

irishtheatre MAGAZINE

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MAGAZINE



VOLUME THREE, NUMBER ELEVEN ■ SPRING 2002

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THE CONTENT IN THIS MAGAZINE IS SOLELY THE
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HAIL AND FAREWELL, BICKERSTAFFE

RICHARD COOK AND LYNN CAHILL haven't made big noise about the fact that their theatre company is shutting down because, according to Cook, "we're not interested in retrospectives."

Well, tough. We're going to give them one anyway.

Bickerstaffe has been in business for a decade. Like many of the companies that started up in the early '90s, its founders were interested in challenging the boundaries of theatre, in Bickerstaffe's case locational as well as formal. By putting out their shingle in Kilkenny, a city without its own professional theatre company for adults, Cook and Cahill guaranteed that they would have novelty on their side; but they also faced the challenges of building an audience and of making sure they were taken seriously by scribes and tastemakers in the Big Smoke.

They accomplished both by an innovative primary commitment to the work of directors, and their taste for talent was keen: they discovered John Crowley while he was still at UCC, and let him create any kind of work he liked. The result was *True Lines*, one of the most important Irish productions of the '90s. They gave Conall Morrison free rein to direct what interested him before his career at the Abbey had begun. Over the years such innovative directors as Jimmy Fay and Maelfosa Stafford have worked with the company, on new work and the late lamented outdoor summer Shakespeare.

It's been clear recently that the interest of

Bickerstaffe's founders has shifted towards their work in comedy production — for they have also succeeded in transforming Kilkenny into a hub of the international comedy circuit with the Cat Laughs Festival. The company now is being "reinvented" to extend the Cat Laughs to include not only stand-up but also readings, exhibitions, and the like. The Arts Council, interestingly, has allowed the company to retain its €95,000 grant for 2002, and to apply it to Cat Laughs activities that are not potential self-funding.

But why give up theatre production as well? Cook's answer is bracingly frank: "We've run out of ideas."

What was nearly unique about Bickerstaffe among Irish companies is that it was producer-led: Cook and Cahill located talented individuals and gave them the space, time, and money to make theatre the way they wanted to.

The company's demise raises again the troubled issue of succession in Irish theatre: there have been numerous companies established since the early '90s, but almost all following the usual model of an artistic director setting up a company to do his or her own work. This works some of the time, but rises and falls on a production-by-production basis. A producer-led approach feels sturdier — as long as the producers have vision, as Cook and Cahill do. Where are the new young producing visionaries? We're on the lookout.

In the meantime, here's to ten years of challenging, inspired theatre from Bickerstaffe.

*Where are the
new young
producing
visionaries of
the Cook and
Cahill model?*

TIVOLI STAYING THEATRICAL

CONTRARY TO A REPORT IN THE MARCH 7 *IRISH TIMES*, the Tivoli Theatre is not to become a nightclub. The venue's space downstairs on Francis Street is currently undergoing a €3 million overhaul, backed by Chris Kelly of the Capitol Bar and promoters Paul Davis of Influx and Peter May of Genius, but the theatre's managing director, Tony Byrne, clarified that the theatre itself is under no threat. "We're doing major renovations downstairs," Byrne said, "and then we'll address the upstairs." Byrne says that the downstairs refurbishments will allow for late-night entertainment, but hesitated to call the space a nightclub. Meanwhile Byrne's plans for the theatre upstairs are to make it "a more desirable space" focussed on "the younger market in theatre."

NEWLY AVAILABLE SPACE IN TEMPLE BAR

Temple Bar Properties has advertised for tenders to manage and operate a 2,100 square metre space on West Essex Street. The current occupant, the Dublin Viking Centre, is shutting down. It is a condition of Temple Bar Properties' funding that the space remain devoted to cultural activity, and it will be interesting to see what uses are proposed for this large

and well-located facility. The closing date for tenders is 31 March.

AMEND YOUR HANDBOOKS!

Tinderbox Theatre Company has moved to Imperial Buildings, 72 High Street, Belfast BT1 2BE. Prime Cut Productions has also relocated, to 285a Ormeau Road, Belfast BT7 3GG; new phone number 04890-645-101. Theatre Shop has moved to 7 South Great

SANDY FITZGERALD: APOLOGY

In our report "City Arts closes its doors," published in the Winter 2001 issue, we said that Sandy Fitzgerald, former executive director of the City Arts Centre, had been criticised for "misuse of CAC funds." No such criticism was ever made of Mr. Fitzgerald by any person or organisation, and we unreservedly accept that there is no foundation whatever for any accusation of financial impropriety against Mr. Fitzgerald.

We and the author apologise to Mr. Fitzgerald for the distress and embarrassment caused by our report. We have agreed, at Mr. Fitzgerald's request, to make a donation to a charity of his choice, in lieu of financial damages.

George's Street, Dublin 2; new phone 01-670-4906, fax 01-670-4908.

AWARDS FOR ARTISTS

Artists resident in Dublin City can apply for a Dublin City Council (née Dublin Corporation) bursary of €4,000 towards studies at advanced level or the development of work or professional skills. One bursary will be awarded in each of the five disciplines: visual arts, music, dance,

drama, and literature. Application forms are available from Jack Gilligan, Dublin City Council, Arts Office, 20/21 Parnell Square, Dublin 1. The closing date for submissions is Friday 5 April.

TEEVAN BETTER THAN THE REAL THING

Playwright Colin Teevan is making the most of a sabbatical year away from his lectureship at Queen's Belfast. His adap-

THE CAST OF FOCUS'
A DELICATE BALANCE





ROSALIND HASSLETT

tation of Euripides' *The Bacchae*, directed by Sir Peter Hall, will be performed at the National Theatre, London (8 May – 8 June), before travelling to Newcastle's Theatre Royal and the Epidaurus Festival in Greece. His recent play for the Young Vic, *Monkey: A Tale from China*, concludes a UK tour in the Gateway Theatre, Chester on 23 Mar.

TRAINING FOR MARKETERS

Julie Aldridge of the Arts Marketing Association will present an online marketing seminar in Waterfront Hall, Belfast on 27 Mar. Designed to help arts professionals make the most out of their online activity, "Word of Mouse" offers guidelines for generating websites and e-marketing campaigns. Non-AMA members welcome. Book by email to julie@ama.co.uk with your name, address, and the date/location of the seminar.

THE LATEST PRODIGY

Rosalind Hasslett, a final-year English and Theatre Studies student at TCD, has won Fishamble's "Summer in the City" New Play Competition. She won the award for her first play, *Still*. Fishamble will stage the play in August, as part of Temple Bar Properties' Diversions programme.

SUMMER IN CORK, LIKE

The annual Cork Midsummer Festival takes place from 18–29 Jun. One innovative event will be an audio tour of the city penned by author and playwright Cónal Creedon. Participants wear individual headsets and walk the streets, guided by Creedon's part-fact, part-fiction narrative. Cork Opera House will host *The Wedding* directed by Kathi Leahy. Graffiti Theatre Company will work with local youths to present an outdoor, site-specific performance. Corcadurca will present rehearsed readings of three plays chosen from submissions to the Corcadurca Playwright Award 2001, and directed by Thomas Conway, Tom Creed, and Oonagh Kearney (27–29 Jun. at the Triskel Arts Centre). Boomerang Theatre, in collaboration with Italian street theatre company

PUTTING TRAINING IN TRAIN

The Arts Council/An Chomhairle Ealaíon has called for tenders for the development, design, and delivery of training programmes and other developmental supports for the arts. It is seeking proposals from its own staff, the managers of arts organisations, and their voluntary boards. A copy of this tender can be found on the Council's website: www.artscouncil.ie. The council will also seek views from the arts sector and will hold a meeting on the subject in their offices on 26 March.



TWO FROM BLUE RAINCOAT:
A BRIEF TASTE OF LIGHTNING
AND THE HOLLOW IN THE SAND

Teatro Instabile Urga and Spanish company Teatro Guirigai, will present an outdoor show based on the poem "Lament for Arthur Cleary" in Emmet Place. And Cork Arts Link will perform a street theatre show, on the theme of *Faust*, at Coal Quay.

... AND MAY IN BELFAST

The Cathedral Quarter Arts Festival in Belfast includes Brian McAvera's *Kings of the Road* (1-4 May); Martin Lynch's *History of the Troubles (According to My Da)* (1-12 May); the Irish premiere of Mike Maran's *Did You Used to be RD Laing* (4 May); Dionysis Theatre Company's production of Strindberg's *The Stronger*; Try 2B Scene's series of monologues, *Stills* (May 6-7); and Gare St Lazare Players' *Beckett Trilogy* (10-11 May).

SMASHING CULTURAL BOUNDARIES

Smashing Times Theatre Company run ongoing workshops which aim to raise awareness of racism and to celebrate cultural diversity, bringing together partici-

pants from ethnic communities, professional actors, and community-based drama organisations. Those interested in taking part can contact Smashing Times on 01-865-6613. In Nov. 2002, the company will premiere *The Spoken Word* —

.....
Got a One-Act under your Bed?

Submissions for the O.Z. Whitehead Competition are due on 31 Mar.; this is an annual one-act play festival open to Irish playwrights and foreign nationals resident in Ireland. More information available from the Irish Playwrights' and Screenwriters' Guild at the Dublin Writers Centre: info@writerscentre.ie. Meanwhile, entry for Focus Theatre's annual One-Act Play competition has been extended until 30 Mar. Entries can be sent to New Writing, Focus Theatre, Pembroke Place, Dublin 2. Two plays will be chosen for production in Focus Theatre in Jul.-Aug. 2002. In the meantime the Focus will stage Edward Albee's play *A Delicate Balance*, directed by Caroline Fitzgerald (13 Mar.-20 Apr.)

LOVERS AT VERSAILLES



Markets Over 800 Years, based on the history of the Smithfield markets area of Dublin. It will be a community arts co-production with the Northwest Inner City Women's Network community drama group.

UPCOMING PRODUCTIONS

Corcadoreca's latest is *Bruen's Twist* by Eamonn Sweeney and directed by Pat Kiernan, playing in the Everyman Palace, Cork from 4-13 Apr. Ben Hennessey directs Tony Guerin's new play *Hummin'* for Red Kettle; after a Garter Lane run from 15 Apr.-4 May, it will tour and settle into Andrew's Lane, Dublin from 20 May-15 Jun. Meanwhile Jim Nolan's Red Kettle production of *Kings of the Kilburn High Road* by Jimmy Murphy plays in the Irish Arts Centre, New York from 11 Mar.-19 Apr... Andrew's Lane will host the revival of Guna Nua's *Scenes From a Watercooler*, a Dublin Fringe

favourite (27 Mar.-10 Apr.) as well as receiving Gerard Stembridge's *Denis and Rose* (22 Apr.-18 May). Calypso has revived its production of Roddy Doyle's *Guess Who's Coming for the Dinner* for a run in Andrew's Lane (through 16 Mar.) before it transfers to the Civic, Tallaght (18-23 Mar.). It will then tour to theatre venues in Ballymun, Monaghan, Letterkenny, Galway, Athlone, and Ennis; to Portlaoise and Mountjoy prisons; and will have a special performance for refugees and asylum seekers at the dispersal centre in Mosney, Co. Meath, on 27 Mar.

The Lyric Theatre's next is Tom Murphy's *Conversations on a Homecoming*, directed by Conall Morrison (12 Apr.-4 May); a revival of Marie Jones' *A Night in November*, with Dan Gordon reprising his solo turn, will play at the Lyric from 7 Jun.-6 Jul... The Civic hosts Storytellers' production of *Women in Arms*

written and directed by Mary Elizabeth Burke-Kennedy (6–13 Apr.). There will be an in-house Civic production of *Othello*, directed by John Delaney, in their Loose End space from 16 Apr.–11 May. Rattlebag's production of *Mansfield Park* returns to the Civic from 29 Apr.–4 May, pursued by *Scenes From A Watercolor* (6–11 May). Cork's Brown Penny presents Tom Kilroy's adaptation of Ibsen's *Ghosts* at the Civic from 13–18 May.

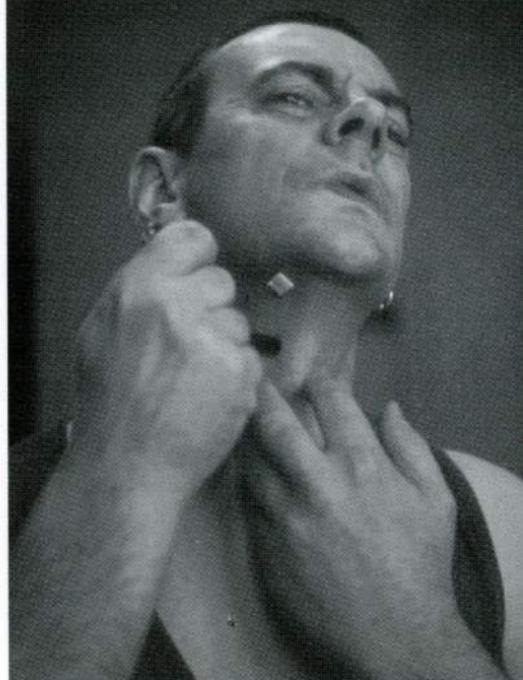
Following the Abbey's production of Bernard Farrell's *Lovers at Versailles* (6 Mar.–4 May), Gerard Stembridge directs his own new play, *That Was Then*, opening 21 May. Patrick Mason will then direct a new production of Hugh Leonard's *Da* from 9 Jul. Joe O'Byrne's new play *En Suite* plays at the Peacock until 20 Apr., followed by Martin Drury directing Aidan Mathews' *Communion*, opening 30 Apr. Tom Murphy's own production of his play *Bailegangaire*, revived from the Murphy season, starts performances 13 Jun. Patrick Mason — busy man! — will also direct Frank McGuinness' latest, *Gates of Gold*, at the Gate Theatre, Dublin from 25 Apr.–1 Jun.

Rough Magic stages the Irish premiere of Michael Frayn's *Copenhagen* at Project, directed by Lynne Parker with Ingrid Craigie, Declan Conlon, and Owen Roe (19 Apr.–11 May). Other Project theatre offerings include the Convergence Festival, featuring Perimeter Productions' staging of Buchner's *Woyzeck* (8–13 Apr.). Danse Macabre perform *An Evening of Ionesco*, featuring five short works written by and adapted from the absurdist playwright and directed by Nicole Wiley (30 Apr.–4 May).

Island Theatre Company's production of

Mike Finn's *Pigtown* returns to the University Concert Hall, Limerick (15–19 May). Next up at Island, Terry Devlin directs Brian Friel's *Faith Healer* with Barry McGovern and Joan Sheehy, opening at the Belltable Arts Centre on 4 Jul. for three weeks, followed by a nationwide tour. Island will present the pre-

GUESS WHO'S COMING FOR THE DINNER



miere of Mike Finn's new play *The Quiet Moment* at the Belltable in November. Blue Raincoats have two new plays coming up: *The Hollow in the Sand* by Brendan Ellis (13–23 Mar.) and *A Brief Taste of Lightning* by Malcom Hamilton (15–20 Apr.) both directed by Niall Henry at the Factory, Sligo.

TACKLING HAUGHEY'S SUBJECT

The ramifications of the controversy over SEBASTIAN BARRY's latest play echo well beyond the Hinterland, argues PATRICK LONERGAN.

WHAT, EXACTLY, IS SO BAD ABOUT *Hinterland*? Using aspects of the career of Charles Haughey, the play explores Sebastian Barry's well-known preoccupations with fatherhood, power, memory, and dislocation. Early press reports focussed

only on the play's treatment of Haughey, however, and reports that his solicitors were examining Barry's script created the public belief that *Hinterland* was "about" the former Taoiseach in a biographical sense. That perception proved difficult to dispel.

The controversy took off a week after the play's 1 February premiere, when it was subjected to a stunningly vituperative attack by *Irish Times* literary correspondent Eileen Battersby, who called it "a vulgar, tacky travesty" and a "naïve undergraduate revue treatment" of a complex figure; its satire was "moronic," claimed Battersby, and its author "cowardly." The notion that the play was not just controversial but badly written was also given airing on the 18 February *Rattlebag* when, in an interview with Abbey artistic director Ben Barnes, presenter Myles Dungan repeatedly emphasised the Abbey's "right

FATHER AND SON: Drew and Malahide in *Hinterland*



to fail" and fretted about *Hinterland* being sent abroad as a bad ambassador for Irish drama.

Barnes moved quickly to defend the play and the Abbey's duty to produce it. Highlighting the irony of the media complaining about an invasion of Haughey's privacy, he pointed out that, although the Abbey is often criticised for being "irrelevant as far as contemporary culture is concerned," *Hinterland* showed that it was grappling "with contemporary social and political mores." People are entitled to form opinions, Barnes argued, but "it is not acceptable to us that journalists who know little or nothing about the theatre and rarely, if ever, come are queuing up to tell us how bad a play *Hinterland* is."

Apparently unaware of the further irony in doing so, the press rushed to report Barnes's comments, with the *Irish Independent* giving them front-page coverage. Most damagingly, on 24 February — the day after *Hinterland* concluded its Dublin run — *The Sunday Times* published two articles critical of both Barnes and the Abbey, which included a claim by Michael Ross that the theatre has "lost its sense of purpose" and that its problems are caused by "a private fiefdom directed by a couple of stubborn personalities."

The Abbey has clearly been damaged by this controversy. Following the *Barbaric Comedies* debacle in 2000 and the dreadful mishandling of the theatre's proposed redevelopment, Barnes was justified in saying on *Rattlebag* that the reputation he brought to the Abbey for having a "safe pair of hands" must now surely be gone. This is unfortunate: under Barnes, the Abbey has achieved many successes — notably its Tom Murphy season — while also significantly improving its administrative structures.

The failure of the Abbey to publicise these successes is worrying. There may be no such thing as bad publicity, but a theatre that needs to galvanise public support to resolve its difficulties with funding and redevelopment would benefit much more from praise than controversy.

And the negative effects of the *Hinterland* fracas ripple far beyond Abbey Street. Last year, Barry confessed to apprehension about *Hinterland*'s Dublin opening. Following the poor reception of his last Dublin premiere, *The One True History of Lizzie Finn*, Barry felt that "There are certain towns I don't want to go back to unprotected, and Dublin is one of them." Barry was approaching the Abbey "with infinite caution," he said, because of "a sense that it's only 10% an arena for theatre and 90%, it has other concerns."

Barry's difficulty with producing work in Dublin is shared by many other Irish writers — notably Conor McPherson, who stated recently that he intends to premiere his plays in London because "he won't put up with the level of criticism here." Having his first Dublin premiere in a decade labelled "moronic" is unlikely to convince Barry — and other writers like McPherson — that success is possible on this side of the Irish Sea. The *Hinterland* controversy may have damaged the Abbey, but it is also one further example of how the poor standard of theatre criticism in Ireland is undermining the development of new writing.

