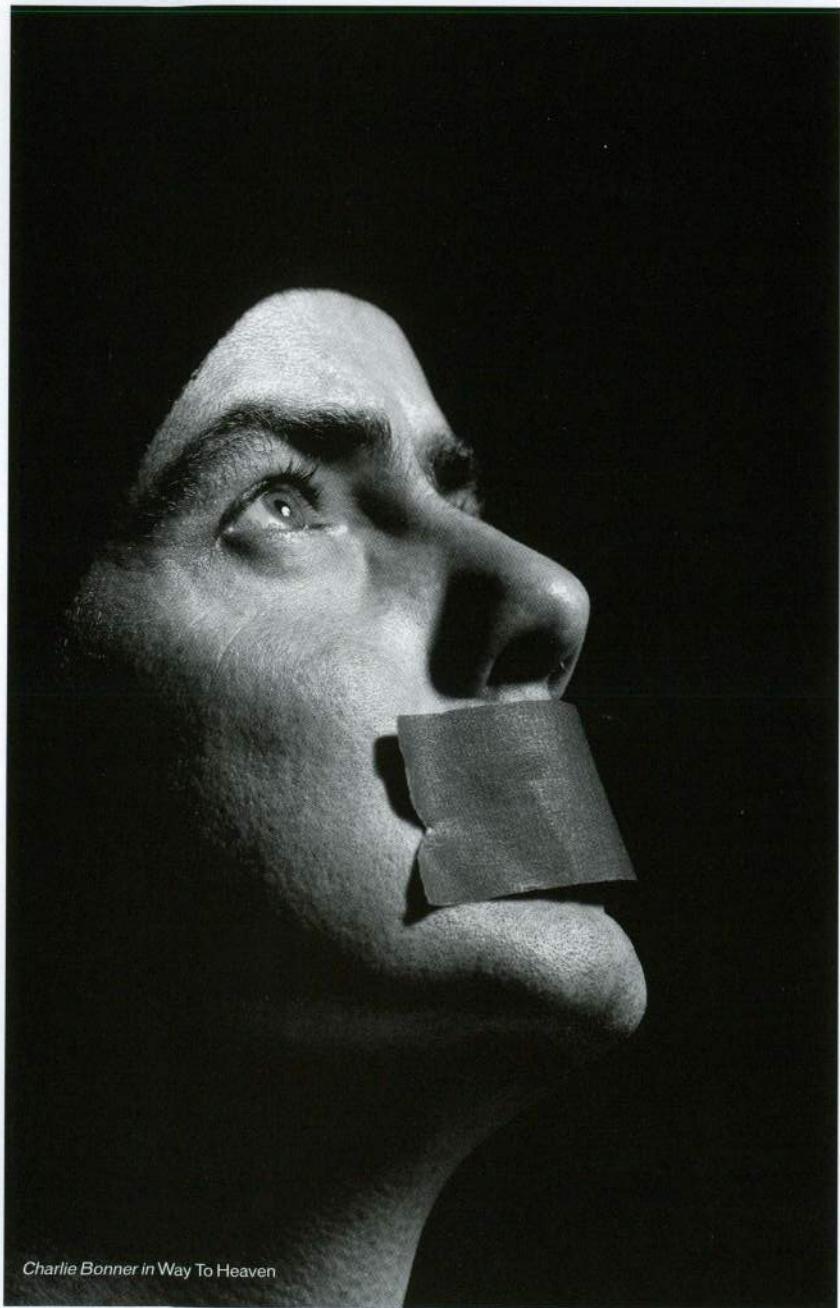
On Tour, Civic Theatre Tallaght

Reviewed 2 November

BY HARVEY O'BRIEN

JUAN MAYORGA'S *WAY TO HEAVEN* has been in circulation a few years now, but this production by Galloglass Theatre Company constitutes its first Irish presentation. Inspired by a true story, the play recounts the visit of a Red Cross representative to a Concentration Camp outside Berlin during the Second World War. The visit, which uncovered a blameless resettlement community run by Jews and supervised by Germans, is seen from a variety of perspectives and with shifts in time which cause certain events to be shown repeatedly, each iteration casting new light on previous ones. It begins with the visit itself, as the Inspector (Charlie Bonner) finds himself grappling with his conscience years later with the curse of hindsight. "My mission was to look and to see", he tell us, and in so doing advises us to examine events more closely than he did.

The play then moves "behind the scenes", unveiling the fiction that was constructed for the benefit of this visi-



Charlie Bonner in Way To Heaven

tor. We see moments of everyday life played out by prisoners: children squabbling over a spinning top, a couple discussing their future, a little girl playing with her doll. These moments are repeated, the cast shifting position between cycles to literally show a different perspective. Each time the performance within the performances become more strained, close to shattering as the 'prisoners' reveal the terror beneath the veneer of normalcy. Finally we are shown how this came to be: the negotiations and rehearsals under the direction of the Commandant (again Bonner), eager not merely to present a false reality to avoid criticism, but seemingly almost genuinely deluded enough to think that his faked community represents a model for a utopian Europe of the future, a rehearsal for life after the war in which all gestures, all movement, and all meaning is ordered from a single centre.

The political ironies are laid on thick. The play has an eye for the contemporary even more so than the past. The Commandant boasts that he feels more European than German and his hypocritical speeches on the value of culture posit less philosophy than he credits himself with. Mayorga uses the evidently self-reflexive setting of a "play" taking place within a play to analyse the role of theatre in suggesting and maintaining a vision of reality in the age of self-delusion, and duly deconstructs the 'human

theatre' that is contemporary life. Cracks and fissures in the veneer of bonhomie the Commandant seeks to project show up in the constant fear that can be read in his 'actors'. The Jewish liaison (played by David Heap) frequently irks the Commandant by asking awkward questions, bringing the fantasy down to earth by inquiring about the trains heard arriving at night and trying to find out what will happen to the 'cast' when the 'show' is over? The Commandant, lost in his visions of theatrical and ideological grandeur, fails to answer.

This is a solid play, well delivered by a company of actors dealing with a difficult set of performative challenges. Bonner holds the centre extremely well both as Inspector and Commandant. David Heap is convincing as the Jewish 'mayor' struggling to avoid being Judas and yet 'collaborating' in this little drama. Michael Sheehan and Patrick O'Donnell struggle with the double bind of playing children who are under pressure to appear childlike, but Christina Hughes succeeds brilliantly as the little girl who must offer a song and play with her doll, but ultimately breaks down at the crucial moment.

My only real reservation about the play is that it is so cleverly constructed and engaging on a literary level that it depends greatly on direction to keep it anchored in reality. David Horan directs with an eye for the reflex-

ivities inherent in the script, and makes the most of the self-referential engagement with theatre, staging, and performance on a strikingly adaptable set composed of four wooden columns supporting an open beam roof suggestive of both enclosure and open space. All of this works well, and yet the core reality of this experience - suffering and death - remains aloofly suggested to the point of abstraction, and this leaves a somewhat hollow centre to the production.

Harvey O'Brien lectures in Film Studies at UCD and reviews theatre for culturevulture.net

THE TRESTLE AT POPE LICK CREEK

by Naomi Wallace

Prime Cut

Directed by Patrick O'Kane

With Maggie Cronin, Robert Jezek,

Sean Kearns, Pippa Nixon

Old Museum Arts Centre, Belfast

Reviewed 28 October 2006

BY DAVID GRANT

PRIME CUT'S DELICATELY CRAFTED production of Naomi Wallace's *The Trestle at Pope Lick Creek* is a powerful reminder that the impact of The Great Depression in the 1930s was psychological as much as economic. Seen expressionistically through the lives of two teenagers, the aching emptiness of their lives fills the stage and reverberates on those around them. Pace

Creagan is a charismatic eighteen-year-old who exerts her mesmeric hold on the younger Dalton Chance, enticing him with a mix of bravado and coy sexuality. Fascinated by the elemental power of the steam locomotives that represent a brief intrusion of the outside world into her isolated hometown, she is obsessed with the challenge of outrunning them on the nearby trestle bridge. She is, by her own account, a potato in the dark, desperate to root, but with nowhere for the roots to seek nourishment.