The literary qualities of *Hinterland* deserved more attention — and so did its politics. At a post-show discussion at the Abbey, director Max Stafford-Clark — famous for his controversial work with writers like Mark Ravenhill and Andrea Dunbar — rejected the criticism

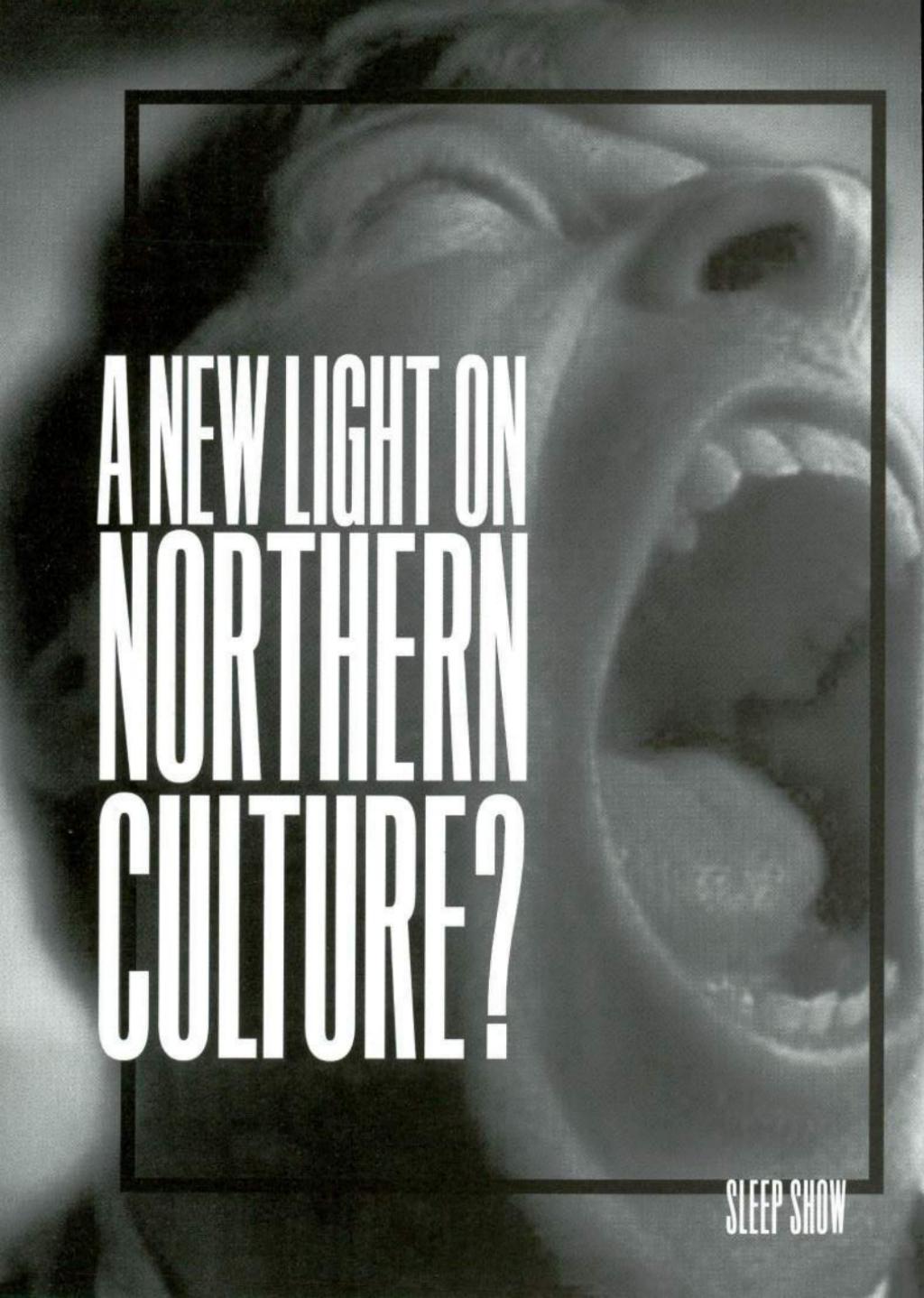


SURVEYING HIS KINGDOM: Patrick Malahide and Dearbhla Molloy in *Hinterland*

of *Hinterland*, stating that its strengths will be evident in "five or ten or 20 years." While there is some truth in such statements, the need for the play's defenders to talk down its politics has stripped *Hinterland* of much of its immediacy. As Barry implied when he stated that "my horrible thesis is that [politicians like Haughey] are part of us," *Hinterland* wants to make audiences uncomfortable now. Irish audiences deserved to have this discomfort articulated and resolved.

With Marina Carr's *Ariel* — about a murderous midlands politician — due to premiere at the Abbey in October, and as John Breen prepares his new play *Charlie*, reportedly also about the former Taoiseach, for a September tour, it looks like people will be talking about *Hinterland* for some time to come.

Patrick Lonergan is carrying out research on contemporary Irish theatre at NUI Galway. Gerry Dukes' review of *Hinterland* appears on page 101 of this magazine.



A NEW LIGHT ON
NORTHERN
CULTURE?

SLEEP SHOW

"Let there be Light!" was the ambitious slogan of the 2001 Belfast Festival at Queen's, STELLA HALL's first as director.

MARK PHELAN casts a critical eye of the BFQ's theatre programme, placing it against the background of a society where the notion of culture seems perennially in crisis.

AT PRESENT BELFAST IS COMPETING TO BE EUROPEAN CAPITAL OF conflict — sorry, culture — for 2008. To many (cynical) citizens, such an appellation seems somewhat amusing, part of the post-peace process packaging of Belfast as a vibrant, rejuvenated city, an image which has limited purchase in the public consciousness. Much of the regeneration remains confined to prestige developments in the Laganside and city centre areas, while in the riot-racked north of the city the only noticeable public investment appears to be in the euphemistically entitled peace walls.

In light of the ongoing sectarian ferment in Belfast, one sometimes feels like there is more culture in yoghurt; but many would maintain that the annual Belfast Festival at Queen's can be relied on to import a much needed international colouring and flavouring to a rather bland year-round cultural diet. The Festival's history is long and far from untroubled, and opened up a new chapter this year, the first that Stella Hall programmed as director.

The Belfast Festival has been in existence for 39 years; is run as a department

of Queen's University; and has long been seen as elitist, highbrow, conservative, and contemptuous of local provender. Michael Barnes operated an extraordinary duopoly as both Festival director and artistic director of the Grand Opera House from

1980 well into the 1990s. That Barnes commissioned an "Irish-themed" Festival in 1982, with an "Italian theme" following in 1984, epitomised his approach and indicates why there was little or no local involvement during his reign. His festivals had the sense of colonial throwback to the 19th-century circuit of visiting English

productions, with annual RSC tours and visiting orchestras the staples of the programme.

This trend continued right up until the entrance of Sean Doran, who in his first year, 1996, programmed the work of



Robert Wilson, Phillip Glass, and Romeo Castellucci — the latter hailed by Michael Billington as the “face of 21st-century theatre.” However, although Doran’s programming restored much freshness and vitality to the Festival, as an institution it remained unreformed. Perversely, Doran remained on a part-time contract, making him the only member of the BFQ staff who was not paid during the Festival: no wonder he left for Australia after less than two years at the BFQ.

Upon Doran’s departure, two things happened: the Festival’s former formulaic programming returned, and its severe financial problems surfaced publically. It seemed that, in attempting to revitalise the Festival, Doran had overestimated potential box office returns in a city where Castellucci remains a brand of ice cream. What Doran had critically failed to acknowledge was that the Festival’s failings were not confined to conservative programming alone but to its long tradition of neglecting to cultivate a local audience.

In her first year in charge of the Festival, Stella Hall was hampered by a reduced budget. Both the University and the Arts Council are backsiding on their investment in the Festival, which initially seems strangely at odds with the seismic political changes of recent years. A changed Arts Council drawn more “democratically” from the local community now includes members who have never been enamoured with what they see as the ivoried institution that is the BFQ, which they continue to associate with university elitism and direct rule that had for so long isolated and alienated them.

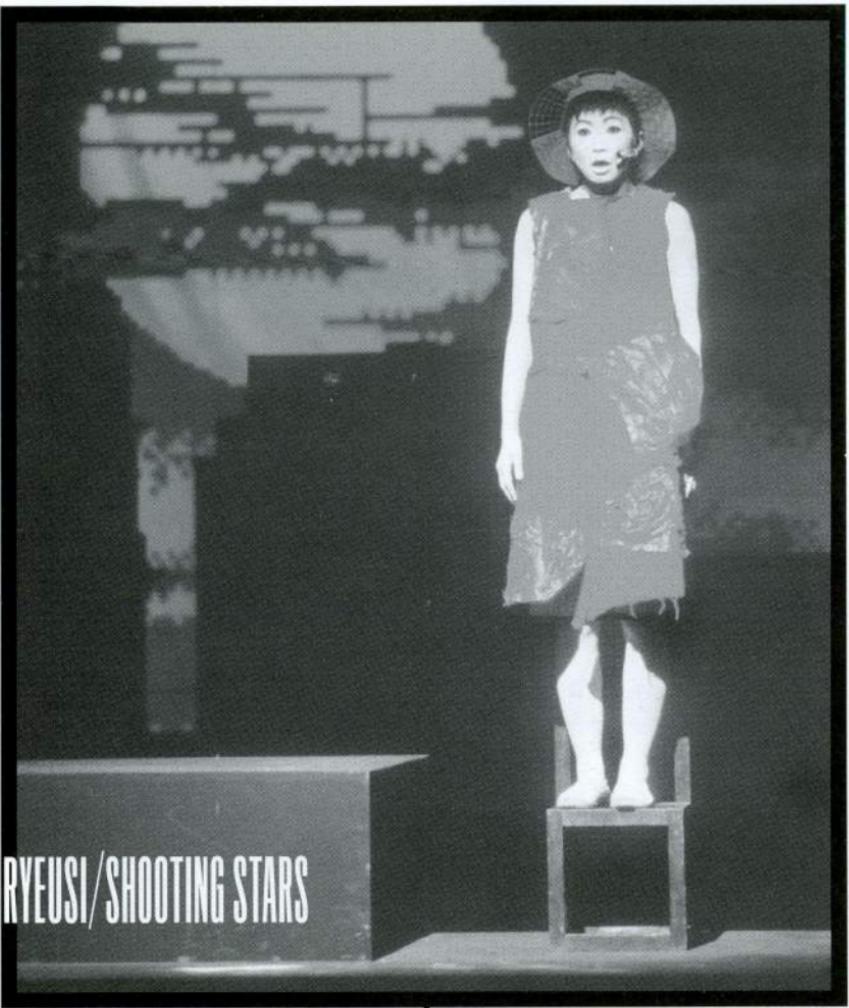
These lingering associations, however, will hopefully be somewhat dispelled by Hall’s honest attempt to widen the constituencies of the Festival, both in terms of audiences and artists. The year’s theme was the rather messianic “Let there be

Light” — irradiating from the film and visual arts programme in the form of the Hindu Festival of Diwali (Lights), which helped open the Festival, and Rita Duffy’s *Drawing the Blinds*, which closed it. What was interesting about both projects was the way they (re)framed the Festival, the former engaging with Belfast’s small Indian community and the latter with residents of the Divis area, one of the most socially deprived parts of the city: both target constituencies which have traditionally been excluded from the Festival.

So far so good — so what about the Festival’s theatre component? A cursory glance at the programme promised an interesting mix of big-budget, corporate productions; European avant-garde work; and local offerings.

Heralded as the highlight of the Festival, *Ryeusi/Shooting Stars* was certainly its biggest single production. Belfast was one of only two European cities with a large enough facility to host this massive show from Osaka’s Ishin-ha theatre company — an impressive marketing coup, although the show itself was rather disappointing: a cold experience, both physically and performatively.

As a spectacle of music, movement, and dance, *Ryeusi* was very different from the traditional Noh, Kabuki, and Butoh we associate with Japanese theatre. In the cavernous playing space of the Harland and Wolff Paint Hall (where the Titanic was painted), 35 performers pounded out a precise series of choreographed routines on a huge set of black boxes geometrically arranged to represent the skyline of some malevolent metropolis. The staging and scale of *Ryeusi* gave it a cinematic feel, its massive stage recalling the elaborate sets of Hollywood musicals whilst its setting in “a post-nuclear city” dovetailed nicely with the physical *mise en scène* of Harland and Wolff — a rusting reminder of the



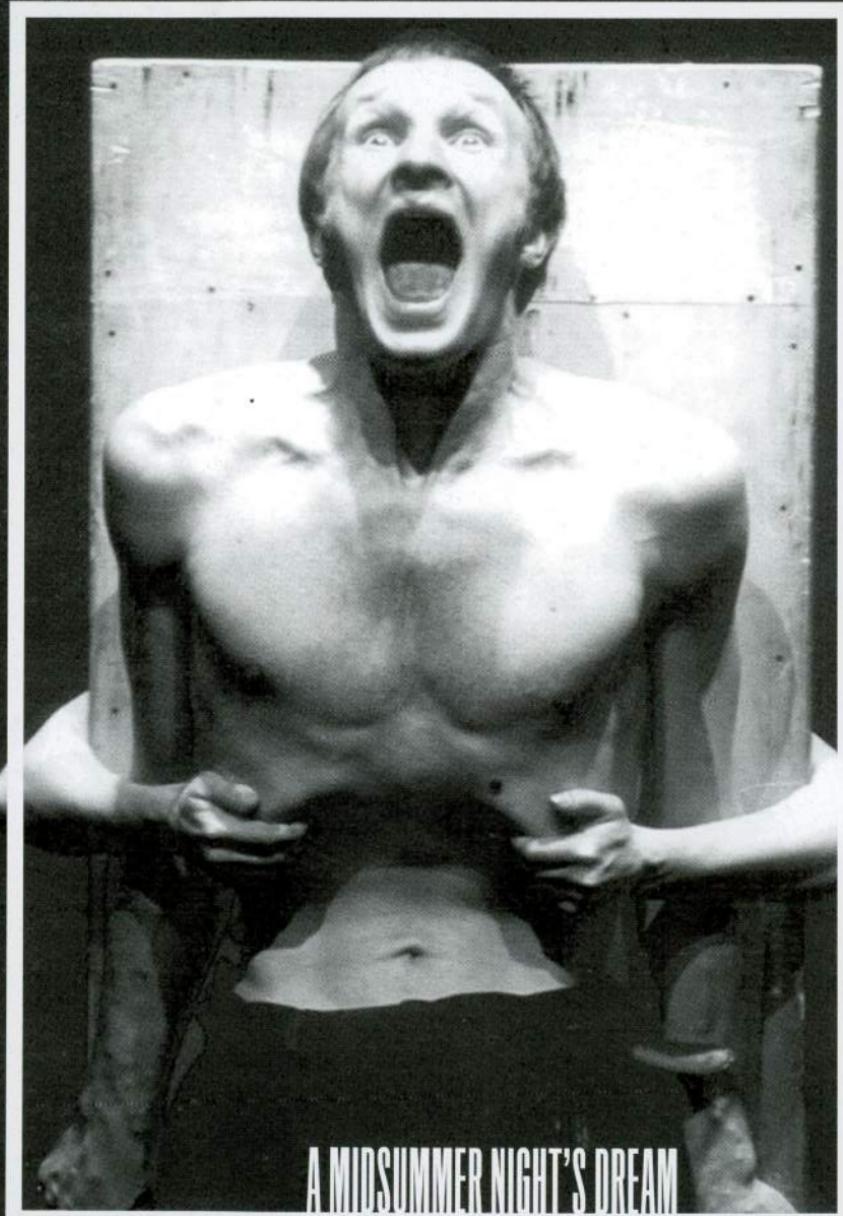
RYEUSI/SHOOTING STARS

city's industrial decline.

Performed in a style the company has dubbed "Jan Jan Opera," (which aptly translates as "Noise Opera"), the soundtrack consisted of interwoven layers of live and recorded sound, music, and speech which matched both the space and the setting. However, it was difficult to

discern what was happening in the play, given its disjointed narrative, which appeared to follow two boys lost in the hostile and violent city before, in a ridiculous scene, they encounter two aliens who appear from a spaceship.

The incoherence of this plot was compounded by the play's structure as a



A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM

series of choreographed tableaux; although impressive in both scale and sculptural composition, these images were visually non-communicative, as the pounding precision of the performers' movements denied any play of meaning. On the whole, the visual, aural and kinetic elements of *Ryeusi* were well-integrated in the production's clinical aesthetic, but that controlled formalism, compounded with the freezing temperature of the Paint Hall itself, ultimately left audiences, well, cold.

The Theft of Sita was an altogether different affair, a strange show that can only be described as an hybridised scion of the international theatre festival circuit. Ironically, its simplistic political attack on global capitalism appeared to bite the political *** that bred it! A multi-media production mixing traditional Balinese wayang kulit (shadow puppet play), photographic projection, film footage, computer animation, traditional gamelan music, and modern jazz, *The Theft of Sita* was an inchoate mess both ideologically and aesthetically. Using the Sanskrit story of the Ramayana, in which the beautiful Sita is stolen from Rama by the demon Rahwana as a mythic meta-text, it attempted to address the recent political upheavals in Indonesia and to attack the continuing legacy of colonialism in South-East Asia.

Sita is spirited away from her Edenic natural paradise and brought to the corrupt urban jungle by the capitalist demon Rahwana. Rama dispatches his servants, Tualen and Merdah, to find and restore her to him. As they travel through the forest which is being burned by fire and cut down by monstrous logging machine puppets, Tualen explains to his son how the forest is being destroyed to provide toilet paper for the west.

Upon emerging from the forest, the two

punakawan enter the city with its surreal landscape of factories, chimneys, electrical pylons, motorways, and skyscrapers where they are swept up with students and demonstrators. With them they storm Rahwana's palace as his financial empire collapses. As scenes of the violent end of Suharto's regime are projected before the puppets, their shadows are seen tentatively approaching the ballot box.

On the surface, *The Theft of Sita* appears to be a laudable effort to engage in political debate, but in actuality it conflates a panoply of cultural and political issues — post-colonialism, international capitalism, tourism, environmental destruction, racism, and multinational corporations — and collapses them into a confused and contradictory narrative. The single biggest problem with the play is its position within these political discourses. Whilst denouncing the economic depredations of multinational corporations, *The Theft of Sita* conveniently ignored its own complicity in the same capitalist systems of exploitation.

The Theft of Sita was produced by Performing Lines, a company dedicated to "the global advocacy of Australian work through to the creation and development of touring circuits." The show, however, appropriates Balinese theatre practices to generate capital through its commercial export to the Western festival circuit (prior to Belfast, the show played in Adelaide, Melbourne, Hanover, Paris, London, and New York). When asked in a post-show discussion whether or not the play had been performed in Bali or anywhere else in Indonesia, director Nigel Jamieson demurred, saying that the show was too expensive to be performed there and that no theatre could afford it. It would seem then that profit rather than political principles were the primary concerns of this project, as post-colonial appropriation

masqueraded as intercultural exchange.

Unlike *The Theft of Sita*, Oskaras Korsunovas' tour de force production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* appealed to the intellect rather than emotions. As one of a number of young Lithuanian directors reacting to the new challenges of post-communist theatre and searching for a modern means of expression and non-traditional acting, he has, in his highly physical, playful and visually stunning production of Shakespeare's play, discovered a truly extraordinary corporeal dramaturgy. Stating that he wanted to avoid the "costume fairy tale" atmosphere that productions of the play tend to create, he accomplished this with style through a potent mixture of surrealism, expressionism, and Brechtian acting, allied with the extraordinary athleticism and energy of his talented troupe.

Korsunovas' production deconstructs both the play and traditional forms of staging: the 16-strong cast wear unisex dungarees and enter carrying plain wooden boards, which served myriad purposes. As setting, the boards created the walls and pillars of Athens, as well as the forest labyrinth of trees and traps. As props they operated as gymnastic apparatus, percussive instruments, doors, walkways, rhythm machines, sexual partners — bringing a plasticity to the performance that succeeded in releasing, in Korsunovas' words, the "phantasmagoric character of the play." This minimalism was merely a material one, for Korsunovas concentrated on developing a physical dramaturgy with his actors performing the two worlds of the play and everything within it with their bodies and their boards. This synergy between flesh and wood embodied and contrasted the worlds of court and forest.

The cold, hard, implacable world of the

court was suggested by the hard edges and clinical symmetry of upright boards, forming a structure wherein Theseus and Hippolyta were performed by two other upright boards: monolithic columns mirroring the immutable strictures of Athens and its rigid law. The boards also "performed" a courtly dance to stiff, formalised choreography; the actors' bodies behind the planks were obscured. In libidinous contrast to this was the sensual physicality of the forest which was visually and vocally brought to life as the intertwined bodies and boards of the actors became sinuous vines and branches, whilst their voices cried out the strange sounds of the forest.

Such sexiness was sadly missing from Kabosh's *Sleep Show*. Whilst the Lithuanians brought out the darker, sexual nature of Shakespeare's comedy, Kabosh's exploration of a dream world was a curiously chaste affair: In a post-Freudian world, does it not seem bizarre to do a show about sleep and the subconscious without sex? I speak not out of a prurient desire to see lithe young dancers get lascivious on stage but out of a (Freudian?) frustration that the physical movement of the piece was so staidly static, regulated (and seemingly repressed). This physical lack of imagination was in contrast to its extraordinary setting: a scaffold, "dressed" with clothes, enclosing a raked stage replete with numerous cubbyholes and crevices.

Suspended high above the stage was a bed, broodingly lit by a dimly pulsing naked bulb which revealed the slumbering form of a boy. As the dreamer slept, the shadows and shapes of his dreams come to life from the under the floorboards and through the walls. This exquisitely beautiful opening image radiated with promise, which however drained away over the

show's hour-long playing time; the show was particularly disappointing because it felt repetitive: Kabosh explored the sleep and dream worlds in their immediately previous, similarly movement-based production *Oriana*.

Marie Jones' *Weddin's, Weeins and Wakes*

previous, smash-hit collaboration, *Stones in his Pockets*, made it the Festival's most popular show. Audiences who have never enjoyed a Northern version of the Southern Synge-song theatrical language were here delighted by the casting of Belfast speech into rhyming couplets.



witnessed the return of the award-winning partnership of Marie Jones and Ian McElhinney to the Lyric Theatre. The play, reworked from an earlier Charabanc production, was an Orange idyll that resembles an urbanised version of that earlier Protestant pastorale, St John Ervine's *Boyd's Shop*. Its outstanding cast (led by Jones' Charabanc co-founders Eleanor Methven and Carol Moore, along with Dan Gordon, Séan Kearns, Richard Dormer, and Katie Tomelty), strong production values, and the same kind of intelligent and witty directorial touches which distinguished Jones and McElhinney's

Reviews, however, were remarkably mixed, in a non-secular sense! National broadsheets patronised the show as "parochial," and that most provincial of publications, *The Belfast Telegraph*, with a hilarious admixture of hubris and hypocrisy, castigated it for its lack of a critique. These reviewers rebuked Jones for romanticising the past, perhaps a fair enough charge but for the fact that it is never levelled against another local, Van Morrison, who has romanticised East Belfast for decades and never faced the same criticism. There also seemed to be a reluctance to recognise that this was not

realism, but a burlesque, slapstick romp.

Accusations that Jones' play was compromised by its "lack of critique" of the Protestant culture it so celebrates stems from the insidious ideological assumption that every representation of Orangeism should automatically condemn it on the basis that any decent "liberal" knows they are a bunch of simian, sectarian knuckle-draggers. On the contrary, Jones deserves commendation for portraying a much-maligned religious and cultural identity that has long been under-represented and misunderstood in Ireland — a point that seems all the more ironic given that she has frequently been criticised for "turning Taig" in other plays, most notably *A Night in November*.

It is true that *Weddin's, Weeins* did indulge in nostalgia and had its fair share of saccharine, sentimental songs, but it was still altogether more complex than it was given credit for, and a far cry, say, from Gary Mitchell's old-fashioned melodrama. What was politically radical about the play was its refusal to represent Orangeism as mere atavistic sectarianism. And accordingly, what came palpably across to this Catholic nationalist sitting in the audience was the fact that in many tightly knit "loyal" local communities, the "Twelfth" is more pageant than politics.

Tinderbox's devised offering, *No Place Like Home*, tackled the issue of the mass displacement of civilians in times of conflict, drawing heavily from local experiences as well as those from Europeans and Africans. Overall the production was hugely problematic. The superb programme, edited by Roisin Higgins, was a valuable historical collection of the experiences of displacement from Catholic and Protestant perspectives, as well as those from members of minority Asian communities. These searing per-

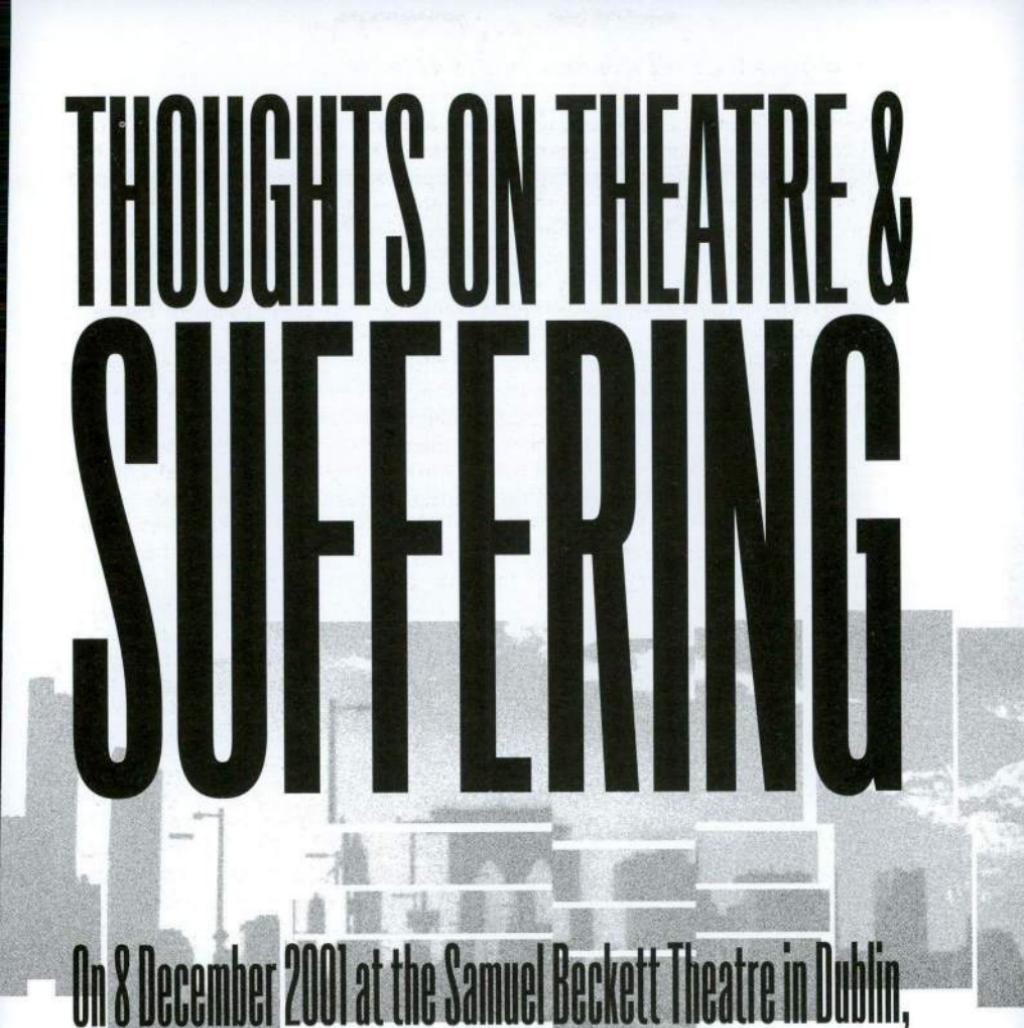
sonal accounts might have provided rich material for a narrative exposition; but the play's performance style relied upon an abstract, non-narrative, highly physical and visual idiom that worked against the very accounts which inspired the piece. There was a deeply unsatisfying dramaturgical displacement between form and content.

Although director Simon Magill's strong physical and visual direction was imaginative and technically well-performed by the five-member cast, it was ultimately the incoherent and allusive nature of Owen McCafferty's script which undermined these efforts. This seems all the more ironic and unfortunate given that the company's last project, *Convictions*, was highly successful precisely because it embodied the social, spatial, historical, and political specificity that *No Place Like Home* eschewed.

In terms of programming, then, it was an encouraging first Festival for Hall, although one was continually struck by a lack of Festival presence in the city and the failure to generate any palpable sense of Festival "atmosphere." On one hand this was due to lack of funds and the continued failure of the media and political figures to take the arts seriously. But when one compares this with the successful supersaturation marketing strategies of the Dublin Theatre Festival — or even the visual presence of the UDA and UFF's promotional material in Belfast — it seems strange that the North's biggest cultural institution packs such a paltry punch. Perhaps a bit of political consultancy might improve things for next year — you never know, might make an interesting commission for Marie Jones and Gary Mitchell!

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THOUGHTS ON THEATRE & SUFFERING



On 8 December 2001 at the Samuel Beckett Theatre in Dublin,

director Conall Morrison, under the auspices of the National Theatre and Bickerstaffe Theatre Company, staged a rehearsed reading of Hanoch Levin's *Murder*, a graphic portrayal of sectarian violence, written out of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Morrison organised the reading as a response to the 11 September terrorist bombings in the United States, and to the issues that the atrocity raised about the role of art in times of

crisis. These issues were discussed by a panel, and the audience, following the reading of *Murder*. Here three participants discuss their response to the event and the issues raised: actor Miche Doherty, who performed in the reading; and playwright Gavin Kostick and post-graduate student Andrea Romaldi, who observed the week-long rehearsal process and participated in the panel discussion.

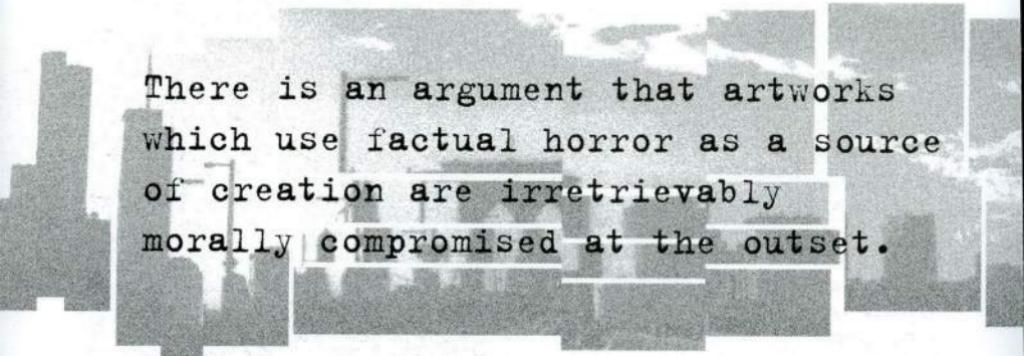
CONTEMPLATING HORROR

BY GAVIN KOSTICK

THREE ARE PARTICULAR WORKS OF ART which are especially potent because they take their source material from situations of real suffering. When one observes them, one is aware that lurking behind the artistic production there is an actuality which is desperately and shockingly painful. Recent presentations in Dublin of *Judith* by Howard Barker, and *Blasted* by Sarah Kane gained their urgency by reference to real events in

intervention, even one based in fact, such as *Schindler's List*, is fundamentally incapable of describing (let alone recreating) the true horror of certain barbaric situations. Indeed art is bound by its nature to render palatable that which should not be palatable. The use of artistic technique to turn such experiences into the pleasurable (and financially rewarding) commodity of art is seen, in this argument, as a decadent insult to the dead.

In the view of cultural critics such as Theodor Adorno, art has a border where it must simply stop and step aside for fact and documentary. But, of course, there is simply no system by which we



There is an argument that artworks which use factual horror as a source of creation are irretrievably morally compromised at the outset.

Bosnia. Going further back, *Come Good Rain* by George Seremba was a powerful recounting of the author's actual experiences under the Amin dictatorship in Uganda. Hanoch Levin's *Murder* races through explosive and deeply distressing personal cycles of violence in an Israeli society where there is the violence of power (both state and personal) but no justice or understanding.

There is an argument that artworks which use factual horror as a source of creation are irretrievably morally compromised at the outset. Any artistic

can stop artists using whatever they like for source material. What authority could prevent Robin Williams from making *Jakob the Liar*? The fact is, that good and bad art will be made out of these events regardless of any *fiat*. And as there is generally more bad art than good anyway, if the good artist entirely absents him or herself through moral scruple, the situation is so much the worse. Given that this is the case we may as well, to paraphrase Ibsen, put on our working trousers and go into the muck.

What effect on an audience can we value from plays which draw from, and represent graphically, real suffering?

The first simple answer is that such plays make an audience emotionally engage with the suffering of people of whom we might have knowledge but with whom we have no relationship. There is a difference between knowing something in a factual newspaperish manner and knowing it in an experiential, emotional sense. It is when people internalise something in an emotional, rather than literal, sense that they tend to be provoked to a response. Good drama tends of its nature to assert the interest and value of the individual life. Barbaric cruelties of a large or on-going kind require the removal of the victim's individual, particular characteristics. Drama is a method by which the audience is enabled (or sometimes forced) to turn statistics into flesh and blood.

Having made the decision to produce such work, there are still good or bad artistic decisions to be made in the course of producing such work. One common weakness is that of the artist prioritising his/her own emotional response within the artwork. The artist is not primarily making the audience relate to what has happened or what is happening, but saying, Let me tell you how badly I feel about these things. This results in "hitching a ride to the gas-chamber," as Paulin said of Amis. It also frequently results in an implicitly accusatory work. *Blasted* seems to me to be shouting, particularly in the second half, "I feel this strongly — why don't you? This is real — why don't you believe me?" The audience is (often incorrectly) made to feel bad or inadequate about its supposed emotional shallowness and many will resentfully lose interest.

WHERE DO I STAND?

BY MICHE DOHERTY

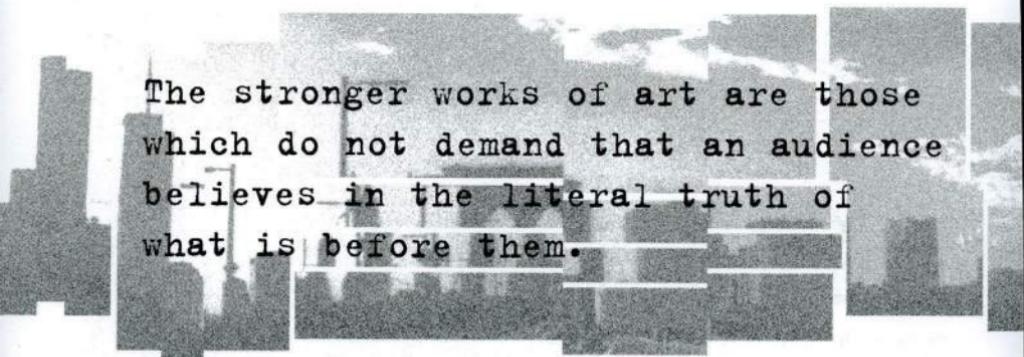
11 SEPTEMBER, 2001

It's been a gloomy few weeks in Belfast, with news reports from Ardoyne reducing us all to impotent mutters of "Will it ever end"; and mentions of "peace process" usually yoked to the word "stalled." It has been a relief to escape to the airy perpetual summer of *The Importance of Being Earnest* (which Dan Gordon is directing for the Lyric Theatre). Today, though, no such escape is possible, and we wind up early to go and watch the news. The next day, of course, we buckle down and get back to business (almost) as usual, but I think we're all wondering now whether what we are doing is pointlessly trivial. Still, no doubt, if we'd been working on a play about mass murder, we'd have



A second common flaw in the types of work we are discussing stems from the artist's (deliberate or accidental) confusion of real fact with an artwork. Plays and films are simply not the best source of primary factual information. For one, they can rarely be as exhaustive or as detailed as even short work of history. Yet certain artworks, say *Schindler's List*, depend upon the continuous implicit assertion that what is happening is true — not just in an emotional and human sense, but in a literal, event-by-event sense. The core problem here is that discussion of the artwork rapidly degenerates into the stale debate concerning the truth or otherwise of depicting

The stronger works of art are those which do not demand that an audience believes in the literal truth of what is before them. The movie *M*A*S*H*, for example, is a successful satire on the ongoing (at the time) Vietnam War, precisely because it is set in the Korean War and is thus not dismissible by argument over specific historic detail. Another example would be the tremendous strength and purpose of the writing of Gary Mitchell, which stems from his immersion in actuality, which is then recreated into fictional drama. Because his work is fiction, it is not possible to dismiss it as "inaccurate" on any literal grounds, but the high-impact and pre-



The stronger works of art are those which do not demand that an audience believes in the literal truth of what is before them.

ed events. For example, after the recent televisation of *Bloody Sunday*, which effectively stands as a retelling of actual events, we had the usual accusations of excessive condensation, bias and distortion on one side and "poetic truth" on the other. The overall effect of this is hard to quantify, but there is at least partially a demoralisation of the audience into an uncertainty about where the truth lies. The event becomes important again, because it is brought into public consciousness, but it is done so in a confused and argumentative way.

cise scenarios that he creates are clearly troublingly reflective of a particular truth, which cannot be shrugged off.

The arguments above carry the implicit idea that the artist is trying to have a strong effect on the audience, without either prioritising his or her own feelings or insisting that the audience must believe in the work in a quasi-documentary way. Both of these problems lead to a sense of claustrophobia on the part of the viewer. While watching *Murder I* was reminded that good drama in fact leaves space for the

audience to have its own intellectual and emotional response — it involves a two-way relationship of trust. The audience trusts that the artist has a good reason for showing us such horrors; and equally, the artist trusts that the audience will not willfully misuse such a journey for salaciousness or immoral conclusions. However, neither the audience nor the artist can actually control or stop the other doing what they are going to do anyway, unless, as Kubrick did with *A Clockwork Orange*, the artist simply withdraws the artwork from circulation entirely.

In searching for a structure to gain objective distance, without reducing the intensity of the work, artists often have



CONALL MORRISON

recourse to familiar myths to explore otherwise incomprehensible situations and to say unsayable things — for example Barker's *Judith*, or Heaney's sonnet on September 11th. Artworks which employ myth as their artistic framework do run the risk of suggesting that such events are timeless, impossible to modify, and arising from a static, unchangeable human condition. But situations on a local, national, or international level can be made better or worse depending on the actions of individuals or collectives. And "human nature" itself changes from time to time and place to place. Artwork that sug-

wondered whether what we were doing was pointlessly trivial and voyeuristic to boot.