The play's non-linear structure teases us with snatches of information, much as she teases Dalton Chance, and little by little we learn of the traumatic death of her former boyfriend, dissected by the train when he gave up on the challenge of the dare. Flashing mercurially and achronologically between the bridge itself, Dalton's home and his cell in the County Jail, where he is guarded by the dead boy's father, it soon becomes clear that he is accused of Pace's death. But this is not so much a *whodunit* as a *whydunit*. The recklessness of the young is contrasted with the hopelessness of their parents' generation, particularly that of Dalton's father who has given up on life. The one germ of optimism is Dalton's mother Gin, who defies the bosses to help reclaim the derelict glass factory which offers the only hope of economic salvation.

A passionate, and constantly engaging performance by Pippa Nixon



Pippa Nixon in *The Trestle At Pope Lick Creek*

as Pace provides the play its engine. Maggie Cronin's evocation of Gin is poignant and beautifully understated, capturing vividly a mother's suspicion of Pace's insidious influence. Paul Malton is entirely convincing as the gangly Dalton, switching skilfully between naivety and the cold reality of the prison cell, where Sean Kearns' stylised playing of Chas Weaver, the jailer, provides a jarring sense of distance from the reality outside the jail. Robert Jezek as Dalton's father, Dray, exudes despair, but allows us glimpses of his underlying humanity. But a scene in which he and his wife throw a plate between one another until he smashes it in a gesture of frustration became somewhat technical in tone, and was one of a number of rather self-conscious symbolic episodes, which the play could usefully have done without.

Patrick O'Kane's direction, however, fluidly captures the play's lyricism, allowing it to glide seamlessly

between time and place. The production is well served in this respect by Alan Farquharson's simple but endlessly adaptable set, whose various levels of decking provide endless possibilities for the audience's imagination. The centrepiece, a large image of the trestle bridge on gauze, is well used by John Comiskey's unobtrusive lighting to often magical effect.

Not since Charabanc's 1993 production of Darrah Cloud's *The Stick Wife* have I felt a play have such an unexpectedly strong connection with its performance context. In the earlier piece, which showed the dilemma of a family caught up in hate crime, the parallels with the current situation in Belfast was all too clear. Given the recent epidemic here of teenage suicide, this story of teenagers desperately seeking excitement or death has an all too contemporary feel.

David Grant lectures in Drama at Queen's University Belfast.

Playing with the Canon

Classic plays have been handled with both reverence and creativity in recent months, with a re-invention of Oedipus, a newly salvaged ancient Greek tragedy and some faithful approaches to Shaw and Ionesco.

ARMS AND THE MAN

by George Bernard Shaw

Lyric Theatre, Belfast

Directed by Richard Croxford

With Niki Doherty, Karen Hassan, Matt McArdle, Frankie McCafferty, Richard Orr, Libby Smyth,

Glen Wallace

12 September – 7 October 2006; reviewed 2

October

BY TOM MAGUIRE

IT IS 150 YEARS SINCE THE BIRTH of George Bernard Shaw and, given its recent success with *John Bull's Other Island*, the Lyric's decision to programme Shaw's first major success, *Arms and the Man*, is timely. But while *John Bull's* exploration of the relationship between English and Irish culture presents recognisable local concerns, *Arms and the Man* is replete with dislocations and juxtapositions. It is Shaw's only play to choose an East European rather than Victorian setting; it challenges its audience to reconcile the personal demands of love with the public requirements of a country at war; dramaturgically, it seeks to infuse the romantic comedy

genre with Shaw's own theatre of ideas; and, at the most practical level, the set has to change between a variety of locations within the household of the Bulgarian Major Petkoff (Frankie McCafferty). A further issue is the need to make the play's somewhat dated and laboured dialogue vital in performance, while maintaining the strength of its argument against romantic views of either love or war.

The plot concerns the consequences arising from the unexpected arrival of Captain Bluntschli (Matt McArdle), a Swiss officer serving on the Serbian side who is fleeing pursuing Bulgarian troops, in the bedroom of the Major's daughter, Raina (Karen Hassan). Raina is already engaged to a Bulgarian officer, Major Sergius Saranoff (Glen Wallace), but becomes infatuated with Bluntschli. Sergius, meanwhile, has unresolved feelings for one of the servants, Louka (Niki Doherty), who in turn is the object of the affections of another servant (Richard Orr). Bluntschli manages to make good his escape and, as allegiances shift in the war, returns as



Matt McArdle and Glen Wallace in *Arms and the Man*

a trusted ally to advise Majors Petkoff and Saranoff, setting off a series of plot twists which will lead the participants to see themselves as they really are.

Stuart Marshall's design uses white lattice panels on three sides, with doors stage centre and into either wing. The panels provide views onto the cyclorama, which are shaded off with the use of muslin drapes. This is most effective when allowing James C. McFetridge's lighting to create a starry night sky seen from Raina's bedroom. The detail of the opening bedroom scene is sumptuous in the use of gold, red, and brown swathes of fabric; and Raina is suit-

ably attired in a striking emerald gown. There is a strong sense of the chocolate box which Raina will proffer to the ravenous Bluntschli and which is the foundation of the romantic vision which she has of war and love.

Yet the attention to detail which is so marked in this opening is increasingly uneven through each scene change, so that, for example, the library of the second half is almost entirely denuded of books. Worse still, the flatness of the playing space created by the design means that much of the acting is conducted in two-dimensional profile.

The actors' performances are no

more sophisticated. Shaw's rejection of melodrama jars with the decision to mount his play as a broad comedy, and too often the actors fail to deliver either the play's serious engagement with ideas or even its comic moments with an appropriate lightness of touch. McArdle brings formidable physical presence and languor as Bluntschli, but lacks the capacity for the piercing sardonic wit which is needed to expose the duplicities of the Petkoff household and their absurd notions.

Wallace's characterisation of Sergius seemed confined to hair flicking and lip curling while striding around the stage. Orr and Doherty

play the servants as stock types of the Ulster country kitchen comedy, obscuring Shaw's intention to use them to critique the absurdities of class division. Karen Hassan's Raina seems to have been coached in every cliché of the English ingénue. While this is revealed as part of Raina's social masquerade, neither the awareness that she is using this tactic consciously nor the shift to another register when she transforms to her natural womanly voice are sufficiently marked. Collectively, the actors find it difficult to establish and maintain any sense of ensemble on stage, often appearing disengaged and stranded when not actually speaking.

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Arms and the Man is a favourite of the English amateur drama circuit and its attraction for this purpose is clear. But this production does not offer a secure foundation for Northern Ireland's only producing house as it begins to rebuild itself.

Tom Maguire teaches Drama at the University of Ulster.

MYRMIDONS

by Mike Poulton

Ouroboros

Samuel Beckett Theatre

Directed by Simon Coury

With Ruaidhri Conroy, Denis Conway,
Will Irvine, Una Kavanagh, James Russell,
Bryan Burroughs, Shane Gately, Eric Higgins,
John Paul Millar, Aonghus Óg McAnally
and Ciarán O'Brien.

30 August – 9 September 2006;

reviewed 8 September

BY TANYA DEAN

MYRMIDONS, THE "BRAND NEW ANCIENT Greek Tragedy" from Ouroboros, is built on a fascinating premise: that a 'new' ancient tragedy can be built from the extant fragments of a lost Aeschylean text. All Athenian tragedies have to be translated from ancient Greek for performance; each new production of an extant text is also, in a way, a 'brand new ancient tragedy'. The challenge for writers and translators involves retelling the story in their own words, while ad-

dressing the problems that Athenian tragedy represents for modern adaptation, such as pacing, use of chorus, and re-interpretation of old ideals to appeal to modern audiences. So Mike Poulton's re-imagining of Aeschylus' story is, in a way, treading well-worn ground. Yet it still ends up generating several of these problems for itself.

The major difficulty with creating a 'new' Greek tragedy is that any attempt to clone a genre so integrally tied to an ancient society's ideology risks slipping into caricature or misrepresentation. From the beginning, *Myrmidons* makes a brave attempt to position itself within the literary and dramaturgical traditions of Athenian tragedy. But with so many referents attached to classical literature and mythology, problems inevitably arise: for each classical allusion included in the new text, another is omitted (a prime example being the goddess Athene ordaining Odysseus' punishment of exile, which jars unforgivably with her iconic role as his patron goddess in *The Odyssey*).

Myrmidons also proves unable to resist some of the problems of form. The prologue, delivered by the sun god Apollo (in Denis Conroy's impressively sonorous tones), explains the predicament of the Myrmidons in an odd combination of metered declamatory speech and almost informal jibes.

And then there's the content. Arriv-

ing on the beaches of Troy with dreams of battle and glory blazing in their minds, the Myrmidons are a group of loyal soldiers who are now forced to sit in frustrated idleness because of a childish argument. After being pressured to return a woman he had stolen, King Agamemnon, leader of the Greek army, insisted on taking Achilles' chattel Briseis in compensation. As a result, Achilles sulkily withdraws from battle and forces his loyal Myrmidons to retire with him. Achilles (James Russell) now sits in his tent with his lover Patroclus (Will Irvine), ignoring the pleas of the other Greek warriors, who are being slaughtered by the Trojans in his absence.

The parodos (entrance of the chorus) of the Myrmidons articulates their discontent at their enforced idleness, but without orders from their leader to galvanise them into action, they remain begrudgingly inactive. Simon Coury's direction forges a cohesive unit out of the chorus of soldiers, unanimous in thought and occasionally speaking in unison. Through long speeches, the Myrmidons acutely capture the frustration of months of cloying, nail-biting inaction in war, broken



Una Kavanagh, James Russell and Will Irvine in *Myrmidons*

up only by minutes of pitched battle. While this is an interesting theme, *Myrmidons* labours the idea of waiting for war, with nothing new being said at each re-investigation.

A further problem relates to gender: women in *Myrmidons* are conspicuous by their absence, and the casual misogyny displayed by the male characters is presented without authorial judgement. The only female character onstage is Athene, traditionally the goddess who aligns herself firmly with the masculine sphere: as she says in another of Aeschylus'

plays, *Eumenides*: "no mother gave me birth - that's why in everything but marriage I support the man with all my heart." Briseis, the cause of the standoff between Agamemnon and Achilles, is given no voice or signification, being simply (and chillingly) referred to as Achilles' "rape, his spoil of war." Although unseen, she acts as a microcosm for the Trojan War itself: like Helen of Troy, she is blamed for being the catalyst for a petty argument that spirals into the death of hundreds. While it could be argued that Poulton's script is simply reflecting the mores of Athenian society, he also introduces an uncomfortable contempt for women. In one scene, for example, Achilles jokes about giving an overly talkative woman a black eye – which is played as a crude attempt to engender a matey 'just between us blokes' camaraderie between him and his Myrmidons that is at best uneasy and at worst repellent.

The production ends with the glamorous goddess Athene standing proudly at Achilles' side as he bays for the Trojan prince Hector's blood to avenge the death of Patroclus. While this open ending is obviously trying to allude to the two other plays (*The Nereids* and *The Phrygians*) that would have completed Aeschylus' lost *Achilles* trilogy, it falls flat. To an audience that has spent far too long waiting for action, the promise that a spoilt brat will finally return to

battle is no recompense.

Tanya Dean is the General Manager of Irish Theatre Magazine and writes about theatre for Totally Dublin.

OEDIPUS LOVES YOU

by Simon Doyle and Gavin Quinn,

after Sophocles

Pan Pan

Smock Alley Theatre

Directed by Gavin Quinn

With Ned Dennehy, Gina Moxley, Ruth Negga,

Karl Shiels, Dylan Tighe

9-21 October, reviewed 18 October

BY FINTAN WALSH

OEDIPUS IS NOT A CHARACTER WE associate with love. Lust, maybe. Desire, certainly. Incest, murder and plague, absolutely. But love? When a man's most significant sexual relationship has been with his mother, it is understandably difficult to take any declaration of 'love' seriously. Admittedly, the gouged eyes do not help much either. But in Pan Pan's adaptation of Sophocles' play we are promised, titularly at least, that Oedipus is enjoying a new incarnation: loving you, and probably *your* mother too, like he has never loved before.

While Greek tragedies have long attracted faithful productions and contemporaneous adaptations, *Oedipus Rex* has been markedly less popular than many of its Mediterranean relatives. Sophocles' taboo-infused

writing might be to blame in part, but Freud is the more likely culprit. In his writing on the Oedipus Complex the father of psychoanalysis famously saw in Sophocles' play a model of individual, familial, and social dynamics that highlights the disastrous consequences incurred by transgressing cultural norms: it is Oedipus's failure to suppress his desire for his mother that unleashes the plague upon Thebes. In holding up Sophocles' play as an archetypal model of psycho-social process in this way, Freud ensured that *Oedipus* would gradually become more important to the analytic encounter than to the stage, and as an interpretive framework for understanding all family dramas rather than the house of Laius alone.

Pan Pan's production of the play moves the action from Fifth century Thebes to Twenty-First-century suburban Dublin. Although character names remain the same, characterisation, context, and form are revised considerably. This Oedipus (Karl Shiels) lives in a cramped house with Jocasta (Gina Moxley), Creon (Dylan Tighe), and Antigone (Ruth Negga). The family are plagued by boredom, and spend most of their time wandering though the family home, performing rock songs, and planning for a barbecue. A family therapist (Ned Dennehy) surmises that this is not just a case of middle-class ennui: the real problem is that Oedipus has

married his mother.

In their staging of the play, Pan Pan create a dwelling space that is at once claustrophobic and transparent. Its sheer domination of the small Smock Alley stage effects an airlessness, while the open-plan design facilitates constant visibility. This is also ensured by the CCTV equipment that mediates the bedroom capers. In what might be seen as a stab at Freud's psychic topography of consciousness and subconsciousness, there is no room for secrets here. The DJ who provides a contrapuntal soundtrack from the wings, and the director who issues cues to the actors, further collapse any presumptions of deep-seated psychic texture. However, these devices rank among the subtler notes in a play whose overall tone might be described as tongue-in-cheek, mock-parody.

However, neither Sophocles nor the contemporary Irish family are the real targets here, just Freud. His theories are made fun of in very general terms, ironically through the performative deferral and displacement of meaningful engagement, rather than through systematic unravelling or clever deconstruction. There is an obvious nod to the work of Forced Entertainment here, in particular to the chaotic style of *Bloody Mess* which played at Project in 2004. While this theatre-in-quotation-marks style may have some success in destabilising

Ruth Negga in Oedipus Loves You



the relationship between the sign and the signified (that most popular of post-modern pursuits), it is a critical strategy better left to postcards than generative technique – damned, as it is, to make limited statements on the depthlessness of the world rather than contributing anything new. Generally accepted as quite a dated approach, it is disappointing that Pan Pan invoke it here. There is nothing complex about this Oedipus: *ceci n'est pas une critique*.

The real irony is that if the company had not set out to do a modern adaptation of *Oedipus* the show would probably have been more successful. For in setting up this kind of triangulated conversation, they invite the piece to be assessed on its treatment of Sophocles, Freud, and the tradition of the family drama. But none of the three is interrogated thoroughly here. Omitting an Oedipal base might have allowed the piece to enter more interesting formal terrain, allowing for greater experimentation with performance, music, time, and space than was possible under the current weighty intertextuality. While all the performances are fine, the production's cynical stance on meaning and psychological depth makes judgement difficult. Performers shine with their highly accomplished rock renditions, which are worthy of independent airings.

But although this Oedipus claims

to love you, he's not very good at showing it. Maybe he's just a narcissist after all.

EXILES

By James Joyce

The Cottesloe, Royal National Theatre

Directed by James MacDonald

With Peter McDonald, Dervla Kirwan,

Adrian Dunbar, Marcella Plunkett

Reviewed 22 October 2006

BY KEVIN BARRY

THIS IS THE FIRST LONDON PRODUCTION of James Joyce's play *Exiles* since Harold Pinter's of 1970. That was a landmark event in the life of a play that the Abbey had rejected on its completion in 1915. *Exiles*, like Joyce's poetry, has seldom figured in the Joycean canon. His first published book, in 1907, had been the love poems of his twenties, *Chamber Music*. He was anxious about the sincerity (and therefore the dishonesty) of these verses, but sentimental enough to offer to his partner Nora a gift of a handwritten copy on parchment, their initials interlaced on its cover. Those elegant poems do admit that Joyce knows no "love where may not be / Ever so little falsity". *Exiles* is a thorough analysis of larger samples of falsity in the loves of the twenty- and thirty-somethings. And on that account, through Pinter once again, *Exiles* entered the world of English theatre in its extraordinary



Peter McDonald and Dervla Kirwin in *Exiles*

closeness to the action of his celebrated play *Betrayal*.