FRIDAY 30 NOVEMBER

Conall Morrison, asking me to take part in a week of rehearsal and discussion, wants to address the question of voyeurism and exploitation as part of a wider issue: "What use or not is theatre... to help us deal with our feelings about 11 September, Afghanistan, and the rest of the godforsaken millennial meltdown." Well, I'll be very happy to give my opinions, as soon as I can come up with some. He has sent out, among other things, an extract from Theodor Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory and Cultural Criticism*:

The so-called artistic representation of the sheer physical pain of people beaten to the ground by rifle-butts contains, however remotely, the power to elicit enjoyment out of it. The moral of this art, not to forget for a single instant, slithers into the abyss of its opposite. The aesthetic principle of stylisation, and even the solemn prayer of the chorus, make the unthinkable fate appear to have had some meaning; it is transfigured, something of its horror is removed.

Had *Murder* simply been a play about a murder, I wonder whether such aesthetic and moral issues would ever come up in rehearsal. *Murder* is about the only serious crime that can be shown without complaint on family television, after all. This play begins with a

gests barbarism is an inerasable aspect of society is not only sentimental but again runs the risk of rendering the audience passive.

Art has a habit of showing chaos within order and the order within chaos. Kitchen-sink, family drama, for example, tends to show the chaos within a seemingly ordered world. Good drama of the kind we are discussing tends at some point to show order within chaos. That is to say, a fully realised work of art which deals with appalling chaos will habitually make some kind coherent analysis of why people do things that we, in general, would consider too vile for people to actually do. This analysis may either be implicit or explicit in the work. Brecht is a writer, for example, whose analysis of barbarity is explicit.

Levin, for his part, is particularly strong on showing the causes of vile behavior implicitly. Even where all might seem just random barbarity, he suggests that there are, in fact, causal personal and social reasons why people do what they do. And these are underlying causes which could, at some stage, be addressed. If the past cannot be unmade we might at least learn and make changes in the future.

Levin, like Brecht, Beckett, and Kane, writes structurally provocative plays. As the fundamental meaning of an artwork is encoded in its structure this is important for the writer who deals with suffering. A niggling problem with *Schindler's List* is that for all its remorseless accurate depiction of (frequently arbitrary) suffering its fundamental structure is the simple Hollywood one of a white (non-Jewish, even) protagonist who comes to heroic self-realisation through survival. As audiences are habituated to identify with the lead, the story becomes one where we feel that "we" have survived, which is essentially a

false picture of the Holocaust. Having survived, the audience is left more with a passive sense of relief than any real determination to act.

If the artist, like Levin, is talking urgently to an audience whose actions outside the theatre might make some difference (for better or worse) in society, then he/she has to consider making the structure of their work one which does not allow an audience to feel pacified by a reassuring, redemptive coherence.

Artworks are not the motor of change in society. Yet anyone whose personal outlook has been changed by their experience of art will know that neither is theatre necessarily always a place for pleasurable, ineffectual game-playing. Art of the kind that Levin creates does have an effect on how humans are able to contemplate horror. If it cannot tell an audience how to behave after the experience, it can at last ensure that such experiences have been properly considered.

GOING BEYOND THE REAL

BY ANDREA ROMALDI

WHAT INITIALLY INTRIGUED ME ABOUT Conall Morrison's proposal to present Hanoch Levin's *Murder* was that it sought to focus our attention primarily on the visual potency of stage drama, an aspect of theatre often neglected in what many still consider a literary art. That 11th September 2001 would have been less traumatic for Western society had it not been a visually conceived event — intended for the television and film media — is apparent to me. The perpetrators "got to us" not merely physically, but psychologically

and emotionally through the manipulation of a widely-viewed Hollywood genre: the disaster movie. During the *Murder* workshop, we suggested that Westerners' fear and disgust and rage arose partly because a real-life disaster had the look of Hollywood "art"— and that we remained riveted to the event, as compelled by the aesthetic quality of the image as by the knowledge that thousands were dying.

Before I entered the *Murder* workshop, I knew that Conall was concerned that this propensity to aestheticise historical suffering could easily find its way onto stage, even in a well-intentioned exploration of the darker side of the human psyche. For theatre too, like television and film, works in images often designed to be attractive and enjoyable — even thrilling — often at the cost of beautifying the profound ugliness of historical atrocity. I was also keenly aware that while watching an historical atrocity elicits feelings of helplessness and powerlessness, watching that same event re-enacted on stage often has the opposite effect.

Interpretation is a fundamentally empowering process. To take seemingly senseless and unrelated historical events and impose meaning on them — by placing them in a structured plot and by representing them in artfully constructed images — can help us to cope with historical trauma. Theatre offers us the opportunity to project our desires onto the characters on stage, taking delight in their success, suffering in their sorrows and often, resolving their crises. But what happens when we start identifying with characters whom we cannot possibly understand because their life circumstances are so different to our own? While we can argue that this identification brings about a greater

brutal war crime, and follows a chain of further violence in the name of revenge, including an onstage rape. I don't think we're likely to see Dick Van Dyke in *Diagnosis: Rape* any time soon.

MONDAY 3 DECEMBER

Hanoch Levin's play strikes me at the first read-through as impassioned, oddly structured (the main character disappears two-thirds of the way through), and very bleak indeed. We're not allowed to get to know any of the characters, all of whom have labels — The Father, The Bridegroom, Pale Soldier — instead of names. The only glimpse of anything redemptive comes at the end, and even then it is a gesture offered far too late and to the wrong person, just as the acts of revenge are visited on the wrong people. But listening to the second read-through it becomes clearer that there is a symmetry of foreshadowing and echo. There is comedy too, though it's never used to let the audience off the hook: any character who makes us laugh is probably about to come to a sticky end.

TUESDAY 4 DECEMBER

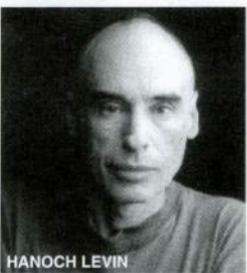
Since this is a staged reading, we have to contend with some practical performance considerations. We can't have someone reading in stage directions like "They kick him" or "He rapes her." We have to decide how far to go in presenting the violence and the humiliation of the characters. Is it necessary, in a reading, to strip someone in preparation for genital mutilation? We decide it is not. However, we do need to do enough to suggest

human truth, in this particular case that all human beings experience suffering, does it not mask the specificity and differing intensities of such suffering?

To say that I can understand a father whose boy has been mutilated and murdered merely because I have suffered through my parents' divorce equates two unequal sufferings. When theatre represents instances of historical suffering onstage, this central tension between the audience's need to enjoy and identify with the characters, and the imperative to

art in general, is fundamentally a humanising process. It is this process — of getting inside another person's head — not the mere interpretation and representation of content, that enables audience members to address the causes

of historical suffering, to work to comprehend the trauma, and to prevent such suffering in the future. Perhaps then, it is not the content of the images we need to be concerned with, but the way the images are constructed. Historical atrocity must be staged in such a



HANOCHE LEVIN

11 September would have been less traumatic for Western society had it not been a visually conceived event — intended for television and film.

comprehend the profoundly traumatic nature of the situation, becomes a question of great moral and ethical significance. Given the potential for enjoyment in its re-presentation, what can justify the depiction of violent atrocity on stage? This is the central question with which I grappled throughout the week-long process of working on *Murder* — the rehearsal workshop, the reading itself, and the panel discussion afterwards.

During the panel discussion, Fintan O'Toole suggested that theatre, indeed

way that it promotes this humanising process rather than passive enjoyment. Thus, though theatre is illusory, it can nevertheless engage with "real-life" concerns providing analysis and critique. The theatre's ability to enter into a dialogue with its audience, through what panellist Tom Kilroy termed "the intimacy of the present tense," only intensifies this humanising process. While the audience remains compelled to identify with the characters and situations represented, they are also urged to question the basis of their own con-

ceptions of reality through the immediacy of the theatrical re-presentation.

This is particularly true if we consider and advocate non-realist methods of production. Realism is inherently problematic in its re-presentation of physical assault and sexual violence, because modern Western audiences are extremely familiar with its conventions. We know that realist theatre claims to imitate real-life situations and events as they are. Thus, when realist theatre is unable to maintain its illusion of "reality", audience members disengage from the theatre piece, citing its failure to be "realistic" as the reason for their sudden withdrawal. And, for some reason, it is always patently obvious that realist depictions of sex and violence onstage are "fake." Yet, these re-presentations of sex and violence are often integral to the staging of real-life atrocity, essential to plot, character, theme and ultimately, the intellectual and emotional impact of the play. Realist theatre, then, provides a convenient escape from the exigencies of such re-presentations of atrocity, thereby negating the actual trauma depicted on stage.

The final scene of *Murder* focuses on a brutal beating: a group of prostitutes skillfully manipulates the community's prejudices to incite the gang murder of a peeping Tom. The man is punched and kicked as he begs for mercy, stabbed, and then decapitated. A prostitute urinates on the severed head. Skilled directors and actors could no doubt perform this scene realistically. However, the slightest flaw in their representation would destroy the illusion of reality. And a near perfect re-presentation would likely degenerate into pure spectacle, the audience awed by the flawless illusion. Either possibility would ultimately divert the audience from the sig-

what's happening, and a sitting-on-chairs reading would distance the action too much. Watching a scene where someone is beaten to death, I see that even stylised violence can chill: as the actors pick up each others' rhythm, and the rhythms of the text, they seem to be behaving like a pack.

THURSDAY 6 DECEMBER

This afternoon is the first time since the read-through that the entire cast has come together so we can talk about the context of what we're doing. Full and frank discussion follows, enough so that I'm quite relieved at one point to be called away for a costume fitting. Conall has asked people to bring in pieces of writing that seem relevant to the context of the play, and to world events. The diversity is remarkable, and people have chosen with care. The Pretensionmeter never flickers.

SATURDAY 8 DECEMBER

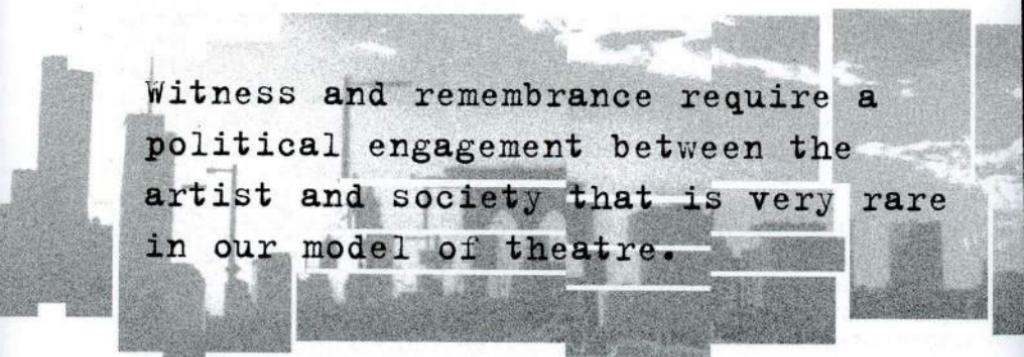
Now it's other people's turn to consider the politics, ethics, morality — even the artistic quality — of the piece. Our job now is to tell the story as clearly as we can, so they can decide for themselves. The theatre has no sound relay to the dressing rooms, which makes quick changes more fraught than they ought to be, but I get a few chances to listen from the wings, and think "Yep. It's clear. That's all we can do."

At the panel discussion, one of the cast mentions the great pleasure of spending as much rehearsal time on the why as on the how. Oddly, I don't remember the big why getting much of a look-in: we asked "Why

nificance of the event: namely, that the retributive violence is senseless and futile. For the purposes of the rehearsed reading, Conall staged violence symbolically, depicting that final scene as a dance of fits and starts, relying as much on violent sounds as exaggerated physicality. Because his symbolic re-presentation of violence made no direct reference to reality, I believe it prevented the audience from enjoying it as a spectacle of realistic re-presentation, or retreating into realistic criticism and so disengaging from the content. Instead, it promoted contemplation of the violence itself, and the events surrounding that violence.

the audience, disallowing identification and limiting personal engagement? Or is the theatre artist obliged to engage the audience in social critique at the expense of historical accuracy and faithful representation of the characters' plight?

Conall best addressed this complex issue through an exercise he staged during the rehearsal process of *Murder*. We were all, he explained, inhabitants of a Jewish ghetto in World War II Poland. Though many of us were ill, we had little penicillin. Should we distribute the penicillin to all in the hope that we will be liberated before we perish from sickness? Or do we medicate only the strongest, so that they will survive and



Witness and remembrance require a political engagement between the artist and society that is very rare in our model of theatre.

In addition to providing a forum for contemplation, critique and dialogue, theatre also has an obligation to remember and reconstruct events as they occurred. During the panel discussion, Robert Ballagh stressed the importance of the "artist as witness." This brings us to the second central problem explored in the rehearsal and reading of *Murder*: the tension between remembrance and reconstruction, and dialogue and critique. Does the obligation of the theatre artist lie in faithfully representing the atrocity at the possible risk of alienating

carry our memories and stories beyond the end of the war?

Initially I instinctively rejected the exercise as one which perpetuated a strangling, socially conditioned binary mode of thinking. In my mind, neither of the two options was acceptable. I believed that the difficulty of the situation arose from the community's inability to think of a third option, rather than from the circumstances of their existence at that point in history. Only afterward did I realize that in pursuing social critique — namely, that

we are not trained to think imaginatively and this is the cause of much of our suffering — I neglected to remember the real-life trauma experienced by those inhabitants of the ghetto in deciding who, if anyone, should receive medical treatment. Though I have always believed that theatre can provide insight into human history, and critical analysis of contemporary society, I never devoted much thought to how we can or should employ theatre simply to remember. Perhaps this remembering can never occur on its own: it will always to some extent entail the re-writing of the past. However, Ballagh's concept of the "artist as witness" — as the keeper of the collective memory — has implications far beyond the artistic content of a theatre piece. Whereas social critique implies a temporal and ideological distancing from subject matter, witness and remembrance require a political engagement between the artist and society that is, as Ballagh pointed out, very rare in the "Anglo-American" model of theatre.

Conall Morrison's rehearsed reading and panel discussion indicate a small but significant break from that tradition in Ireland: it created a space where artistic and political concerns intersected, and promoted meaningful communication on the role and function of each discipline within the community. The artistic success and audience response to the workshop demonstrate that, at its best, theatre can negotiate all of the competing tensions to provide a compelling and meaningful remembrance and representation of real-life atrocity, to advance a valid social critique, and to carve out a social space for audience engagement, contemplation and dialogue.

do it this way?" but not "Why do it at all? Why make plays? Is theatre any use?" Well, we're hardly a statistically valid sample. I suppose most of us decided long ago that it's worth doing, and we want to concentrate on finding the best way to do it.

But there was another question, wasn't there, that we were supposed to be thinking about? Maybe they're discussing it now, those articulate people on the panel who seem to be able to think in sentences, but I don't know because my knackered brain has turned into a sponge. — Oh, yes. I remember. Voyeurism, exploitation. Can you make theatre out of suffering without cheapening the experience? And in the course of the last week I have at least come to a firm conclusion on that question: It depends. It depends on how good, how honest, the play is. There's no formula for that. We should protest, and loudly, when shocking things are enacted for cheap effect; but there can't be forbidden territory.

Adorno wrote: "There is one nearly invariable characteristic of such literature. It is that it implies, purposely or not, that even in the so-called extreme situations, indeed in them most of all, humanity flourishes." Hanoch Levin's *Murder*, it seems to me, is an exception. He resists sentimentality, and he shows us not the humanity of the characters but their capacity for evil (which ought to be, but isn't, part of the definition of humanity). His is not a comfortable voice to listen to, but it speaks with passion and honesty, and it's a voice that deserved to be heard this afternoon.

THE WRITER IN

On 24 February, irish theatre magazine, in association with the Lyric Theatre and the Theatre Archive of the Linen Hall Library, sponsored a panel discussion about new play development at the Lyric. The participants were LOUGHLIN DEEGAN (playwright and literary manager, Rough Magic Theatre Company); KARIN McCULLY (chief reader and former literary manager, the National Theatre); SIMON MAGILL (artistic director, Tinderbox Theatre Company); and GRAHAM WHYBROW (literary manager, Royal Court Theatre, London); and the panel was chaired by itm's editor in chief KAREN FRICKER.

Following the discussion, the Lyric presented a staged reading of excerpts from new plays produced at the theatre in the 1970s and 1980s. A transcript of the discussion appears below, accompanied (in the main) by photographs of those historic plays in their original productions.

THE THEATRE

LOUGHLIN DEEGAN: I'm going to start with some statistics. If anyone has heard me banging this drum before, I do apologise. I find these particular statistics eternally fascinating, however, I accept that not everybody feels the same way! Anyway, they are taken from the document that was produced as a result of the extensive Theatre Review undertaken by the Irish Arts Council in 1994/1995, designed to inform future policymaking and provi-

The Review canvassed 49 production companies over the period 1990 to 1994, which during that time produced 522 productions. Of those 522 productions, 63% were by Irish writers, which in itself is a very healthy situation. More interestingly still, 46% of all plays produced were premieres of new Irish plays, and a remarkable 15% were first plays from first time new writers. Another interesting statistic included in the review is the fact that only



AT THE LYRIC ON 24TH FEBRUARY: (L.) LYNNE PARKER, DAVID GRANT, LOUGHLIN DEEGAN, AND ELEANOR METHVEN. (R., BACK ROW) OWEN McCAFFERTY, PATRICK GALVIN, JOANNA LAWRENCE, DARRAGH CARVILLE, MARTIN LYNCH; (FRONT ROW) CHRISTINA REID, ANNIE McCARTNEY, AND GRAHAM REID.

sion for the entire theatre sector. The Review published some fascinating findings on Irish theatre and although it is already seven years old, it remains the only significant empirical evidence we have to draw on.

15% of these new plays were written by women, a situation I believe has improved somewhat since these figures were recorded.

These statistics are undeniably impressive. Irish writers are actively writing

plays about Irish society that are being presented before Irish audiences. I doubt that any other country in the world could challenge figures as impressive as those. What it shows is, on the surface, a very healthy new writing situation, and indeed it is. Irish theatre is constantly producing new work and new playwrights. Most companies only want to produce new plays or new theatre: If you take away *Loose Canon*, for example, it is almost impossible to think of an independent Irish company that doesn't list new writing as a major part of its artistic policy.

If you combine these figures with the recent international success of new Irish writing, one might think that there was little room for improvement. I disagree, however. What these figures don't reveal is that during this period of intense activity, there was effectively only one full-time literary manager working in Ireland; there was no dedicated new writing house, along the lines of the Royal Court, the Bush, or the Traverse in the UK; there were little or no new writing initiatives designed to develop new voices from different sectors of society; and there was no strategic policy in place for the support of new writing.

What we had effectively was a situation where under-funded companies were struggling to grapple together the meagre sum paid to commission a writer. These commissions were so valuable that it was generally agreed that if a play was commissioned, it would automatically be produced, whether the script was ready to be produced or not. Although many artistic directors had an instinctive ability as "play developers," many others did not, and few companies had the structures in place to counteract this. What resulted was that many plays were presented before they were ready, resulting in writers facing a barrage of criticism

which often completely undermined their confidence. I believe this system failed, and indeed continues to fail, writers.