James McDonald's direction of *Exiles* at the Cottesloe is deliberately as a period piece, framing the strangeness of the play's claustrophobic analysis of an open love affair. The stage design of Hildegard Bechtler – with its layered and almost opaque wall of ivy green curtain across the full width of the stage, a heavily furnished domestic space, foregrounding the busy criss-crossings of entrances and exits – elaborates Joyce's own emphasis on the "green plush" of Richard Rowan's Dublin house by the sea at Merrion. It also squeezes the interaction of the characters forward into an almost two-dimensional space that entraps them.

The play, as its title suggests, is about attempts at freedom. The

scene of acts one and three at Merrion is the home to which the exiles have returned. This is where the writer Richard Rowan (Peter McDonald), his partner Bertha (Dervla Kirwan), and their eight-year old son Archie (Thomas Grant) now live after their years in Italy. The scene of Act Two is a cottage in Ranelagh, where Richard had lived as a student with his closest friend, now a journalist, Robert Hand (Adrian Dunbar). Robert has held onto the Ranelagh cottage as a useful bolthole, and it is there that he seeks a night-time tryst with Bertha, an assignation which Richard allows and implicitly encourages. The Ranelagh cottage is a doubtful address, on that precise edge of the unrespectable which all Joyce's writings exactly trace. Normally Robert Hand lives with his mother and cousin

Beatrice Justice (Marcella Plunkett) who, with Brigid (Aine Ní Mhuirf) the old servant of the Rowan family, initiates the action of the play.

Exiles is systematically built of triangles: of paternity (Richard, Bertha, and Archie); of sexual transgression (Richard, Bertha, and Robert); of spiritual transgression (Richard, Beatrice, and Bertha); of the humiliated (Robert, Beatrice and, by his own contrivance, Richard). The play opens on the humiliation of Beatrice Justice: the would-be lover whom Richard has chosen only as the distanced muse of his writing, and now the piano-teacher of his son. Marcella Plunkett's quiet and internalised playing of this damaged young woman is compelling, and wonderfully overcomes the fragile status of Beatrice in the structure of the drama, which she initiates and from which she then is almost always physically absent, its wounded ghost.

The play is about giving and taking. Its range is wide and varied. The give and take of a psychological drama of guilt and shame are the main issue in Joyce's own notes on the play: 'a rough and tumble,' as he put it, "between the Marquis de Sade and Freiherr von Sacher Masoch." He divides the characters systematically in these notes: 'Richard - an automystic; Robert - an automobile.' And by their names alone, the earthly and the spiritual divide Bertha from Beatrice.

Bertha's age is given as 28, the national length of the menstrual cycle; Beatrice, an idealising protestant, is living on her nerves.

The play, however, goes well beyond the notes that informed its construction. The Royal National Theatre's production of the play loses nothing of this period melodrama of psycho-sexual anxiety, but recognises that the drama has a wider implication. The playing out of logic and desire (by which a man who is committed to freedom will entertain the probable bodily union of his wife with his closest male friend, and will enjoy this jealous doubt that, stronger than any fidelity, now binds all three of them together) is strongly represented, but it is not the only texture the production recognises.

The play is full of echoes: Prospero's manipulation of other people's intimacy in *The Tempest*; William Blake's radical fantasies about harsh truth-telling and friendship; Henrik Ibsen's suicidal comedy of the artist who steals his beloved's soul; a mimicking of Irish nationalism's assertion of *ourselves*, the word repeated again and again in Richard's and Bertha's final arias to the paradox of his holding her by no bonds.

The period distancing of the décor and the deliberately archaic phrasing of the actors release these echoes in Joyce's text and are true to its peculiarly frozen praise of sexual, aesthetic, and political doubt. There is a sense in

which McDonald and Dunbar accentuate their differences to an effect of caricature (the Edwardian artist, the Edwardian cad) that catches the echoes of Wilde's comedies of manners and the deliberate mimicking of *The Importance of Being Earnest*: the volatile sentimentality and knowingness between the women; the retreat to cousin Jack in Surrey. In all this period costume the production catches also, precisely because it frames the play in the past, its eerie commitment to what we often think of as a later mindset that is now often called the postmodern: an acceptance of ignobility as the proper limit to any pretensions, a determination to inhabit Richard Rowan's logical passion "to be dishonoured forever in love and in lust. To be forever a shameful creature and to build up my soul again out of the ruins of its shame."

Kevin Barry is Dean of the Faculty of Arts at National University of Ireland, Galway.

THE CHAIRS

by Eugene Ionesco

Blue Raincoat Theatre Company

Directed by Niall Henry

With Ruth Lehane, Ciaran McAuley,

Michael Murfi

On tour. reviewed 26 October

Town Hall Theatre Galway

BY CHARLIE MCBRIDE

HAVING STAGED THE BALD SOPRANO

last year, Blue Raincoat revisit the work of Ionesco to good effect with a fine production of *The Chairs*. First performed in 1952, *The Chairs* remained a personal favourite of Ionesco: he wrote of it that "I have tried to deal more directly with themes that obsess me; with emptiness, with frustration, with this world at once fleeting and crushing, with despair and death. The characters I have used are not fully conscious of their spiritual rootlessness but they feel it instinctively and emotionally. They feel 'lost' in the world". While this is an accurate summary of his play, Ionesco omits to mention that *The Chairs* is also frequently very funny.

The main characters are an Old Man (Mikel Murfi) and an Old Woman (Ruth Lehane) who have been married for some 70 years and inhabit what seems to be a lighthouse (designed by Jamie Vartan, who follows Ionesco's stage directions carefully), its timeworn interior and peeling paint making it look as aged and decrepit as its human occupants. They reminisce about their lives together, their memories often at odds. The Old Woman is cooingly affectionate toward her spouse. While her inane utterances echo one of Ionesco's favoured themes - the banality of much human communication - Lehane and Murfi ensure that the tenderness

Ruth Lehane and Mikel Murfi in *The Chairs*



KIP CARROLL

that exists between that couple also suggests that small-talk forms part of the cohesive social glue that binds them together.

Slowly the invisible guests start to arrive, firstly in ones and twos, then in groups and finally in a ceaseless torrent. This becomes the occasion for some terrific slapstick as the increasingly flustered and overwhelmed hosts frantically try to accommodate all the guests, the hapless Old Woman scuttling in and out of the set's multiple doorways. One is reminded of the famous Marx Brothers' "stateroom scene" from *A Night at the Opera* - with the ironic twist that the multitude here is imaginary and the chairs remain empty.

Michael Cummins' lighting makes the chairs' shadows loom menacingly up the walls of the set, counterpointing the comedy with the suggestion of something dark and oppressive. At the play's outset the old couple are able to share moments of closeness, but as the deluge of visitors pours in they are buffeted and cast adrift from each other, their heads bobbing plaintively atop a sea of humanity, desperately trying to maintain contact and control. It remains only for the Orator (Ciaran McCauley) to deliver the message but, in a final twist, he turns out to be mute and can convey nothing. The production emphasises that this is an apt gag for a dramatist: attempting to

communicate with a roomful of empty chairs via an actor who cannot deliver their lines.

Under Niall Henry's skilful direction, Blue Raincoat do full justice to Ionesco's metaphysical parable, maintaining a sure balance throughout between comedy, pathos, and absurdity. Regarding the last element, it's worth recalling that Ionesco himself was never entirely comfortable with his work being labelled "Theatre of the Absurd", preferring the term "Theatre of Derision" coined by the French critic Emmanuel Jacquot. For Ionesco the term evoked the idea that the whole world was a farce, a prank played by God against man and all one could do was laugh about it. The production manages to be faithful both to despair and the humour inherent in such a worldview.

Murfi and Lehane give assured, affecting performances: their eloquence of movement and gesture is effective in conveying moments of intimacy and sequences of slapstick. Their various reactions to the incoming horde of visitors give that absent multitude a palpable stage presence. Ciaran McCauley makes the most of his cameo as the Orator and the design elements of the production also contribute significantly to its success.

Charlie McBride is a theatre critic and a Government of Ireland Scholar at NUI Galway.

Backward Glances

From historical and political retrospection to individuals' attempts to look back in sobriety in Conor McPherson's work, Irish playwrights continually revisit the past to make sense of the present. Our critics analyse the obsession.