Rough Magic instigated the position of literary manager because it was agreed within the company that a number of recent productions of new writing could have been developed further before they entered the rehearsal room. There was also agreement that the company need to improve the service it provided to writers submitting unsolicited plays to the company. As a result we have now established a panel of five readers who read and report on all scripts sent to the company. We have monthly script readers' meetings which are attended by the readers; Lynne Parker, the artistic director; and myself. Every single play that is sent to the company is now discussed at these meetings so that everybody involved in the company is aware of the work of the writers who are submitting to the company.

We now guarantee writers that we will respond to their script within three months, even if is read by two or more people and we are also meeting more and more writers on a one-to-one basis in order to begin building up a relationship with them. We hope to be able to offer writers the possibility of private readings, staged readings and workshops in the near future. Our readers are also reading more and more international work in our ongoing search for significant international plays with production potential. All of this is designed to provide opportunities for writers beyond a letter of rejection with some critical feedback.

Recently, in association with the Dublin Fringe Festival, we have also initiated the Seeds project, whereby we commissioned six young writers. Some of them had submitted work to the company in the past and had shown signs of true talent; but we also felt it was important to cast the

net as wide as we could, so we had an open competition. We received 107 applications, and we eventually interviewed 12 people and commissioned six writers.

Our criteria were very much that we wanted to support young writers who had some experience of writing, albeit on the fringe or at student or amateur level, but hadn't gotten to that second rung of the ladder which is the first fully professional production. I think that's a very dif-

writers worked directly with those mentors and with myself as literary manager. They had the facilities of workshops, private readings, public readings — the whole gamut of dramaturgical tools were available to them. We are presenting these plays as a series of staged readings on 9 though 11 May at Project in Dublin. And we would hope then to assess the production potential of each script individually beyond that. We are still committed to



GRAHAM REID'S *REMEMBRANCE* (LYRIC, 1984)

ficult rung to reach in Irish theatre at the moment.

The writers were then paired with mentors, directors, all of whom had significant experience of working with new writing — Max Stafford-Clark from Out of Joint; Mike Bradwell from the Bush in London; Philip Howard from the Traverse in Edinburgh; freelance American director Wilson Milam; and Conall Morrison and Jim Nolan from Ireland. Basically the

developing the scripts with the writers if they so desire.

Part of our thinking, I suppose, was to expose those writers to a greater network through those directors, because we don't have the production muscle ourselves to produce that quantity of plays.

KARIN McCULLY: I am going to start off by saying that for the last three years I have been completely out of the area of

play development. I haven't even been in the country — I was living in Italy for most of that time. Being out for a while gave me a chance to formulate some kind of overview of what I believe — what my personal views are on play development and dramaturgy as a profession. So I put this statement together, which I'm going to read, and then I will be happy to make it more specific, or answer any questions, about, say, when I was at the Abbey — what the structures were, what the initiatives were, and about what they may be in the next couple of years.

It occurred to me immediately that when I was trying to put these ideas together, what I was doing is what a dramaturg would do at the beginning of a pre-production process. I was putting together what the Germans would call a "protocol." Part of this is to give an address which is an overview of what the assembled company is embarking on: what are the ideas of the play at hand, what the production concept might be, and, very importantly, how that play relates to not only the overall artistic season of that particular theatre but also to theatre history at large. And I think in a sense that gave me a cue as to what I am trying to do, which is to take an overview.

The very first thing that occurs to me is the challenges of developing new plays estranged from tradition. It's true, of course, that playwrights have always created their forms and a tragedy for Euripides was not a tragedy for Aeschylus, nor was Shakespeare as a playwright following the models of Marlowe and Kidd — but all these writers operated within traditions which they then took control of, revised, refined, and possibly updated. To fast-forward and bring the discussion more up to date: Ibsen, Strindberg, Chekhov in their different ways warred against the well-made play and pro-

duced, in their terms, the real tradition of realism and surrealism.

So one can look at the 20th-century theatre from Pinter to Beckett to Churchill as a radical break from tradition of late 19th-century realism with its expectations of psychological coherence and linearity. Writers became more and more infused with the possibilities of the stage as a three-dimensional canvas, no matter whether the vision was metaphysical or political in nature. But this thrust away from the entrenchment of 19th-century realism — which is, for better or worse, still with us today — constitutes a broad tradition of identifiable dramaturgical strategies; I think now we can call those strategies of dissent, if you want. Certainly, these are recognised, but it's safe to say we have come to a much deeper understanding of what the structure of a Beckett play is, for instance, no matter how alien that might first have appeared. This understanding of the 20th-century writer has helped us to read and appreciate the formal developments of Pinter, Shepard, Churchill — and closer to home Tom MacIntyre, Tom Murphy, or Marina Carr.

So the question is then, how do we read the work of playwrights who are in a era of post-tradition, who are perhaps the children of the 20th-century radicals and revolutionaries? I see this as a double challenge at the minute. Not only has there been a radical break from tradition, but the theatre has become more peripheral — something I suppose we would all agree with. It makes it increasingly difficult for new traditions. So another question is, then, are playwrights even looking to the stage now for notions of dramatic structure? Or are they looking more towards film, television, or even new technology? When you do a broad call for playwrights to submit plays to a theatre, it gives an instant snapshot of what the cul-

tural reference points are, and indeed the dramatic reference points for playwrights. Any time we did that over the five-year period I was at the Abbey, very interesting things would come out. Possibly we would be dealing with scripts which were more indebted to Quentin Tarantino than to any playwright.

In this global, computerised age where

position of having to invent the wheel, where form is no longer a given and, even more importantly, reaction against form is not a given. So one of the responsibilities of the dramaturg, the "play developer," or the literary manager acting in a dramaturgical capacity, is to help the playwright to realise his or her own model. And perhaps one of the best ways to do that is to



PATRICK GALVIN'S *WE DO IT FOR LOVE* (LYRIC, 1975)

people want to travel in all different directions at a click of a mouse, theatre has come to seem rather laggard in comparison, and postmodern playwriting sounds almost like an oxymoron. Playwriting has not done as good a job, in my opinion, as, say, postmodern direction or performance art in keeping up with the times. There may be advantages to this, but there are also inherent problems. And those writing plays today find themselves in the

show the playwrights, particularly the young ones, that they are not really writing in a vacuum — to help them assemble a formal tradition of their own, whether that is a mix of Tom Murphy and Woody Allen, or Beckett and performance art, or Tarantino and Tennessee Williams.

In many ways looking back over my own experience in play development, I would say that that there is a very important area beyond the one-on-one relation-

ship that might or might not develop with the playwright, and that is the relationship that dramaturg can create with other departments in a theatre or other people within a theatre company — designers, directors, even marketing. This is an extremely valuable way of supporting the playwright by communicating ideas and theatrical concepts that might be emerging with that playwright to other parts of the theatre.

What the future of dramatic structure is has been in debate throughout the last century, but at this stage theatre needs to think outside of the box — which means not just thinking about the theatre, but connecting radical theatrical energy to what is happening in music, film, and performance across the board. And ten years ago that would have been something you could have said in the Irish context was not very evident. Now, coming back into the world of theatre, I see that is in fact changing a lot. But still I wonder if it's happening as vibrantly as it should be happening to push Irish theatre on into the next era — whatever that will be.

GRAHAM WHYBROW: If the central question here is what are the structures for the writer in the theatre, I would say first off you need an artistically-led, subsidised theatre to create the conditions for indigenous cultural playwriting. You need more than one theatre, so that the culture becomes collaborative and competitive. The Royal Court experience is that it was set up at a time of depleted playwriting in England in the 1950s. New plays had to be produced in the commercial theatre, and it was absolutely clear that there was a point of risk below which commercial managers wouldn't go in finding and producing new plays that might be either in advance of public and critical taste, or which might only com-

mand a small audience. In order to bridge that problem, you need public subsidy — to make something happen that wouldn't otherwise happen.

I think it's easy to forget all that by giving a description of the Royal Court as it is now, because it will seem a very vibrant and hopefully successful theatre in producing new plays and discovering new playwrights. But it's absolutely essential to remember the floor you are standing on which is the existence of public subsidy. The Royal Court is, in fact, funded at the level of a major regional theatre in England, so it receives about one-tenth of the subsidy of the Royal National Theatre and the Royal Shakespeare Company. Yet it succeeds in producing up to 17 new plays a year in its two theatres, a 400-seat mainstage and an 80-seat flexible black box studio. This creates an economic and artistic demand for new plays and new playwrights, so in the middle of that the artistic director is picking up on the radar screen any new plays that they can produce at that theatre. The argument will always be mostly on quality, but when you have more than one theatre out there, that argument can also be about suitability. That is to say, if plays might be produced at other theatres, you could say why would you produce this at our theatre? If a play is commercial you might even say it's a very good play, but too commercial for our particular theatre.

So the existence of the Royal Court for 40 or 50 years has enabled new playwrights to come forward in each decade. But I think that it's been very helpful that new writing theatres have been created to create a more competitive environment and to help sharpen the definition of what each theatre does. Now, there are some important building-based new writing theatres in London, and there are also new writing touring companies which



MARTIN LYNCH'S DOCKERS (LYRIC, 1981)

may move into those theatres or into other venues. There are also other professional and regional theatres outside London. There is a very active relationship between the theatre and the writer in Britain, because there is a constant demand for new plays to produce.

Also, you have to work behind the scenes to create the structures for the development of plays and playwrights. We don't draw too much attention to that

because we hold firm to the idea of a writers' theatre. That I think is the key to this discussion. A writers' theatre is a theatre where the writer is the artist, and everyone else in the process — the director, designers, and the actors — are there to serve and reveal the play. This model of working now seems to be a huge source of admiration internationally. We have witnessed, in continental Europe, a huge return to the text, and a huge return to the interest of working with living playwrights again. Traditions have changed considerably in the last five years in Germany, France, and Scandinavia, because those theatres have adjusted their artistic policy. They are far better-funded theatres than in England or in Ireland, yet as soon as they decide that is what they want to do, they don't just want to do more production of classics, but they actually want to produce new plays — they ask the question, where do those plays come from? And it's commonly heard, if you travel as much as I do, 25 or 30 trips a year... I go into these places and they say

in our country we have very few new plays and those are very bad. But the reality is that it's the theatre that is always responsible for creating the conditions for writers. I think there are no excuses. And theatres, writers, funding bodies, audiences, can all help to create those conditions for vibrant writing to occur.

SIMON MAGILL: I represent Tinderbox Theatre Company, and our philosophy

regarding new writing is quite simple, but it's also, I believe, very important. It is to produce new plays which explore new territory about life in Northern Ireland. To that end at the present we have seven commissions pending, which we hope with lottery funding will come to fruition, which is in the North quite a significant number. I don't think there has ever been that number before. Those are by the established playwrights that Graham referred to before — voices that are very important and ones that have been heard before and must continue to be heard. But also, through our New Writing Hothouse, which we have developed over the last six months, we are planning a series of workshops, one-to-one readings, and so on, with writers that send in unsolicited scripts to the company. We are also co-operating with the Lyric Theatre with the unsolicited scripts that come in here, because at present the Lyric, due to restrictions with finance and personnel, is not able to develop new writing as it would like to, and has a great tradition of doing. Hopefully someone from the Arts Council might address that.

The plays that are sent to us we read — we also have a panel of five readers which we have just put together, myself and John McCann, our outreach director. What we are looking for are new voices that reflect the social and religious nature of our society, how it works, and where our society is going in these new and hopefully better times. Also we are planning to develop a lot of work with schools to let young people know that the theatre is a very vibrant and legitimate way of self expression. So, to that end, we have a pilot programme this year to go into schools — 12 schools I think — and work with young people on the text they might be studying at O or A Level. We are helping them devise their own new work,

which we will showcase towards the end of the year.

These are all very exciting times and they are pilot years, but I think it is important that our society recognise that our own voice is a legitimate voice and has a right to be heard. I remember one of the most striking experiences for me as a young man was seeing a production of *The Hidden Curriculum* by Graham Reid, and being astonished that someone was writing on us and for us, and it opened up a whole world for me. That is what we would try to communicate to the young people who are interested in theatre.

KAREN FRICKER: Loughlin spoke briefly of systems being put in place to stop plays being put on too soon. I'd like to pursue that, the notion of the play developer who is there to advise the playwright, but who also, potentially, has the authority to tell a writer what to do and not to do. Is part of the play development process building the confidence of writers so that they can know themselves when their work is ready?

LD: Speaking as a playwright, you have to trust that the theatre company will make the correct decisions. I need someone to be making those decisions on my behalf. I often describe the role of a literary manager as the intelligent audience member before the play goes in front of an audience. I need someone to say, No, there are holes in the plot; no, what you are trying to communicate isn't actually being communicated. As I said earlier, with the vast majority of plays that were being produced in Ireland, companies were just grappling to get the money to get a commission in place, then they were commissioning a writer. There wasn't a culture of analysing the scripts. Theatres didn't enter into a relationship with a

writer that was bigger than than you write it, we put it on. I think in many incidences plays were put on without the kind of support the writers needed.

KF: Graham, is it possible for you to talk about the relationship between a literary manager and a playwright, or do you find that every relationship is specific? Is part of the job to gauge what the person needs and what the play needs, and the answer

good choices. It seems to me the history of theatre is littered with examples of theatres making bad choices or theatres being resistant to the new. That is to say, innovations in theatre are often strange or provocative or shocking or disturbing. And it's vital that that theatre is sufficiently open and receptive and imaginative to back those breakthroughs. A vivid example would be say Ibsen, who started writing his later plays in prose, and this was



JOHN BOYD'S *THE FLATS* (LYRIC, 1971)

might be very in-depth tinkering, but it might also be an arms-length, "do it yourself and let's put it on" kind of approach. Am I right in characterising it in that way?

GW: I think the relationship between a theatre and the individual writer is always a close one, but it takes place in a culture and an ethos. So I suppose I am concerned that we have to trust, as Loughlin suggests, the theatres to make

shocking to theatres stuck in a dogma that plays should be written in verse. So he was in the bizarre situation of writing in exile in Rome, and his plays were then published to huge readership. He would try to get his plays sent to his publisher by July or August in order to get them published in time for the Christmas market. This is a surreal situation — but there you have a theatre culture that is resistant to a major breakthrough.

That seems to me to be a lesson that we should all learn from, so that we are all sufficiently receptive. Because essentially as playwrights you don't have the power — the theatres have the power, and within the theatres are individuals who are making choices based on the past. It seems to be it's the responsibility of the theatres and the individuals working within them to bring into being the future. And the future is often strange.

KF: The issue of form has been raised, and the issue of the future — Graham has brought up the responsibility of theatres to see something that might be strange and foreign, and yet to be able to see when it has the mark of vision. But I would offer that theatre in Ireland and Northern Ireland still is very much lodged in a tradition of realism. Simon, do you find that in the plays that you have coming in, are they quite straight-down-the-line, character-driven narratives?

SM: I do find writers resorting to quite traditional linear narratives — and in a way wanting to. Many writers who were writing on the fringes, in more radical ways, now are having this opportunity to write a play for a subsidised production company, and interestingly they felt they needed or wanted to write a "grown-up play." I think it's interesting — a lot of these writers are writing in very traditional structures, and working with very traditional forms. Which is not something we have forced on them, but its something they have decided to do.

KF: I'd like to ask all the panellists to give us their impressions of Northern Ireland playwriting. Graham, I know that you have produced Gary Mitchell's work at the Royal Court, and that you have revived Ron Hutchinson's work. Do you

see a lot of Northern Irish work? Do you have an impression of what it's talking about, and how it's talking about it?

GW: It seems to be there has been a consistently remarkable stream of playwrights coming from Northern Ireland, despite adverse conditions in terms of production opportunities. So actually, they have to move beyond Northern Ireland and develop relationships with other theatres, particularly in England. And there is a line through the writers whose work we are seeing read tonight to Ron Hutchinson and Marie Jones, and through to Gary Mitchell and others. As well as their work, I also read a lot of plays which are sent to us as a theatre, which are not produced. There is such an extraordinary body of talent, but there isn't the infrastructure for realising that talent within Northern Ireland. There don't seem to be enough professional theatre companies to develop the playwrights, or to develop audiences to be receptive to that work. But the stories are there, and the writers would develop much more if they could speak to their own people. If in the particularity of it, the plays resonate beyond Northern Ireland, that is great — but you want the stories told here as well.

In light of this line of thinking, it seems that it's worth separating out the description of a writers' theatre from other kinds of responsibility that cluster around theatres. It's an accident of history that the Royal Court is a writing theatre set up in the 1950s, before England had a national theatre. This is unusual in a way, but it means that we are not crowded out with national responsibilities, or some idea of showing the repertoire of royal drama or of contemporary classics as well as new plays. We can just in a sense do what we want to do — so

the theatre is ruthlessly artistically led.

Also in its definition as an oppositional theatre, an anti-establishment theatre, it is willing to take risks on works that are original, contemporary, challenging, provocative, and shocking. In a way if we do that, if we upset everybody, we can

agendas pushing us back all the time, and conflicting with simply being an artistically-led organisation, backing the most talented writers as we identify them.

LD: I am not necessarily qualified to talk about Northern writing — but it was



CHRISTINA REID'S TEA IN A CHINA CUP (LYRIC, 1983)

CHRISTOPHER HILL PHOTOGRAPHIC

always appeal to our history. Because many of the most important, defining plays of the modern Royal Court history have created controversy, whether it's through John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* to Edward Bond's *Saved* through to Sarah Kane's *Blasted*. You can appeal to that tradition to strengthen your argument for doing the work. And I think if we had national responsibilities projected on us then we would have all kinds of

interesting reading four of the plays that are being read tonight. I was struck by how all the plays, without exception, had to do with the individual struggling against society. I think it is perfectly obvious why that would be the case in Northern Ireland. But I think it's quite radically different to the tradition as it developed in the South. In the early days of Irish play-writing, with O'Casey, people were writing plays that were commenting on socie-

ty. But, as Fintan O'Toole has said, you can no longer write an epic play about Irish society because the society in the South has become stratified to such an extent that you can't encapsulate the entirety of the culture in any one play any more. I think theatre down South is very much about the family now, and it's smaller plays, more naturalistic plays — deeply psychological studies about an individual character.

Rough Magic produced a play called *Midden* last year, by Morna Regan, who comes from Derry; she wanted to write a play that did not mention the Troubles anywhere. We sent her play to theatre managements in England who actually said they would not take a play seriously about Northern Ireland that didn't mention the Troubles. Which is quite fascinating.

KMcC: Since I came back to the Abbey, in the last couple of weeks there has been a number of plays coming in from the North, which are distinguishable for just one thing. They have an incredible urgency in their structure which I think is completely distinct. They stand out almost immediately. I am wondering in fact is this something to do with Gary Mitchell's plays being so successful. Has this unleashed a new wave of playwriting? These plays share this quality of incredible energy which pushes the play beyond the structures in which you would think any play is producable.

What is also interesting is these are playwrights that have submitted to the Abbey — that is good too. Because it's true that the road from Belfast led to London before. Obviously it should stop in Belfast — there should be the structures here to address these plays before they go to Dublin. But it is exciting nonetheless to see these plays coming in to the Abbey.