THE LIEUTENANT OF INISHMORE

by Martin McDonagh

Town Hall Theatre

Directed by Andrew Flynn

With Owen McDonnell, Elaine O'Dea

Millennium Forum Derry

September 12 -16 2006 and touring

Reviewed September 15

BY LISA FITZPATRICK

The Lieutenant of Inishmore was famously turned down for production by both Druid and the Royal Court, both of which had championed McDonagh's previous work. McDonagh's claim has been that his treatment of terrorism made the play too dangerous to be staged; in fact, it is a violent black comedy that never engages with the complexities of the subject.

Leaving aside its politics, however, the play also presents problems for staging with the extreme violence of the second act in which bodies are dismembered in view of the audience. The original Royal Shakespeare Company production (which toured to the Dublin Theatre Festival in 2003) involved prodigious quantities of blood that sloshed and sprayed over the actors.

In this production, although the prosthetic corpses of the INLA men are well formed and credibly resembled the actors, the more modest quantities of gore detracted from the comic-book quality of the action. In other areas of the production Andrew Flynn's vision engaged effec-

MARTIN MCDONAGH'S *LIEUTENANT of Inishmore* has frequently been criticised for its representation of Republican paramilitarism as motiveless and crazy. The eponymous lieutenant, Mad Padraic from the INLA (Owen McDonnell), tortures drug addicts, kills three of his comrades, shoots a cat, and almost murders his own father. All of this carnage is unleashed because Padraic believes his pet cat, Wee Thomas, has been killed, and sets out to avenge him. In one of the many comic plot twists, Padraic is finally shot by his girlfriend Mairead (Elaine O'Dea). In a final melodramatic touch, Wee Thomas arrives back on the blood-soaked stage safe and well.



Andy Kellegher, Diarmuid de Faoite and Joe Hanley in *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*

tively with the play's aesthetic of excess. As Christy, Joe Hanley's accent and gestures are those of the villain from melodrama, while his comrades Joey and Brendan (Andy Kellegher and Diarmuid de Faoite) were more restrained.

However, the director and designer's engagement with conventions of the Peasant Play – in the representation of the cottage kitchen, and the reproduction of several iconic images from the Irish theatre tradition – are more effective. Owen Mac Carthaigh's elaborate set includes a cyclorama of a Summer sky that marks the passage of time over a twenty-four hour period. A steeply raked hill curves upstage

behind the cottage interior. Actors enter and exit via the hill as well as from the wings, and Padraic and Mairead are, at one moment, framed in a lovers' embrace against the blue sky in a manner that is reminiscent of Boucicault's romances. The back wall of the cottage is also the side of the hill, and though dressed in accordance with the conventional stage country kitchen – there is a dresser, a table and an old-fashioned stove – the furniture is set against what are clearly exterior walls with no doorways to mark the actors' movement from the roadside to the interior space. The detail of the design includes the slicing away of part of the dresser and plates

to align them with the curve of the hill. The gable wall of the cottage revolves to become the urban alleyway in which Padraic tortures the drugpusher, who hangs before a clichéd representation of a Republican mural. The merging of these different iconic images from the Irish stage indicates that Irish theatre is finding a way to incorporate McDonagh's work into the repertory in a self-aware way.

The play was well received in Derry, with the audience responding with laughter to Padraic's expressed desire to 'free the North', and to the scenes of the punishment beatings. Yet the question of why a company would opt to stage this play at all remains. McDonagh's work, though often entertaining, is a riff on one joke: it parodies pre-Celtic Tiger Irish society. The self-conscious theatricality of Town Hall Theatre's production, which recalled An Grianan's 2005 co-production with the Lyric Theatre of *The Lonesome West*, suggests that this approach is emerging as a commentary on the highly conventionalised representation of space in the Irish tradition, and a movement away from the naturalistic sets of Druid's *Leenane Trilogy*. As such, this production can be seen as evidence of a social and theatrical moment in which a traumatic past is made safe by its containment in comedy. Alternatively, these productions may mark the final death of the naturalistic tradition

and the Abbey's peasant drama.

Lisa Fitzpatrick is a lecturer in drama at the University of Ulster

TROUSERS (OR PANTS)

by Paul Meade and David Parnell

Civic Theatre and Gúna Nua, in association with

Origin Theatre Company, New York

Directed by Paul Meade

With Gerry McCann and Tom Murphy

30 August – 9 September at

Project Cube and on tour

Reviewed 6 September

BY TOM DONEGAN

GÚNA NUÁ'S TROUSERS (OR PANTS) wears its cinematic influences on its sleeve. A quasi-comic, quasi-dramatic depiction of two men in a precarious state of mid-life crisis, it shares thematic and tonal terrain with recent movies such as *Sideways* and *Broken Flowers*. This is no bad thing: both were certainly very good films, tapping into a rich and largely unexplored seam of contemporary concerns, particularly the problems encountered by the maturing male. However, despite an often witty script, some fine acting, and high production values, this production leaves one feeling that something is missing: in attempting to emulate silver-screen surface, Gúna Nua have neglected to provide theatrical depth.

Homeless, jobless, and penniless, Mick (Gerry McCann) is a desperate



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Tom Murphy and Gerry McCann in *Trousers* (or *Pants*)

case. Having been thrown out by his partner, he is allowed to stay temporarily in the flat of his old friend Dermot (Tom Murphy). It is not long before disparities of character cause disruption. This device is repeatedly seen in sitcoms and Hollywood comedies: cue differences of opinion, cue conflicts of interest, cue laughter.

McCann and Murphy render their characters with expert comic timing. Mick is a boozy, slovenly, selfish pessimist; while introverted Dermot is a teetotaller who is obsessed with self-help psychology. Just as their personality traits contrast, so too does the characters' physical stature, which is presented in a style reminiscent of *Lau-*

rel and Hardy. The sight of McCann's Gentle Ben frame squeezed into the extra-small t-shirt which he has been forced to borrow after his entire bag of clothes is venomously cut to shreds, is old-fashioned visual humour at its best. Cruel, but very effective.

The problems really begin when Meade and Parnell attempt to develop this formulaic presentation of personality clash into a more serious investigation of each character's personal failures. In both films referred to above, the protagonists embark on a life-changing journey that allows the viewer a privileged perspective on the nature of their problems. In place of this road-trip device, *Trousers* stages a

series of flashbacks to a summer during the 1980s when Mick and Dermot shared digs in New York. This movement is slickly executed through the skilful collaboration of set and lighting designers Laura Howe and Mark Galione: the book-cases which make up the interior of the contemporary Dublin flat transform into sky-scrappers of the New York skyline.

But the move into the past offers no new insights into the present. Twenty years ago, Mick may have had more energy and optimism, but he was still arrogant and untrustworthy. Dermot has changed even less, lacking confidence and direction then as much as now – although he *has* had a haircut in the mean time. An incident in which Mick deceitfully slept with a girl Dermot fancied (the discovery of which came through a pair of incriminating trousers, hence the title) briefly encroaches into interesting territory, from which the production soon pulls back. Other than this scene and a passing mention of failed exams and gloomy job prospects back home, the move to the New York past serves only to display the characters' flaws in a more embryonic state.

When the action returns to the present, there is much talk of what might have been, but behind the 'what ifs' there is little that is new or perceptive about what *is*. These characters' revelations about themselves are garnered through comic insight –

but it isn't accompanied by a process of analytical investigation. This means that the discoveries are simply forgotten with the next punch line. By the play's conclusion, both Mick and Dermot's lives are shown to improve, after they adopt the positive-thinking mind-game techniques they were previously neither willing nor able to master alone. However, because the production fails to provide any deeper understanding of the roots of their problems, the idea that either character will achieve positive long-term change is at best naïve and at worst a laughable simplification of the matters at hand.

In the place of genuine solutions, the best *Trousers* is ultimately able to offer is a rather superficial (though undoubtedly 'feel-good') hypothesis that the answer to all the problems of Irish masculinity lies in simply thinking happy thoughts. Now that really is amusing.

THE SEAFARER

by Conor McPherson

The Cottesloe, Royal National Theatre, London

With Ron Cook, Conleth Hill, Karl Johnson,

Michael McElhatton, Jim Norton

Directed by Conor McPherson

28 September 2006 - 11 January 2007

Reviewed 7 October

BY DAVID BARNETT

HARRODS OF LONDON SURPRISED shoppers this year by opening its

Christmas shop unprecedently early at the end of August. Not to be outdone, the National has premiered Conor McPherson's new two-act play, which takes place on Christmas Eve, at the end of September.

The eponymous seafarer is the former ferry-worker, James 'Sharky' Harkin. When the devil appears in the body of Mr Lockhart, we discover that he is on a dark mission, having lost a game of poker and thus the prize of Sharky's soul twenty-five years earlier. Sharky's reward was the 'miraculous' dropping of charges against him for murder, but the threat remained that the devil would return for another game for the same spoils.

As the play unfolds, Richard, Sharky's older, querulous and alcoholic brother, emerges as an allegory of the forces of light. He subscribes to the theory of intelligent design when drunkenly considering the anatomy of a fly and attests to a faith that Sharky, himself only two days off the bottle, can change for the better and return to a state of happiness, if not necessarily of grace. Two other characters ease the plot and the theme of redemption along: Ivan, a myopic, beer-swilling friend of the family, brings about a barely credible but highly entertaining twist at the end of the play. And Nicky is the new boyfriend of Sharky's ex-partner, providing a suitable vehicle for reconciliation in the play's closing minutes.

McPherson also directs the play and has returned to a collaboration with designer Rae Smith - the two previously worked together on *Shining City* which opened at the Royal Court in 2004 before transferring to the Gate in Dublin. McPherson and Smith offer naturalism for the vast majority of the production. The actors perform with full Stanislavskian rigour, within the bounds of an unstylized, shabby split-level interior of a house in coastal Baldoyle. The programme even contained an insert that thanked a family from North Wales for the loan of the authentic linoleum for the floor. The only break from the verisimilitude is when Lockhart discourses to Sharky on the nature of heaven and hell. Here the moon and the stars are projected onto the upper level and the stairwell to suggest the metaphysical stakes of the play.

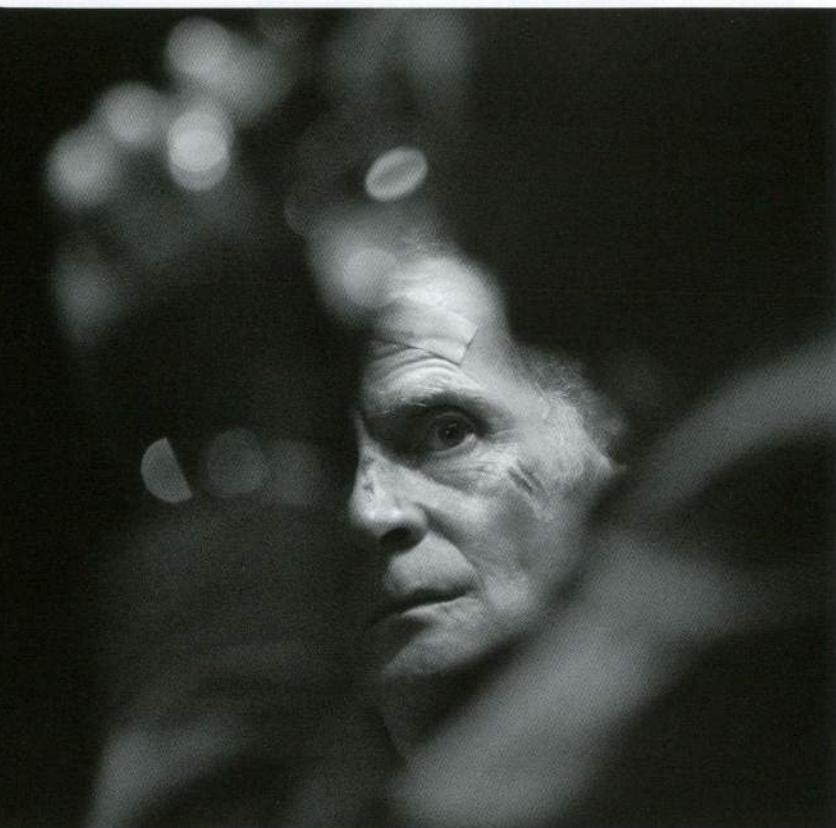
While there is a tradition in continental Europe of directors attempting a critical relationship with their own plays - Brecht is perhaps the best-known example - the British and Irish take has more often been that the director-playwright will show us his or her play as it was 'intended'. Clearly a major problem here is one of distance. When the director is also the author, an unproblematic naturalism does little to deal with any deficiencies or shortcomings, and assumes that a straightforward repre-

Karl Johnson and Ron Cook in The Seafarer

sentation of text on the page exists in some kind of vacuum - the play 'is what it is'. While McPherson's directorial attention to his own language is certainly one of the strengths of the production (as one would expect), the slice of life can have unwanted side-effects. It is clearly impossible to know how a London theatre-going audience will react to the 'straight' presentation of five middle to old aged Irishmen who are all intimately

acquainted with Ireland's drinking culture.

My concern is that the naturalism of the direction does little to challenge the stereotype, especially when the characters, with the exception of Mr Lockhart, find themselves at the lower end of the social spectrum. The supernatural themes of the play may have called the 'reality' with which we are confronted into question, but the devil, who suffers the all-too-hu-



man weaknesses of the body he is possessing, fails to undercut the dominant aesthetic with the grandeur of another world.

The plot, too, is somewhat familiar: the battle of good and evil for the soul of a dissolute man over a game of cards. The director is again unable to send up the playwright, and so the scenes tread their path without self-irony, but certainly with a good amount of humour and warmth. The production, in itself, is a well crafted, carefully acted affair that entertained its audience and received hearty applause. McPherson the playwright is hardly at his best here, yet a more dynamic and critical approach from McPherson the director could have called the clichés into question and offered the audience an altogether more engaging experience.

David Barnett teaches drama at the University of Sussex.

ALLERGIC TO BECKETT

by Gary Jermyn

Bewleys Café Theatre

Directed by Michael James Ford

With Gary Jermyn.

16 – 21 October 2006;

reviewed 17 October 2006

BY SARA KEATING

AS GARY JERMYN POINTS OUT IN his autobiographical one-man show, *Allergic to Beckett*, the brouhaha sur-

rounding the celebration of the centenary of Beckett's birth would have had the melancholic literary giant turning in his grave. Jermyn's play derides this recent attempt to turn Beckett into a popular hero by contesting the central thesis of Beckett's potential popular appeal: namely, that he is funny. Instead Jermyn argues that he's a miserable git, and that his misanthropy is contagious, trapping unsuspecting theatre audiences in the circular incantation of existentialist angst: "the past is worthless, the present is meaningless, the future is hopeless."

In *Allergic to Beckett*, Jermyn tries to break this cycle of Beckettian negativity, but Beckett stalks him on street-corners throughout the city, his steely blue eyes looking down at him superciliously from billboards and lampposts. Faced with an entire month of avant-garde anomie, Jermyn decides that he must confront his fear head on, and he summons up the ghost of the Great Melancholic Man on Carrickmines Golf Course, where they both played golf ("not together, and not at the same time"), to put his literary distaste to bed. However, it is the performance of *Allergic to Beckett* that provides Jermyn's real catharsis: here, the theatrical act of resistance to the avant-garde anti-hero is transformed into a fond tribute that reconciles the pair on an aesthetic, if not a philosophical, level.

The intimate stage in Bewleys Café Theatre provides an appropriate platform for Jermyn's Beckettian performance (and Colm Maher's atmospheric lighting assists). Black-suited, floppy haired and slumped over a tape-recorder, Jermyn conjures up an image of *Ohio Impromptu*, while calling to attention the pre-recorded stage voice of *Krapp's Last Tape*. Jermyn will also use pre-recorded voices to break up his monologue; however, where Beckett used these voices to conjure up a past self that Krapp is both yearning for and desperate to escape, they serve no such important function in *Allergic to Beckett* – either theatrically or thematically. This becomes a key problem for Jermyn's play.

Using sequences of repetition and the unmistakeable Beckettian (or is that Barry-McGovernian?) voice - so generic now, it's almost emptied of any character - Jermyn evokes all the crimes against theatricality that he levels at Beckett upon himself, except that in this parodic context they are devoid of both their originality and their full theatrical significance.

Jermyn, of course, would argue that his originality is invested in the humour of the piece (and it is very funny in parts), where Beckett – if you remember Jermyn's central argument – was never very funny. But that is merely a matter of opinion; many would argue that Beckett was a

right old clown.

However, *Allergic to Beckett* really doesn't ask to be understood with such serious inter-textual probing. It just sets out to express the frustration a spectator feels as he sits down to watch a play in which nothing happens. But for Beckett that was precisely the point: it's not what you see in the theatre, he believed, but what you take away.