KF: This notion of Gary Mitchell's work inspiring a new generation of writers is very exciting. Loughlin has commented in the past that Enda Walsh, who wrote *Disco Pigs*, spawned something like a new Cork wave of writing. Young Cork writers were very inspired by hearing the Cork dialect being spoken on stage, and have produced some very energetic and exciting work. That a single playwright could make such a difference is inspiring.

To bring it back to Simon, and to think about some of Graham's points about what the necessary structures are. Tinderbox's work is very important — but what other things need to be happening in Northern Ireland theatre to keep the work and the talent here? What structures need to be developed? The Lyric has controversially been referred to over the years as being the "national theatre for Northern Ireland" — taking on board all the difficulties in that description. Does Northern Ireland need a national theatre? Does it just need *more* theatres?

SM: It probably just needs the room to develop and the infrastructure to develop. For a long time we have had conflict here; we are coming out of that. I think that money needs to be spent here, and people need to stay and work here. For a long time there was this ingrained thing in Northern Ireland, that if anybody was seen to be doing well, they would be knocked down fairly quickly. I think to see ourselves on the stage is very important. In the past we were a province and a colony of England, and now we might be able to assert our own identity. I think that is what we are trying to do at the moment, to see that come through.

There are a lot of people that are writing for the stage today, but that there is an energy and a passion that has always

been there. It just probably hasn't been given the credence that it fully deserves. I think that is the positive thing that is coming out. Marie [Jones]'s stuff is criticised for not being critical enough of the society in which she lives, but nevertheless it's very popular, and she draws a lot of people into the theatre. And that is important as well.

I would just like to see more cohesion and more proactive strategy from the

also in the methods that one needs to make theatre.

KF: Tinderbox's current play *Caught Red Handed* is a farce about a referendum on a united Ireland, set in 2005. Have you had any feedback from the press about the play being potentially controversial, and representing real-life figures — has it become a talking point in that way?

SM: It has become a talking point, but we



TIM LOANE'S *CAUGHT RED HANDED* (TINDERBOX, 2002)

Arts Council, in terms of how they perceive theatre to be developing here. They said they have a strategic department that is planning for the future. I don't see it, I have to say. You are able to draw on comparative statistics for the South and Great Britain; we don't have them here. And we are pushing for them, but haven't got them yet. So, I suppose, it's investing in the talent that is here, not just in terms of money but

have had to encourage that. We had an interesting night the other night — we had quite a few of the politicians there: the Progressive Unionist Party, the Official Unionist Party, representatives from Sinn Féin, the SDLP, media figures, and academic figures. And the debate was quite a good one, not only centred around the notion of what the referendum was about, but also about the place of theatre and culture in our lives. Which I think is a very

healthy thing; I think it's beginning to happen more and more. So in terms of controversy — I don't think it's very controversial. The DUP man did say it was a blatant pisstake of the DUP, but I don't think that is true. So it is stirring debate and that is what [playwright] Tim [Loane] intended, and that is why we wanted to do the play in the first place.

AUDIENCE QUESTION 1: I am interested in the developmental discussion. I recall there was a popular advertising campaign for tinned salmon years ago — "It's the fish that John West reject that makes John West the best." I just wondered what the relationship was between the number of plays under development at any one time, in all the various production contexts, that the panel represents. Loughlin made the point that once you commissioned something there is almost a sense of failure for your funders if that doesn't reach the stage.

GW: I think it's healthy for a theatre to develop more plays than it can produce, if the development of plays happens in the context of a producing theatre with people who are experienced at working with writers through to rehearsals and production and reception of plays, rather than in a vacuum — I think that is healthy. I think it becomes difficult if you are a theatre that can commission one play a year and produce one play a year. That seems to be a harder challenge for several reasons.

One is that a commission thereby becomes an implied commitment to produce. I believe that is not healthy. And secondly, that one play will carry the reputation of the theatre that year, so in other words if you produce one play, that play begins to carry a representative burden for the quality, nature, politics, and ethos of that company in that year. So it's very

hard to be strategic, and you are very, very exposed if a play is explicitly political, or partisan, or causes provocation because the audience and critics only have this single perspective by which to see the company. You can be much more strategic if you can produce five or six or seven productions a year. I am sure Loughlin and Karin would corroborate that — you can move more freely.

I think it's healthy for producing theatres to have relationships with writers who they think are talented. There is almost a bounty to that. And even if that leads to the development of more plays than the theatre can produce, that can always be reviewed, in the sense that if there are other theatre companies that can produce the plays, and make a success of those plays, then over time that becomes a pattern. So there is a chance for a smaller theatre company to make good choices, and in a David and Goliath spirit make possibly better choices than the major institutions — and as a result we all move forward.

LD: Regarding the problem of a commission being an obligation to produce, I think you simply need to change the way you communicate what a commission means to a writer. I think that is one of the things we have done in Seeds — we have not told people that their work is going to be produced. We have told them we are offering them a process in which they can develop a script and hopefully learn the craft of playwriting, and develop their craft as a result. Rough Magic has four writers on commission outside of the Seeds system, and again they would be writers that we fundamentally believe in. That is one of the things that I think you have got to communicate to a writer you have commissioned — that irrespective of how the play develops, that you believe in

that person's writing. And then the writer and the company work their arses off to make that script producable, but it's important that it will not be produced until both the writer and the company think it is producable.

I think that is a very simple shift, but it's a fundamental shift; I think for too long, Irish theatre companies were operating the other way. It was a case of people sitting in a room that the writer wasn't in, deciding, Oh God, we are going to have to produce it because we commissioned it. I think those conversations did take place.

KMcC: At the moment there would be 15 or 16 writers under commission with the Abbey, and I would say roughly half of those are under the understanding that this is an act of faith — this is basically money and support on all levels to see how this script would develop. We are saying, We think you are a writer and we are willing to go behind you on that. The writers who are on more traditional commissions, certainly some of them would be writers who would have had quite a few plays produced and we would be pretty sure that we are going to produce those plays. But certainly nowadays it would be much easier, even in that context, to say relatively far into the process that maybe that play will not go into production. There is much more of a context for that to happen; it is much more flexible, primarily because the resources are there now in a way they weren't ten years ago. The literary department in the Abbey is quite a large, many-handed thing. It wasn't like that six or seven years ago. This gives it all kinds of possibilities, and lots of flexibility. Apart from those 15 or 16 writers who would be receiving financial support from the theatre and the promise of

production, there would also be another dozen writers who will be having readings or workshops with a view to possible commission or seeding. That is within the context of actually producing seven or eight plays a year, so it's great to have that over-richness there. The thinking would be that you sustain many more writers than you would be able to produce in a year.

KF: Simon, the seven commissions you have out at the moment, would those all be with an intention to produce?

SM: The playwrights we have on commission are quite established, and have a considerable body of work behind them. We would be very confident that they would go to full production. However, the reason we have several out at once is because plays develop at different rates, and we are allowing ourselves some time, because we only produce two or three plays a year. This is allowing us the necessary time to make sure the plays are ready for the stage.

AUDIENCE QUESTION 2: Do the panel have any thoughts on the lack of any Catholic, nationalist, middle-class playwrights or plays being brought forward? Most of the plays that I have come across written by local writers, they represent my people as struggling individuals — and fine in that sense, they have to buck against the system. But there are other people who live here, maybe a boring class of people who leave. Their expression in the past has been largely through poetry, Heaney and Muldoon, for example. I just wondered why we have no Heaney or Muldoon as a playwright?

KMcC: Would you say Brian Friel would be perhaps a notable exception?

KF: But Brian Friel is one of those playwrights, like Frank McGuinness, who resist classification. Everybody wants to claim both of them — they are claimed as Northern and Irish.

AUDIENCE QUESTION 2: They are certainly not from Belfast!

KF: I think your question feeds into the question about, if Northern Ireland is moving into a new phase of its history when conflict is not centre stage, what are playwrights going to write about? Since so many plays have focused on the struggle in society and the struggle of the individual against society. What's next?

SM: I have no idea, I look forward to what comes in. Undoubtedly our society is changing but there is a fundamental issue still ongoing, and that is the difference between the two religions. But also I think Northern Ireland has to grow up a society, in terms of gender politics as well. I would imagine quite a lot of that will come to the fore. I hope it does anyway.

LD: I think the best plays overcome what you have identified. I just think of Stewart Parker's *Pentecost* — a play couldn't put the two sides of the argument more articulately or more beautifully. Funnily enough, not being from Northern Ireland, I couldn't tell you, beyond Gary Mitchell, what religion the different playwrights are from. I don't know whether Darragh Carville is Catholic or Protestant. I think they are just really good plays.

AUDIENCE QUESTION 3: I think companies need to get out further afield and the structures aren't there to get them

there. They are not funded to do that. It's important, getting the companies to tour further afield, getting our writers in residence elsewhere, and then bringing that back home. But the question I wanted to ask is about the balance between heritage and those new writings to come. What do the panel feel to be the balance between the amount of work in the past that we should be keeping alive, and how much new work we should be supporting? Is it 50/50, or 40/60. How do we keep that nurtured as well?

KMcC: Ideally for a theatre that calls itself a national theatre, like the Abbey, one of its primary tasks is to keep the classic repertoire feeding in to the new repertoire and vice versa. To keep producing the classics of that particular theatre for the new generations, so that new playwrights can bounce their own work against and feed off old traditions. That is a juggling act all the time, and obviously with the huge repertoire that the Abbey has — that Ireland has in general — the selection process is important and difficult. How many times do you do *The Playboy*, and when do you get the opportunity to look at things that are in the repertoire that were maybe only produced once? That takes a lot of resources, and you need people who are continually re-evaluating the repertoire and the canon of that particular theatre. Time and time again you will come across a new writer who has happened to stumble across a play from the '20s, say, which he found completely inspirational and set him off on a new path. The theatre has its own responsibility in that area.

This is maybe not a debate that goes on at the Royal Court, because it has a very specific focus on new writing, but one that is a daily debate for a national theatre like the Abbey. How do you bal-

ance a very international repertoire with emerging generation after generation of playwrights?

LD: I think first of all plays have to be published, even if they are not produced, so that people can have access to them and they can be analysed and people can see the history in its totality. The lack of publishing in Irish theatre is criminal. Secondly, it is about judging — it's a hard thing to balance. But here is an example of happens when a play is revisited: When Stewart Parker wrote *Pentecost*, he was called naive because the ending was hopeful. Then when Rough Magic produced it again in the mid '90s he was called prophetic. I think similarly with the revival of *Observe the Sons of Ulster...* there was a real sense that the play had something new to say, given that the cease-fire had been called in Northern Ireland. I think it's wonderful when the repertoire is genuinely relevant — but you have to provide access to it. Publishing is a bugbear of mine. Someone needs to give the Lyric the money to publish the plays that are being read tonight.

GW: Yes, of course there is a big argument for creating more opportunities for the revival of classic plays as well as the production of new plays. I think it's helpful for a leading national theatre or repertory theatre to produce new plays, alongside reviving classic plays. Obviously you get into the daily discussion that you are having at the Abbey which is almost in danger of becoming quota-based. The question is what is the artistic base. It seems to me the best argument for declaring something as a contemporary classic is to say it's a play from the past that speaks to us now. It is very healthy for a producing theatre, as

some one once said of the Royal Court, to treat classic plays like new plays and new plays like classic plays. And to do both side by side.

AUDIENCE QUESTION 4 (Lyric Theatre artistic advisor Paula McFetridge): Obviously the Royal Court and the Abbey both have spaces. I think one of the reasons why we do have problems nurturing new work in the North is that we don't have a set space that can take risks. The Lyric has a limited programming budget, and Tinderbox doesn't have a permanent space. I think it would be advantageous if we had a studio theatre where readings did happen — where people knew they would be exposed to new writing that was possibly about where we are at now as a people.

Another thing as regards the development of new writing is how we develop our new cultural voice. I think we need to try and create a language whereby we can explain that theatre can ask questions and can comment on where we are at — that we have a special story to tell that other people can't tell. If we don't tell it, someone else is going to tell it for us which is even worse.

And I don't think we have written all the plays of the last 30 years. I think we are going to have a wave of all those coming out — particularly from ex-prisoners, and from women who have been involved in creative writing groups. I think those plays still have to come out first, before we get our new wave of writings, and I think we have to be prepared for those. I think we have to find the means of housing them and forging new links with those writers to encourage them to get that play out of their system and to move on to something else. To experiment in style and create that new cultural voice.

MORE THAN BUMS ON SEATS

Why isn't there more commercial theatre in Ireland? To address this thorny question, **PATRICK BURLEIGH** looks closely at the work of three of the few producers who are successful in the field.

HERE IS A LONG HISTORY OF IRISH theatre making money abroad. From Farquhar and Boucicault to Friel and McDonagh, Irish playwrights and companies have found success — financial as well as critical — from Broadway to the West End. But what

of the commercial potential of Irish theatre on its home turf? It seems only natural that, particularly with the strong presence of Irish theatre on the world stage in the past decade, there would be a thriving commercial environment for theatre here.

The reality, however, is not that straightforward. Those shows that have been big successes abroad in recent years — *Dancing at Lughnasa*, *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, *Stones in His Pockets*, and *Alone it Stands*, among others — were born out of the Irish subsidised sector and then bought up by commercial producers who spun them into international successes. While they were well-received domestically, they didn't become true box office "hits" until they went to London or New York.

So is commercial success viable in Ireland? Is there support — among audiences and investors — for Irish commercial theatre? And is the relationship of the commercial to the subsidised sector solely that of predator and prey — producers keeping a close eye on funded shows and then pouncing when a production appears with profit potential?

Searching for answers to these questions, *itm* looked at three different models of commercial pro-

**HOW TO COURT
THEATRE INVESTORS**

The cast of Diarmuid and Gráinne



duction, represented by three established Irish producers with disparate backgrounds. Ronan Smith is executive producer of Abhann Productions, the company behind *Riverdance*, which has recently teamed up with Passion Machine Theatre Company in what may become a model of a more symbiotic relationship between the commercial and subsidised sectors. Pat Moylan owns Andrew's Lane Theatre and is perhaps Ireland's most high-profile and successful commercial producer, who has recently transformed several subsidised shows into international success-

around it: It is very difficult to make money in Irish theatre. The ready justification is that, compared to other countries, Ireland simply does not have the population — let alone the theatregoing population — to make theatre wildly profitable. To privately fund a show in Dublin is a high-risk investment because, unlike London, the city lacks a base audience that a producer may count on just to break even, not to mention make money. With certain exceptions, commercial producers must therefore find plays that are tried and true and will ensure a large audience draw that extends beyond the



MAVENS: Pat Moylan, Ronan Smith, and Edward Farrell

es. And Edward Farrell is a gentleman-producer based in Athlone with a weakness for musicals, who produces almost exclusively in Ireland for "country" (as he calls them) audiences.

THE FIRST THING TO NOTE ABOUT COMMERCIAL production in Ireland is that it's not a big field: these three individuals represent about half the active commercial producers in Ireland today. The paucity of commercial production may partly be explained by the high risk factor in producing a play without an Arts Council subsidy. There's no way

pool of regular theatregoers.

"The repertoire for commercial production outside of [the subsidised sector] is much more limited in Ireland," says Ronan Smith. "In England, where you have a massive potential audience and a massive market, you could put on a production of, say, *Equus*, and if you got it half right you would at least break even. But in Irish theatre, if you get it half right you lose a lot of money."

With the boom of subsidised theatre over the past decade or so, the development of the commercial sector has not kept up with the rapid growth of the sub-

sidised sector. Dublin audiences in particular have therefore been shaped almost exclusively by subsidised theatre. But this small number of theatregoers does not seem to be enough to make a vibrant commercial scene possible. "It's a very discretionary theatregoing audience," says Smith. "There are quite a number of

750,000 with productions of musicals and straight plays, most notably the work of John B. Keane. The company nevertheless folded in 1996, so deeply in debt that it is believed that owners Ben Barnes and Arthur Lappin had to pay creditors out of their own pockets. "Because Groundwork took the very extreme commercial plunge of committing itself to a venue, it undertook the liabilities of the venue as well as the producing," Smith says. "A commercial theatre company can't be at it 52 weeks a year. The product isn't there."

Smith's current employer was until recently (and with the exception of *Riverdance*) involved with theatre production only through sponsorship. From 1999 to the present, Abhann has sponsored Project Arts Centre, the Gaiety School of Acting, the International Dance Festival of Ireland, and the Dublin Theatre Festival. But their involvement with Passion Machine is different; they are active co-producers of the company's two most recent productions, *Diarmuid and Gráinne*, which toured the country in late 2001 and played at the Olympia this March, and *Studs*, which opens at the Gaiety in May.

"Sponsorship is a very simple relationship, in which an arts organisation comes to us and says 'will you help fund this' and we say 'yes', and get credit on all printed material and so forth. Those sponsorship relationships would be arms-length," explains Smith. "We proposed to Passion Machine the idea of being co-producers, which was an invitation to a very different type of rela-



DOWN THE COUNTRY: Edward Farrell's production of *The Chastitute* with Mick Lally

choices, and that limited number of people will make their choices carefully."

Smith knows of what he speaks. Before joining Abhann, he worked as director of Groundwork Productions, the innovative commercial company which worked out of the Gaiety Theatre and in its ten-year existence reached a total audience of

tionship... The relationship has been quite organic in that way — it's grown out of itself. This wasn't us sitting around in a room and coming up with a business strategy. This emerged. And it is potentially very enriching for both parties."

This sounds like a great deal for Passion Machine — they get the benefit of Abhann's business know-how and corporate structure, as well as, more basically, cash to help them get their shows up and running. But how does Abhann benefit?

which you wouldn't ordinarily encounter with a commercial or corporate sponsor, who would be looking at [a production partnership] as a marketing exercise."

ABHANN IS IN THE CLEARLY ENVIALE position of owning a hugely profitable and road-tested theatrical product, *Riverdance*, which provides a baseline of economic security from which the company can engage in other production relationships. Most produc-



HOME-GROWN SUCCESS: John Breen's *Alone it Stands*

"We're interested in exploring new work as it might feed into the scale of international work that Abhann does," says Smith. "Yet there is also a genuinely philanthropic instinct. Abhann is a company that happens to have done very well commercially, yet we have all come through the struggles that lots of theatre people are still involved with. We have a lot of empathy and understanding for that. So there is a philanthropic aspect,

ers, however, function in a less stable economic context, in which every show produced represents a major risk. One of the best ways to lower the risk factor is to back a show that's already proven itself with audiences and critics — and Ireland, dominated as it is by funded theatre, that show will almost always come from the subsidised sector.

Alone it Stands is an exemplary instance of a subsidised show successfully trans-

formed into a commercial hit. Written and directed by John Breen for the Arts Council-funded Yew Tree Theatre Company in County Mayo, the play is an energetic comedy mostly set on a rugby pitch. In its first two runs, the Yew Tree production toured rugby clubs and conventional theatres around the country to enthusiastic audience response. Moylan was in the audience at one of those rugby clubs and liked what she saw: "I decided to bring *Alone it Stands* into Andrew's

for the show to the 1200-seat Gaiety for four weeks in June, 2001. The show was a success at the Gaiety, and so Moylan and Cashe set their sights on a bigger goal: London. As the lead Irish producer on *Stones in his Pockets*, another subsidised show that has become one of the biggest hits of recent years and is still playing in the West End, Moylan had gained experience and confidence that allowed Lane Productions to undertake *Alone It Stands'* transfer to the Duchess Theatre for a



BROADWAY AND BEYOND: Seán Campion and Conleth Hill in *Stones in his Pockets*

Lane," she says, "because I thought it was a terrific show and to see whether it had legs to go elsewhere."