Sara Keating is a theatre critic. She has recently completed a PhD in Drama at the Samuel Beckett Centre, Trinity College Dublin.

THE OFFICIAL VERSION

By Laurence McKeown

Dubbeljoint Theatre Company.

Directed by Pam Brighton

With Rosena Brown, Maria Connolly,

Gerry Doherty, Sorcha Meehan

On tour; Town Hall Theatre, Galway;

reviewed 26 September

BY ROS DIXON

THE OFFICIAL VERSION WAS WRITTEN by Laurence McKeown, who in 1981 spent 70 days on hunger strike in Long Kesh. His play is set in 2006 at the abandoned Maze prison. Plans already in train to develop the site will provide sports and recreation facilities and turn into a museum the prison hospital in which ten hunger strikers died. The play follows Annie (Rosena Brown), and her daughter Teresa (Sor-

cha Meehan), a Sinn Féin councillor, as they tour the old prison. Annie's son Gerard was an inmate during the blanket protest and hunger strikes, and much of the women's conversation revolves around memories of their many past visits. Two other characters are also touring the prison: Robert (Gerry Doherty), one of its former governors, and Julie (Maria Connelly), who is researching a post-graduate thesis on its history. She wants to uncover the truth of the past "beyond the books, beyond the headlines" and so articulates the play's apparent purpose: to consider the history of that deeply troubled period from different viewpoints, and show how it affected the lives of ordinary people.

For the most part the play fails to do this. Instead just two positions are presented: demonised Unionism and triumphant Republicanism. And the audience are left in no doubt that they should share the sentiments of the latter. In fact they could be forgiven for thinking that perhaps they were not watching a play at all, but had come to a vaguely illustrated public lecture, and a wearisome, tendentious one at that.

The fault lies largely with McKeown's script. Though not without humour or devoid of emotion, it lacks many of the essential elements that make for good drama. Pam Brighton's production in turn does little to make poor drama into inter-

esting theatre. There is almost no plot and very little action. For want of anything else to do, the actors stood and talked. To themselves and at us, against a virtually unchanging backdrop of tall grey panels that suggested stark prison walls, but had no visual appeal. All four characters are barely and poorly sketched. Annie and Teresa represent the positive new face of post-Good-Friday-Agreement Republicanism. Julie serves the all-too-familiar function of the on-stage historian whose presence conveniently prompts the re-telling of the past. However, she lacks the political independence or objectivity that such a role demands. Though from a Protestant background, she sympathises very largely with the Republican position, and spends much of her time arguing ardently with Robert, showing up the flaws in his views. Her task was not a difficult one: Robert is a walking cliché of conservative Unionism; bombastic, prejudiced, and anti-intellectual.

Scenes in which Annie and Teresa take trips down memory lane alternate with Robert and Julie debating. The end of one and the beginning of the next is signalled clumsily by the exit (often on a flimsy pretext) of one pair of characters and the (equally contrived) entrance of the other. Except for a brief moment at the beginning and towards the end – when Annie realises that earlier (and frankly

very improbably) she had mistaken ex-governor Robert for a former inmate who might have known her son – the pairs of characters are kept almost entirely apart. This is tediously repetitious. It also underscores the fact that the history of the Maze is not being viewed from multiple perspectives, but rather from just two: a Republican one which was self-evidently correct and a Unionist position which could be largely discounted. In the final moments Robert was banished from the stage completely. The three women stood unite as Annie addressed the audience directly declaring the need to tell history and to learn from it. But if we are indeed to learn from history, we need to tell it in far greater depth and in far wider breadth than McKeown's play allows.

Ros Dixon is Lecturer in Drama and Theatre Studies at the National University of Ireland, Galway.

THE EARLY BIRD

by Leo Butler

Ransom Productions

Directed by Rachel O'Riordan

With Abigail McGibbon and Colm Gormley

On tour: 18 October – 11 November;

reviewed 6 November

The Playhouse, Derry

BY TOM MAGUIRE

WHAT HAPPENS TO THE PARENTS when a child goes missing? Leo But-

ler's *The Early Bird* explores the impact on Debbie (Abigail McGibbon) and her partner Jack (Colm Gormley) when their daughter Kimberley leaves for school one day and does not return. The performance traces the impact on them of their attempts to piece together the fractured sequence of events that led to their daughter's disappearance, and the waves of recrimination and rage which it inaugurates in their relationship. Structurally, the play works as a spiral in which the audience is witness to the characters' insistent return to the same moments without the possibility of catharsis or closure.

The separation between them that Kimberley's absence foregrounds and deepens is realised in Gary McCann's set as a slate grey wall bisecting the stage from back to front. This keeps the two characters apart, each confined to a small space and an identical chintz green arm chair on either side. Like animals in adjacent cages, they struggle to maintain coherence as individuals and any sense of meaningful communication between them. The audience is confronted with the constant replaying of the events leading up to Kimberley's disappearance. This is a ritual of despair in which every small detail and gesture counts. It is necessary to the characters in the reliability of its codified repetitions; futile in its inability to deliver them from their an-

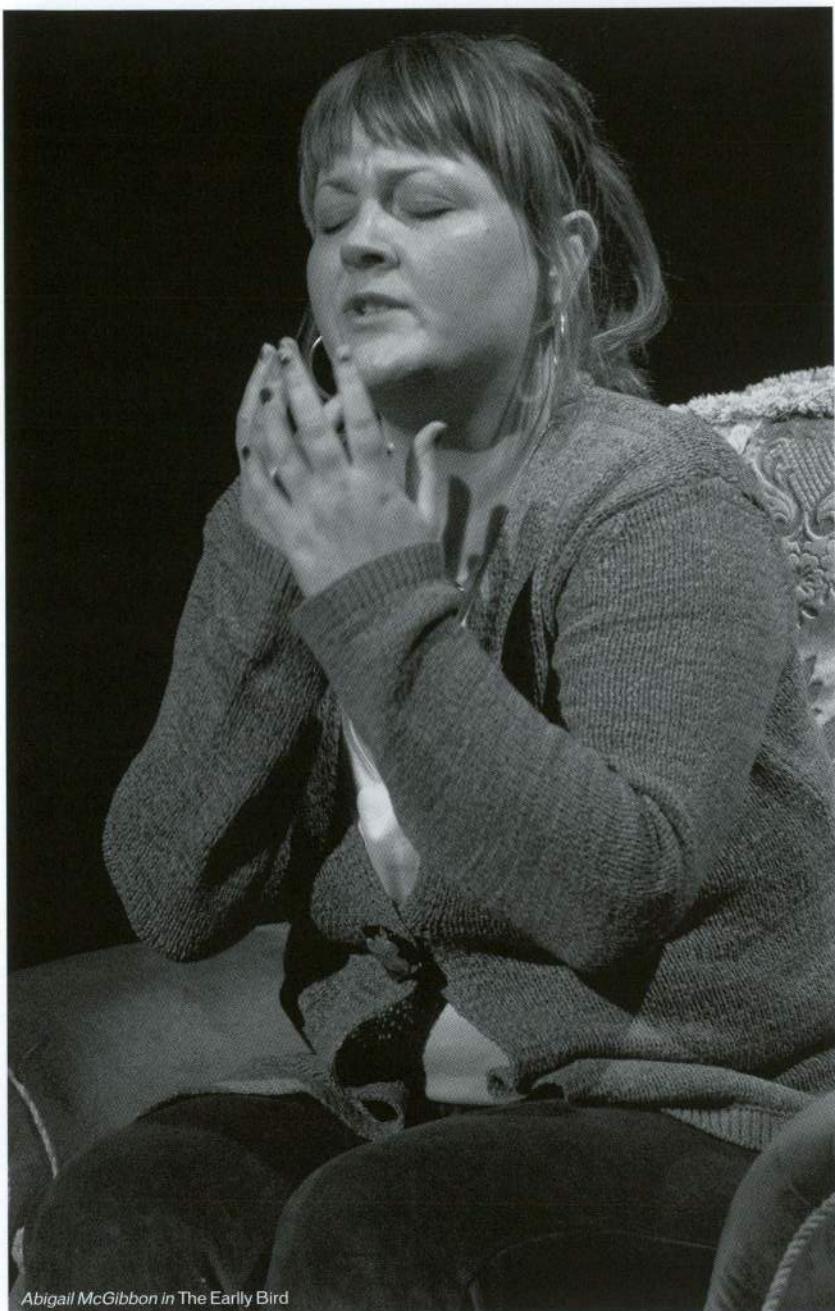
guish. Language is reduced to a litany of grief through which even the names of television programmes remembered in sequence take on significance, as a means of putting the experience of loss in some kind of order. The repeated rituals reveal incrementally the crumbling foundations of the relationship between Debbie and Jack which predated their daughter's disappearance.