At that point, after a long subsidised run in Ireland and a well-received run in Edinburgh, *Alone it Stands* became a commercial production with Yew Tree and Lane Productions (Moylan and business partner Breda Cashe) as co-producers. Its box-office success at Andrew's Lane encouraged Moylan and Cashe to trans-

seven-week run beginning in January, 2002. And Moylan clearly believes she hasn't exhausted the Irish market for the show: back from London, *Alone It Stands* returns for another Irish commercial run at the Olympia this May.

It is rare for a show by a little-known writer, from a little-known company, and with a virtually unknown cast to achieve *Alone It Stands'* commercial success. Moylan's unique position of owning and

operating her own, small, centrally-located Dublin theatre gives her a laboratory of sorts to test shows that might go on to commercial success. *Stones in His Pockets* actually lost money in its Andrew's Lane run, but because Moylan owned the theatre, she was able to absorb the loss and still find investors for its international runs. "Andrew's Lane is a great way of finding out whether something will be successful or not," Moylan explains. "It's not going to cost an awful lot of money to put a play on there. You're taking a chance but you're not taking the big risk. The biggest advantage to running a small theatre like Andrew's Lane is that you can do the play you want to do. I only do plays that I really believe in."

Most commercial producers, however, are not lucky enough to operate their own venue where they can take such chances. And so the number of subsidised shows that actually "go commercial" is quite small. Having a star cast member, writer, or director adds hugely to a show's commercial potential, but it is really only the biggest companies, like the Abbey, the Gate, and Druid, that can lure star talent. And if a play proves successful at one of these theatres, it is almost certain to bypass commercial production in Ireland for a run in London or further afield. Domestic commercial theatre is thereby limited to very small pool of plays and venues, which further limits the audience. Often it is only upon returning from a commercial run abroad — having gained commercial status, as it were — that an originally subsidised play will be produced commercially in Ireland, as was the case with *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*.

Yet it has not always been so. Longtime producers like Smith and former Olympia general manager Gerry Sinnott agree that once upon a time there was less disparity between a play that would be labelled "subsidised" and one considered "commercial." Sinnott describes *Children of a Lesser God*, one of his first commercial productions, as a show that



COMMERCIAL? Catherine Walsh in Eden

nowadays would be something you'd be more likely to see in a subsidised theatre. "Maybe today," he says, "one would say [*Children of a Lesser God*] isn't commercial theatre."

"Years ago, you would have found that the same title would be done commercially and in the subsidised sector," agrees Smith. "Now the differences would be more absolute. There are very

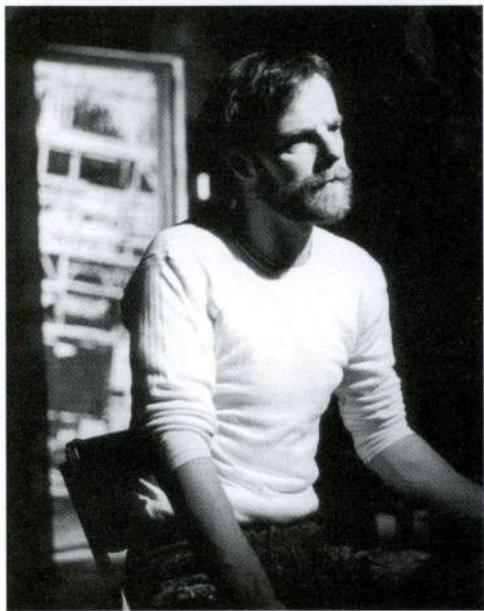
few titles that the commercial sector produce that find their way into the subsidised sector."

Sinnott also observes that relationships between the major funded companies and the commercial sector have eroded. "I had situations on many occasions over the years where I brought in a production which had been running in the Gate or

producer Edward Farrell, Keane is one of few Irish playwrights who can actually fill seats outside Dublin. Farrell, who has been producing plays and musicals for 30 years, has settled into an unusual niche as the only commercial producer in Ireland who produces primarily for domestic touring. He has come up with a very simple equation for success.

"I strive to give the audience what they want. Especially in the country, they like to see television faces, they like to see well-known actors and personalities. They also like to see a good quality production." Farrell has found that in order for a production to be commercially successful in Ireland today, it must be a "packaged show" with familiar names and familiar themes. "The Irish are somewhat reluctant," laments Farrell. "It's harder to get them in to see a new piece of theatre, whether it's a musical or a new play, rather than something tried and true. I wouldn't do a piece now without having a big star in it."

With the construction of many new mid-size commercial venues in towns including Sligo, Letterkenny, and Ennis, Farrell has found it possible to successfully tour shows ranging from Keane's *The Chastitute* to Stephen Sondheim's musical *Side By Side*. "For a long time there was no theatre-going audience in the country because there were no venues other than amateur ones... With the establishment of venues with proper technical facilities in various towns, we were able to go and give them successful shows. But this has just been in the last ten or fifteen years." Farrell has essentially accomplished in the country what Dublin pro-



PROFITABLE: Brian F. O'Byrne in *Beauty Queen*

the Abbey," continues Sinnott. "One week the show would be a subsidised production and the next it would be a commercial production."

Hence one of the only reliable approaches to producing commercially profitable Irish theatre is to do classic plays or plays by playwrights who are certain to have widespread appeal, particularly John B. Keane. For commercial

heims' musical *Side By Side*. "For a long time there was no theatre-going audience in the country because there were no venues other than amateur ones... With the establishment of venues with proper technical facilities in various towns, we were able to go and give them successful shows. But this has just been in the last ten or fifteen years." Farrell has essentially accomplished in the country what Dublin pro-

ducers need to do to make commercial production successful: inspire the "average person," not the regular theatregoer, to attend the theatre.

SMITH, MOYLAN, FARRELL, AND THE FEW other Irish commercial producers have found their own individual and corporate ways to turn producing Irish theatre into a profitable enterprise. But the basic fact still exists that the primary beneficiaries of Irish theatre's current success (other than, of course, the playwrights themselves) are English and American producers. And the taste for things Irish continues to grow and broaden to include, say, the Abbey's recent production of Eugene O'Brien's *Eden*, a brooding two-hander about an unhappy marriage, which looks likely to transfer to the West End by the end of 2002. "A couple of years ago, nobody would have been looking at *Eden* to go into the West End," says Moylan. "English producers are now taking Dublin very seriously. Irish theatre is better known outside Ireland as being viable and successful than inside the country."

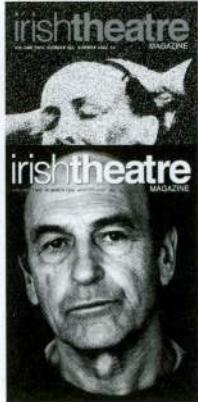
Ireland clearly lacks an infrastructure to support commercial theatre production. This may partly be due to the reluctance of Irish investors to put their money in the theatre, which is undoubtedly a high-risk investment. But many feel that commercial production in Ireland has not kept pace with the rapid development of Irish theatre both domestically and abroad. How to build the commercial sector and bring some of the profit from Irish theatre back into Ireland? Some key players believe that the growing division between the subsidised and the commercial is a big part of the problem; there seems to be a presupposition that if a show makes a profit, then it is somehow artistically inferior.

In light of such attitudes, Ground-

work, under Ronan Smith, led an attempt to persuade the Arts Council to stimulate the commercial sector. "We tried to convince the Arts Council that there was a whole body of work that existed in the shadow-world between commercial and subsidised," explains Smith. "Whether or not a production turned out to be profitable or not profitable, it could still be good theatre. We tried to convince the Arts Council that what was needed was a kind of rolling fund, from which the Council would invest in new productions such as these." The Arts Council never responded with any definitive plan, but Smith, and others, still hope to breathe new life into commercial production. "If a more active commercial sector is desirable," says Smith, "Then this kind of mechanism is what's required."

Putting the onus for change on an overburdened and beleaguered Arts Council hardly seems like a practical strategy these days, however. The focus of real change might need to shift to audiences: it is the public, after all, who buy tickets and turn shows into hits. Edward Farrell puts it thus: "It's all about bums in seats. No matter how artistically good or bad, [theatre] doesn't exist unless you have people coming to see it." Again the fundamental problem arises: not enough people go to the theatre in Ireland for commercial theatre to thrive. In order for more bums to find their way into seats, the divide between the actual theatregoing audience and the potential theatregoing audience must be narrowed. Perhaps, then, it is up to commercial mavens like Smith, Farrell, and Moylan to light the fire underneath those potential bums.

Patrick Burleigh is completing an M.Phil in Anglo-Irish literature at Trinity College, Dublin.



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Hearth and Home

GERALD MURPHY offers an excerpt from his play *Take Me Home*. Murphy is one of the six writers in the Rough Magic/Dublin Fringe Festival Seeds project. There will be a platform presentation of *Take Me Home* and the other five Seeds commissions at Project, Dublin on 9-11 May.



GERALD MURPHY: This is my second full-length stage play. My first play, *The Welcome*, was presented as part of the Druid Debuts series. This is an early scene in *Take Me Home* (which is a working title). Andy, Kevin, and Bren are brothers, and Eddie is their father. He's asked his sons to accompany him on a visit to their mother, Fran, who is sick in hospital. The brothers don't know what's wrong with her. Perhaps it's cancer — or perhaps the recent death of her friend, Mrs. C., a wealthy widow, has something to do with it. This is a family who have little to do with each other; the brothers have to wonder why their father wants to meet them at all. This excerpt is taken from the second draft of the play and may change in the final version.

BREN Which hospital did he say she was in?

KEVIN Was it the Mater? I can't remember.

BREN The Mater?

KEVIN Yeah I think so.

BREN That's what he said to yeh? The Mater?

KEVIN Well I can't really remember — I think so.

BREN Are yeh sure?

KEVIN No I'm not sure.

BREN Cos he said Beaumont to me.

KEVIN Yeh well maybe he said Beaumont then.

ANDY Beaumont, Mater there's a big difference.

KEVIN I don't know I thought he said the Mater. You could always phone him.

BREN Deirdre said James's on the message.

KEVIN Just ring him I suppose.

BREN No he'd be in bed — I don't want

to wake him.

KEVIN What did he tell you was wrong with her?

BREN I wasn't speaking to him he just left a message.

KEVIN Right.

BREN Why did he say something to you?

KEVIN Yeah see I ring Ma every week.

BREN And what did he say?

KEVIN He said "menopause."

ANDY I thought she had that already.

BREN Well maybe it's a relapse or something.

ANDY But she got all the works out the last time — didn't she?

KEVIN Well the last time he said that her tubes were rotten, something like that.

BREN Was that it?

KEVIN And she got them cut out.

ANDY No she got *all* the works out the last time, I remember she said it. The eggs and all.

KEVIN I don't know. It's her womb then or something.

ANDY No they took that out as well.

KEVIN Did they?

ANDY It saves them having to go back in again.

KEVIN Oh right.

BREN Well as long as it's not anything serious. That's the main thing.

ANDY I know what it is.

BREN What?

ANDY Well I don't know if I should tell you or not.

BREN What? Did Da tell yeh or something?

ANDY No but I know what it is.

BREN How do yeh know?

ANDY Ah now that'd be telling.

BREN Fuck off.

ANDY It's the big "C."

KEVIN Cancer?

ANDY Deirdre was telling me that she's

had this chest infection for ages.

KEVIN Yeah that's true.

ANDY It's the Big "C." She's gonna make an announcement about it. She wants us all there. She's been told how long she's left. That's what it is.

BREN She would've said something.

ANDY Not on the phone. She's starting her chemo or something. Why else would we all be going over? Why what do you think it is?

KEVIN It could be cancer. I don't know, it could be I suppose.

ANDY I just think you're better thinking the worst in these situations cos then anything's better than what you thought it was, d'yeah know what I mean? Like all her hair'll fall out.

BREN She would've said something.

ANDY When? When do you talk to her?

BREN Well that would've been a bit of news. She'd have an excuse to ring me.

ANDY No it's the Big "C" and it's something else as well.

KEVIN What?

ANDY Ah now.

BREN Fuck off.

ANDY Do you want to bet that it's cancer?

BREN You're fucking annoying me now. Ring Deirdre.

ANDY I told you she's at the clinic.

BREN Shopping, you said.

ANDY Yeah and the clinic.

KEVIN Is she sick?

ANDY No Gordon's not well.

KEVIN What's wrong with him?

ANDY Ah some kind of thing, a bug, he's always has something going on — poor kid... You think it's cancer, don't you?

KEVIN I don't know.

ANDY Jesus, imagine the oul fella — the fucking place'd fall down around him. Sure he can't even fucking boil an egg, sure he can't?

KEVIN No I wouldn't say so.

play excerpt

ANDY He's had a full time housewife since they got married. You don't get that anymore. Women go out to work. Well most of them do anyway, what?

KEVIN Yeah.

ANDY Deirdre stays at home with Gordon.

KEVIN Oh right..

ANDY But she doesn't iron or cook or anything.

KEVIN Oh right.

ANDY Neither of us cooks.

KEVIN Oh right.

ANDY That's a lot of take-aways, what?
KEVIN Yeah.

ANDY No but do you know what I'm saying? All the oul fella ever done was paint the front door. That's all he did and that was important to him, how it looked from the front. Am I right?

BREN What? I don't know, I painted the last time, why, what colour is it now?

ANDY Shit brown.

BREN Yeah I painted it brown.

ANDY Yeah well that's what I mean. He's a lazy fucker.

KEVIN He's just into himself really I think.

ANDY Is that what you think?

KEVIN Well I mean he doesn't really say very much he just whatever gets pissed, goes into his room and sticks on his headphones.

ANDY "If you were the only girl in the world"?

KEVIN Yeah.

ANDY I love that song.

KEVIN Yeah.

ANDY So he's not lifting you out of it then, no?

KEVIN No well, no, well he never really did.

ANDY Did he not? Fucking lashed me out of it the whole time, that I was a waster and all that.

KEVIN Did he?

ANDY When are we gonna start paying him back so's he can retire and all that, didn't he? This is when I was ten years of age. Fuck's sake.

BREN Never said that to me.

ANDY Did he not? Well I was picked out then for the special treatment.

BREN Don't mind him.

ANDY Don't get me wrong now. He never fucking hit me or anything, more's the pity, what? I mean then you could fucking hit him back, yeh know but no, Ma was the only one that ever clattered me, for wetting the bed it was — that was the one thing that really got to her — did she ever hit you?

KEVIN No.

ANDY Yeah I got the special treatment from Ma as well. I suppose she never clattered you [Bren] either — did she?

BREN I never annoyed her the way you did.

KEVIN Well she told *me* off loads of times.

ANDY Ah well then you're made — aren't yeh?

KEVIN But Da never — well he just kind of ignored me or I ignored him I don't know which.

ANDY He paid for your college though, didn't he?

KEVIN Yeah.

ANDY Well that's not ignoring you then, is it?

KEVIN No but I mean saying "hello" to each other or anything, there was none of that. He just went into his room, put his headphones on and played his records.

ANDY So what're you saying then?

KEVIN I don't know, what do you mean?

ANDY What're you saying?

KEVIN I don't know.

ANDY No you don't know nothing.

BREN Leave him alone, will yeh? He's only in the fucking door.

Volume Control

item's reviewers look at four new books on Irish theatre.

DRUIDS, DUDES, AND BEAUTY

QUEENS, edited by Dermot Bolger

REVIEWED BY SHAUN RICHARDS

Dublin: New Island Books, 2001

DERMOT BOLGER EDITED AND INITIATED this collection of essays as a *Festschrift* to celebrate Phelim Donlon's contribution to Irish theatre while drama officer of the Arts Council of Ireland, and its subtitle, *The Changing Face of Irish Theatre*, is picked up in Bolger's introduction — the period of change corresponding to Donlon's tenure from 1984 to 2001. The richness of this period is apparent when one considers that it opens with Tom Murphy's collaboration with Druid and closes on the critical and commercial successes of *The Weir* and *Stones in his Pockets* including, along the way, the rise and decline of Field Day and Charabanc, major works by Frank McGuinness and Sebastian Barry, and the arrival of Marina Carr and Martin McDonagh.

The range of the essays is equally wide, and largely contemporary, including references to productions which were virtually concurrent with the production of the collection itself. In this sense it's an interesting, rather than invaluable, addition to the expanding range of books on Irish theatre



which have appeared over the last decade. Its utility lies in the extent to which it variously, and variably, captures significant plays and productions in the period. Its limitation lies in the extent to which, as Bolger acknowledges, it is intended as "a series of snapshots." For along with an inclination to resist prescription in favour of capturing the moment goes what is almost an abandonment of editorial intent, apart from an interest in seeing what turns up, contributors being given a "nudge" towards areas but equally permitted "the option of digressing from (or totally disregarding) their brief." When this is combined with the decision "not to impose any house style" the resultant series of "snapshots" falls well short of Cartier-Bresson.

Given, for example, the insight and lucidity of Colm Tóibín's reflections on Billy Roche which opens the collection, one cannot deny the integrity of many individual contributions, but serendipity is not one of the strongest arguments in favour of purchase. Extracts from Ben Barnes's diary entries on meals with Friel in Russia have their (anecdotal) interest, and Owen Dudley Edwards's turbo-charged appreciation of Irish plays at the Edinburgh Festival holds the page, but Emile Jean Dumay's

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"French Perspective" on Irish drama is only that by virtue of being written by a French national, and the Mic Moroney essay which closes the collection has a quality of free-association which would have benefited from Bolger being more editorially directive. Informed academic essays on the drama of Northern Ireland and women in Irish theatre sit awkwardly alongside Johnny Hanrahan's reductive assertion that "life is too short to be trying to pick up the lingo [of Lacan and Foucault]." There is, then, a random quality to the collection but, variations in approach and tone aside, what one would appreciate is a stronger emphasis on analysis than simply record, some sense of what was really at stake for theatre, and theatre criticism, in this period.

The contribution by Karen Fricker indicates what is a leitmotif in some of the more interesting essays when she argues for the need to expand expressive forms and suggests frustration with the recycling of the threadbare trope of "the national question." Vic Merriman is equally concerned with addressing "the languages of theatre itself," but overall the mixture of high quality commentary, conventional academic analysis, and free-form anecdote fails to coalesce into a coherent analytical narrative. Bolger's introduction attempts to forestall such criticism along the lines of "That is not what I meant, at all" but, rather like Prufrock, the absence of conviction means that the moment is not forced to any "overwhelming question." As a register of what was staged in a particularly dynamic period of Irish theatre the collection serves as a series of often interesting records of activity and opinion; what it does not do — what it does not (regrettably) even attempt — is to provide a co-ordinated insight into the significance

and realised (and unrealised) possibilities of that moment. For all the interest that can be generated by a random series of snapshots, sometimes understanding is better served by X-rays.

Shaun Richards is professor of Irish Studies at Staffordshire University.