Rachel O'Riordan's taut and inventive direction choreographs these verbal routines and physical behaviours with precision, and evinces from the actors a sophisticated engagement with the sharp modulations in mood and tone through which the characters shift over the course of the performance. She encourages within the actors a sensitive physicality which, despite the wall, allows them to respond to each other even while trapped apart. The intense focus of the actors provides a balletic quality in performance. The shifts in the relationship between Debbie and Jack are marked also in an expressive lighting design by James Whiteside, which does much to amplify the emotional cycles of the characters.

Leo Butler's script is acute in the creation of a world where uncertainty is the governing principle. It is never made clear what has happened to Kimberley and each character struggles to formulate a consistent and co-

herent account. Thus the unreliability of the narration by Debbie and Jack leaves many fundamental issues unresolved. Kimberley's age is left vague; there are hints that she has a learning difficulty and perhaps even a physical deformity. Are her classmates bullies or friends? Even physical details like what clothes she was wearing when she disappeared are left unconfirmed in the minds of the characters and therefore the audience. If perception is selective and experience always inattentive, then memory is shown as unserviceable, becoming only more unreliable as it is twisted to serve the purposes of each character's grieving. Thus, Debbie's insistence that Kimberley was wrapped up against the cold and rain is displaced by her conviction that it must have been a beautiful sunny day as she adjusts her memory to accommodate a happier version of events.

While this uncertainty is attractive in principle, it is self-defeating as a dramatic strategy. The unknowability of Kimberley makes it difficult to register her absence as anything other than a rhetorical point of departure for an exercise in the poetics of rage. Likewise, marooning the characters apart makes a clear visual statement, but makes it impossible for the audience to have a sense of the quality of relationship which Kimberley's vanishing (or indeed her birth and childhood) has eroded, since all that re-



CHRIS HILL

Abigail McGibbon in The Early Bird

mains of it are snatches of a shared song. Indeed, the script allows little sense of the characters individually as objects of emotional identification. This applies even when Debbie is allowed a final poetic sequence in which she ventures into the imagined and hitherto unspoken fates which might have befallen her daughter.

There is no clear narrative or performative drive towards this moment, which might have come at almost any point beforehand. Which was why, in watching what was clearly a skilful and well-executed set of performances, I kept wondering why I was left unmoved by the experience.

THIS IS NOT A LIFE

by Alex Johnston

Bedrock Productions

Project Cube, Dublin

Directed by Jimmy Fay

With Kevin Hely, Catríona Ní Mhurchu,

Megan Riordan, and Joe Roch

2-18 November, 2006; reviewed 6

and 14 November

BY KAREN FRICKER

LIKE MANY IRISH THEATRE AND dance companies founded in the early '90s, Bedrock seems in the midst of a difficult but necessary self-evaluation. The company, of late, has stepped outside its previous text-based approach with a programming initiative called Urban Ghosts, "new

work that belongs in a theatre but doesn't quite fit the conventional definition of a 'play'". While Bedrock frames this shift as unique to the company, in fact it relocates it in the milieu in which it has always placed itself — cutting-edge British, European, and North American theatre, in which the relationship of text to staging is currently being re-negotiated in a movement that is now widely defined as postdramatic theatre. The term "postdramatic" describes theatre which calls into question – via form, content, or both – its relationship to the dramatic text and to the conventions of theatre which shape audience expectations. Often, but not necessarily, including new media, postdramatic theatre plays up its own inherent theatricality and treats a script as just one source of meaning-making among others (scenography, acting, audience reaction) rather than as the sacrosanct centre of the theatrical event. While the definition "postdramatic" is in some ways interchangeable with "postmodern", advocates of the concept of the postdramatic insist on the necessity of the new term, which places current activity in the trajectory of theatre history rather than in the general postmodern milieu.

This is Not A Life is as postdramatic a production as has yet been staged by an Irish company; yet, at the same time, writer Alex Johnston and direc-

Caitriona Ni Mhurchu in This Is Not A Life



tor Jimmy Fay seem to be resisting their own movement in this direction. This gives the production an intriguing – if sometimes frustrating – internal tension, and perhaps sets the agenda for future experimentation.

In the play's first act, the four characters, who bear the same first names as their actors, sit around a boardroom-type table, along with part of the audience, and speak to us directly about their project, which, though vaguely defined, has to do with speaking honestly about the lack of grounded values in contemporary Ireland. The irony is that the group itself is rife with internal tensions: frustrated with the authoritarianism of group leader Kevin's attitude, Joe reveals that Kevin has been having an affair with Megan, behind the back of his partner Catríona. This is already known amongst the four of them, but is hardly resolved, as the total breakdown of the meeting – and the arrival of the interval – indicates.

Come the second act, we seem to be in a different play – sort of. The same characters now perform in fourth-wall naturalist style; it is several weeks later, and the group has reassembled for a dinner party following an Al Qaeda-style terrorist attack on Dublin, in which Joe and Megan were slightly injured. This initially seems to have jolted the characters into a new awareness of their self-involvement, but Johnston's

point seems to be that nothing much has changed. Discussion of the attack dissipates into drunken recriminations, random snogs, show tunes, and, finally, everyone passing out.

Connections to other work seem rife here. A mid-play terrorist explosion resulting in a change of theatrical style parallels Sarah Kane's *Blasted*, which Fay directed for Bedrock in 2001. The blurred distinction between character and actor and between performance and real life echoes the work of Forced Entertainment and Martin Crimp, amongst many others. When the production allows menace to creep in, so does the spirit of Caryl Churchill, whose plays Bedrock has also staged. The entire premise of the production – that it both is and isn't a play, that it follows a script but seems also to want to surpass or subvert it – absolutely places it in the postdramatic frame. It seems odd that these influences and synergies are not highlighted in the programme and promotional material; placing the work in what is so clearly its creative and aesthetic context could have benefitted audiences.

While it gestures towards the postdramatic, however, the production holds back from committing entirely. Although the idea of direct address in the first act feels genuinely edgy, the vague ludicrousness of the characters' project dissipates any real



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challenge. Yes, we're being asked to consider the ongoing *embourgeoisement* of Ireland, but the pettiness of those delivering the message makes us wonder how serious Johnston's indictment really is. The switch in style between the first and the second acts is less radical than it initially seems: we end up in the same reality, only seen from a different perspective. The fact that a terrorist attack on Dublin is proposed as content and then, effectively, left to one side feels like a missed opportunity to treat challenging material. Johnston names a problem in the play, but doesn't go the next step into proposing an alternative via, perhaps, a true stylistic breach or a direct engagement with the provocative material he suggests.

Another level of latent tension that could have benefited from further exploration is the multi-nationalism of the cast. Roch and Riordan are Americans, who have, in their short time in Ireland, made a significant impact on the theatre scene. Issues of nationality and cultural clash come up repeatedly in the show, but are never really focused on. In the first act, Megan describes her difficulty with Irish attitudes to alcohol abuse, which feels like an edgy breaching of a taboo is-

sue but quickly tapers off. Catriona's several angry outbursts at Megan are couched in terms of nationality ("little plastic intellectual American Barbie cunt"), and her dismissal when Megan, drunkenly, gets oversolicitous towards her - "fuck off, don't be so American" - got the biggest and sharpest laugh of the night, both times I saw the show. While visible minorities and immigrants from less prosperous countries are the focus of much of the dialogue around the diversification of Ireland, the production taps into another lurking issue – tensions around the arrival of privileged cultural migrants – that feels genuinely fresh and potent.

It is good to hear Johnston's uniquely stinging voice on an Irish stage again (who else could so eloquently dissect the issue of the right time to call the Taoiseach a mother-fucker?), and to see him and Fay working together in close synergy. The actors appear to be having a ball, and commit entirely to what they're doing – with Ní Mhurchu, in particular, transforming from radiant to abject in an almost frighteningly short period of time. This new method seems full of promise; one hopes that this is only the beginning of Bedrock's postdramatic phase. 

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