THEATRE TALK: VOICES OF IRISH THEATRE PRACTITIONERS, edited by Lilian Chambers, Ger FitzGibbon, and Eamonn Jordan

REVIEWED BY MICHAEL BILLINGTON

Dublin: Caryfort Press, 2002

WHAT PICTURE OF IRISH THEATRE emerges from this book of interviews with key practitioners? Inevitably, a contradictory one. If you interview 39 people you get the equivalent of 39 articles; a series of individual perspectives all based on a personal vision of truth. But what strikes me, as an outsider, is how many of the views expressed in this new volume uncannily echo British experience, and how clashing opinions are themselves a token of Irish theatre's precarious vitality.

On only two subjects does there seem virtual unanimity: money and critics. Everyone talks about the way energy and enterprise are being stifled by lack of funding. Garry Hynes talks indignantly about mature artists who live hand-to-mouth, "are probably earning less than they did in their 20s and 30s," and lack proper pension provision. Lynne Parker (pictured) says that it's equally difficult for beginners, especially in expensive Dublin, who "have to have two or three other jobs in order to remain in theatre." Peter Sheridan points out that a new play commission of £7,500 is in no way adequate to cover a writer's living costs for a year. In the UK the theatre

has for decades been subsidised by its artists: clearly Ireland has learned nothing from that bitter lesson.

Criticism also comes in for a bashing. Ben Barnes thinks the standard of criticism in the Irish media is "truly appalling." Joe Dowling recalls that, when he took over the Abbey, the now defunct *Irish Press* carried a picture of him with a big headline saying "This man will fail." Even Fintan O'Toole, in a well-argued interview, deplores the trend towards a preview-led culture in which criticism is increasingly marginalised. I know what he means: everywhere you look puffery wins out over analysis. But it would be nice to think Ireland could buck the trend and give criticism the space it deserves: a vital theatre can only survive if it has a range of informed comment.

Aside from money and criticism, the big question the book raises is what constitutes "Irish theatre" and whether it represents the nation's diversity. The short answer is that no one knows. Tom Murphy questions the whole notion of the "Irish play" and points out the wide range of influences on his own work. Declan Hughes argues that there is a great hunger for

stories that talk about the world of modern Ireland, and Dermot Bolger wittily lambastes the conformity of outlook. This again strikes a chord with my experience in Britain where there is a vast number of promising young writers: the only trouble is they're all writing the same play.

The British romanticise Irish theatre — this book shows it is more battlefield than Utopia. But despite some signal omissions — no Brian Friel, Martin McDonagh, Gary Mitchell (pictured), or Conor McPherson, except as an interviewer — I was still struck by the book's value as a work of reference and the depth of concern it reveals. Two interviews, in particular, raise issues that far transcend the particular problems facing Irish theatre. Michael Colgan (pictured) talks fascinatingly about the "change in the imagination" which he sees as the most potent force in the arts today: in particular, the way an MTV-reared generation absorbs information much more quickly and, in consequence, demands shorter, sharper, faster plays. On a different tack, Patrick Mason talks about our continuing need for language and aims some well-directed barbs at the flabbiness of improvised theatre and the hectic sensationalism of much "physical" theatre. I see Colgan's point, but I think we're



Ben Barnes, Sebastian Barry, Dermot Bolger, Jason Byrne, Marina Carr, Daithí Ó Catháin, Michael Colgan, Frank Conroy, Anne Devlin, Joe Dowling, Bernadette Farrell, Oliver Flaherty, Ben Healy, Sean Healy, Declan Hughes, Gary Hunt, Martin Jones, John Keane, Raymond Keating, Pat Kiely, Martin McDonagh, Tom Kavanagh, Hugh Leonard, Tintín Lohan, Tomás Mac Anna, Barry McGovern, Francíse McGuinness, Tom Mac Ingvale, Patrick Mason, Paul Mecurio, Eleanor Mervin, Carol Moore, Tom Murphy, Padraic Ó Dálaigh, Fintan O'Toole, Lynne Parker, Billy Roche, Anne Ryan, Padraic Ryans, Brian Sheridan, Gerard Stedman, Enda Walsh, Michael West, Vincent Woods.



in danger of prematurely junking the inheritance of world drama. And I'm totally with Mason when he talks about "the tyranny of the consumer" and the demagoguery of popular taste. In the best line in the book, he says he doesn't do plays for bums (as in bums-on-seats): "I do them for hearts, heads, and imaginations." As long as people believe that, Irish theatre will survive; and, if its basic condition is one of exuberance-bordering-on-crisis, it's much the same wherever you look.

Michael Billington is chief theatre critic of The Guardian.

THEATRE AND THE STATE IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY IRELAND

by Lionel Pilkington

REVIEWED BY PAUL MURPHY

London and New York: Routledge, 2001

THE FINAL DECADE OF THE 20TH century saw the publication of a number of textbooks offering various engagements with the Irish drama produced during that century. In *Contemporary Irish Drama: Beckett to McGuinness* (1994), Anthony Roche argues that "the presiding genius of contemporary Irish drama, the ghostly founding father, is Samuel Beckett." Roche examines Beckett's influence on subsequent writers and engages with the work of Brian Friel, Tom Murphy, and Thomas Kilroy, concluding with a cursory engagement with drama in the Northern Irish context. Christopher Murray's *Twentieth Century Irish Drama: Mirror up to Nation* (1997), provides a more comprehensive review of dramatic production and reception across the century. Murray brings his near-encyclopaedic knowledge of Irish drama to bear on his reading of text and context, by way of an historicisation

where playwrights are viewed in terms of how they shaped the drama stylistically and thematically.

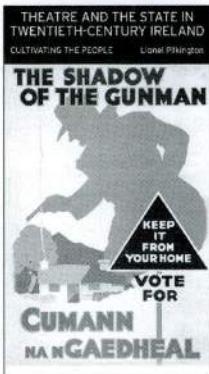
Where Murray goes some way to historically contextualise the way in which dramatists contributed to the evolution of both theatre and nation-state, Lionel Pilkington goes a step further in his current book. He gives a thoroughgoing analysis of the fraught relationship between theatre and state by "tracking in detail an evolving theatre history in relation to the politics of the British, Irish, and Northern Irish states," in an attempt to counteract what he sees as "the long-standing assumption that Irish theatre exists outside politics and apart altogether from the determining power of the state."

Pilkington argues that such bastions as the Irish Literary Theatre, the Irish National Dramatic Society, and the National Theatre Society Limited are as much products of the creative energies associated with "constructive unionism" as they are products of the energies associated with the struggle for Irish political independence. From the outset it is clear that Pilkington is engaging with theatre history only insofar as it enables an almost polemical critique of Irish theatre past and present, as he contends that: "criticising majority orthodoxies may well have been the credo of the Abbey Theatre in its early years, but such critical abrasiveness is only rarely in evidence in the decades after independence. From the 1920s, the aesthetic agenda of the National Theatre Society tends to be dominated instead by a newly invigorated theatics of modernisation: in particular, the idea that a national theatre institution has an important role in educating its nation's citizenry by consolidating and extending the authority of the state." While polemic often uses rhetorical gusto to circumvent issues like accuracy and relevance, Pilk-

ington's argument is much more savvy; his acerbic critical analysis is tempered with mature and insightful commentary.

Yeats, Gregory, Synge and O'Casey are read in terms of their cultural and political contexts with attention to detail which is refreshingly provocative and engaging. Hardly a sentence goes by without painstakingly accurate references to a pertinent theatre review or historical reference, which nearly overwhelms the reader with the sheer range of critical contestation and audience reception of the plays under analysis. Yet the strength of Pilkington's book is not only that it throws new light on familiar texts such as *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, *The Playboy of the Western World*, and *The Plough and the Stars*, but that it re-energises less familiar plays and playwrights such as T.C. Murray's *Birthright*, which "concentrates on the fatal inevitability of primogeniture within the Irish social system and on its tragically divisive consequences." With incisiveness Pilkington shows how this is a tendency in the plays of Padraic Colum, T.C. Murray, Lennox Robinson, and a few little-known dramatists like R.J. Ray or John Guinan. Specifically, the social antagonisms of country life are represented as local problems which are a result of inherited systems that can only be eliminated through rapid modernisation.

Where Roche and Murray's texts end with only cursory examinations of theatre in the Northern Irish context, Pilkington gives a much more thorough consideration of the complex interaction between theatre and state in Northern Ireland. Referring to the Irish government's amendments to the



Offences Against the State Act in 1972 and 1974 and the impact on support for the nationalist minority in Northern Ireland, Pilkington poses the difficult question that "representing the nation in the theatre was now an acutely sensitive political issue raising, once again, an awkward problem of definition: what exactly was the nation in question?" It is this tendency to ask awkward questions and to provide awkward answers

that characterises Pilkington as a politically committed intellectual, who is happy to throw a few well-aimed spanners in the Irish National Heritage Machine.

Paul Murphy is lecturer in the School of Drama, Trinity College.

STEPPING STONES, THE ARTS IN ULSTER 1971-2001, edited by Mark Carruthers and Stephen Douds

REVIEWED BY ROISÍN INGLE
Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 2002

FEW FEATHERS ARE RUFFLED BY THIS comprehensive account of 30 tumultuous years of arts in Northern Ireland which offers a solid, if safe, assessment of those challenging times. While the reader may quibble with the lack of lengthy critical assessment, the collection of essays edited by the BBC's Mark Carruthers and Stephen Douds succeeds in competently cataloguing the achievements in areas including theatre, visual arts, fiction, music and poetry.

Some artistic stepping stones — notably architecture and dance — are left unturned but as an accessible guidebook to the province's recent past and to the

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impact of the Troubles on the sector, the book does not disappoint. *Stepping Stones* is the third in an unofficial trilogy begun fifty years ago with Sam Hanna Bell's *Arts in Ulster* which was followed by Michael Longley's *Causeway*. The latter collection of essays, published in 1971, provided the inspiration for this volume.

Theatre is covered well here. The opening chapter by Ophelia Byrne explores theatre companies and venues in the North. Byrne sets the scene by recalling the "muted optimism" that surrounded the Ulster '71 arts festival. An already ailing arts environment was virtually decimated by the worsening of the Troubles. Actor JJ Murphy neatly summed up the practical impossibility of survival as people stayed away from venues in their droves: "I understand why the security forces don't want thousands of people around the streets. But it takes thousands of people for me to stay in my job."

These insights into the devastating nature of the political situation on the arts are perhaps the strongest part of Byrne's assessment, but David Grant's examination of the playwrights and their plays in the book's second chapter gives the reader a deeper understanding of the quality and nature of theatre in Ulster. Grant ably charts the development of what became known as "Troubles Drama" with the Lyric Theatre's successful and groundbreaking production of John Boyd's *The Flats* in 1971. It took some time for audiences to appreciate art that so closely imitated life. While many plays at this time concentrated on other themes Belfast audiences slowly began to feel comfortable with work that, as Grant puts it, "cast light on the pervasive madness that surrounded Belfast in the early 1970s."

Here, the author puts into context the power of productions from companies such as Brian Friel's Field Day as well as

more populist offerings from Charabanc to Dubbeljoint right up to contemporary writers such as Gary Mitchell. The sheer wealth of artistic achievement, which flourished despite, and in some cases because of, the troubled environment becomes wonderfully apparent.

It is only to be expected that the book acts as a kind of intellectual cheerleader for the established arts in Ulster — the influential Belfast Festival at Queen's is given acres of largely uncritical coverage while the newly established Cathedral Quarter Arts Festival, now in its third year, doesn't warrant a mention.

It is worth noting that Ian Hill's chapter on arts administration is scathing of the Arts Council, criticism that is particularly appropriate given some of the body's more recent controversial funding decisions. The chapter on reporting the arts by Grania McFadden is fascinating for its glimpse of a local media that, with some exceptions, has never really bothered developing its critical faculties. What is missing here, however, is a thorough insight into why this occurred and the even more puzzling issue of why, for the most part, it continues.

The editors assert that the aim of the book was not just to look back but to offer suggestions as to how each discipline might move forward. Mostly though, contributors limit themselves to a few brief paragraphs on this topic, inevitably mentioning Belfast's bid to be European Capital of Culture in 2008 and the impact that achievement could have on the next 30 years. As a volume of history charting a unique artistic journey the publication is invaluable. Perhaps what is needed now, though, is a realistic assessment of the challenges that lie ahead.

Roisín Ingle is an Irish Times features writer currently based in Belfast.

New Directions

PETER CRAWLEY charts comings and goings behind the scenes of Irish theatre.

VALLEJO GANTNER (pictured), former artistic associate of the Melbourne Festival in Australia, is the new director of the Dublin Fringe Festival. **RORY CONNELL** (pictured) has been appointed marketing director at the National Theatre. He was formerly managing director of the Cork Film Festival... **AIDEEN HOWARD**, formerly dramaturg of the National Theatre, has been appointed artistic director of Wicklow Arts Centre, a new multi-arts facility in Bray which is scheduled to open in May... **KATHY McARDLE**, former artistic director of Project, has been appointed artistic director of the Lemon Tree Arts Centre in Aberdeen, Scotland, a combined arts venue which includes a 550-seat music performance space and a 166-seat studio theatre.



ing and press officer... **JAIMIE CARSWELL** is the research and development manager at the Hawk's Well Theatre; this is a new position. **EMMETT McSWINEY** has been appointed marketing and front of house manager at the Hawk's Well.

At the National Theatre, **JOANNA PARKES** is leaving her position as programme officer in the Outreach and Education department to become a freelance drama facilitator.

SINEAD DELANEY, formerly of the National Gallery education programme, takes up that position. **SARAH JORDAN** has vacated the position of Outreach and Education administrator and has been replaced by

RACHEL LYNCH, formerly of the Gate Theatre.

NORMA LEEN is the new administrative assistant of *irish theatre magazine*... **UNA NicEOIN** has been appointed education officer at the Lyric Theatre in Belfast. **ESTHER HALLER-CLARKE**, formerly of RGB Records, is the Lyric's new market-

MICHELLE BROWN has left the position of administrator with Bedrock... **CIARA McGLYNN** has departed from the Civic Theatre as general manager. **KERRY HENDLEY** has assumed McGlynn's duties in the new position of assistant to the

entrances & exits

theatre director. **LOUISE DRAKE** has been appointed box office and marketing manager at the Civic... **ELIZABETH WHYTE** is the new administrator of Rough Magic... **COLETTE FARRELL**, former programming director of City Arts Centre, is Calypso's new company manager.

BRÍD FINN has left the position of office manager with Galloglass and joined Island Theatre Company as administrator... **BREEGE BRENNAN** is the new manager of the Focus Theatre. The theatre will advertise for a new artistic director in the near future. **ELIZABETH MOYNIHAN** and **PAUL KEELEY** are currently acting as artistic directors.

FERGAL MCGRATH (pictured), formerly general manager of the Galway Arts Festival, is the new managing director of Druid Theatre Company... **MOYA McHUGH**, currently administrative assistant with Galway Arts Festival, has been appointed general manager of the Baboró international arts festival for children.



MARGUERITE BOURKE, formerly communications manager of the City Arts Centre, is the new general manager of Calypso...

ANNA GALLIGAN is the new development officer of the National Association for Youth Drama. **DAVID KELLY** has taken her previous position, coordinator of Arts Train, with the same organisation. And **FÍONA NI CHINNÉIDE** replaces

JULIE CRONIN as NAYD's publications and information officer.

JOHN McCANN is the director of Tinderbox's "New Writing Hot House" programme... **EMMA JORDAN** is the new development manager of Prime Cut Productions, and **EDEL MAGILL** is their new finance and administration manager.

PROJECT has advertised for a new artistic director; interviews will be held in mid April. **THE RIVERSIDE THEATRE** in Coleraine has advertised for an artistic director.



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AMERICAN BUFFALO by David Mamet

Prime Cut Productions

Lyric Theatre, Belfast and on tour

Reviewed 23 January at the Lyric

BY PAUL DEVLIN

PRIME CUT'S RECENT PRODUCTION OF David Mamet's celebrated play *American Buffalo* was a surprisingly bright staging of what is at heart a much darker, taut piece of theatre. In a world of small-time crooks, chancers, and sleazebags operating in the sewers of capitalism, Mamet's characters cling to the ideals of big business as a means of escape. Here, friendships are little more than temporary alliances forged to pull off a job, make a buck, and get out clean.

Mamet hangs a deceptively intricate plot off what is essentially a botched caper scenario. An American Buffalo is a rare coin that laconic junk shop owner Donny unwittingly sells at a knockdown rate. Donny brings Teach, a potentially violent cohort, in on a plan to steal the coin back. Teach in turn edges Donny's flunkey Bobby out of the deal in order to up his cut of the heist. All this makes for funny, entertaining stuff, but beneath the banter Mamet savagely attacks the ethics of corporate America, raises questions about the nature of loyalty, and asks how far will the individual go to succeed.

Jackie Doyle's direction managed to tap into the rich vein of comedy unmissable in Mamet's text, but did so at the expense of the play's sinister undertones and black tension. Stuart Marshall's set reflected Doyle's approach. Impressive in its detail, Marshall's choice of colour scheme for the set — largely soft orange and yellow tones — was more gaudy than seedy. Donny's junk shop was packed full of all kinds of suitable rubbish, but though it looked cramped, it lacked any real sense of claust-

trophobia. Similarly, Conleth White's lighting provided a diffuse yellow wash for most of the play, where something more squalid might have served better.

Lalor Roddy delivered a subtle and consistent performance as Donny. Unlike other cast members, he held his accent throughout and trusted the rhythm of Mamet's dialogue to do its job. Roddy drew out the crafty, guarded aspects of Donny but also expertly suggested his character's deeper insecurities, his vulnerability, and his desperate need to make a real connection with another human being. Physically, Roddy was perfect. He brought to his role a measured stillness, with just a hint of decrepitude, which was wholly appropriate.

In contrast, B.J. Hogg, as Teach, moved erratically, at times aimlessly, in a role he seemed uncomfortable in. Hogg failed to supply the steel, the threatening malice, Mamet's desperate hoodlum requires. He wrestled with the accent and attempted a Matt Damon-esque fast-talking patter that worked a few times but was overall inconsistent. Gerard Jordan played his role as Bobby well. He got the right mix of innocence wanting to be corrupted, but was less effective in the more tender exchanges between Bobby and Donny.

The key to *American Buffalo*, as with most of Mamet's plays, is attention to rhythm. The rhythm of Mamet's writing is like musical phrases. His dialogue repeats and cuts to generate tension, provoke ambiguity, as well as creating comedy out of the seemingly banal. Prime Cut's programme notes for this production made it clear that the company was acutely aware of the importance of Mamet's language, reminding the audience that the play is written in iambic pentameter. In performance, though, the delivery was hit and miss. The few times when Roddy and



Hogg hit the right rhythm, they were superb, and the drama began to fly. But the rhythm ball was dropped too often for comfort. Overall, these well-polished examples of what the play could achieve ultimately emphasised the weaker moments in the overall performance that perhaps, over time, might have smoothed out (I did review it early in its run). There was an overriding feeling that Prime Cut's version of Mamet's American classic would improve with age.

Paul Devlin lives and works in Belfast.

BARABBAS... THE FESTIVAL: MOBY DAN, NIGHTMARE ON ESSEX STREET, AND DOG

Barabbas... the company
Project Arts Centre, Dublin

12 November - 15 December 2001;
reviewed on 13 Nov., 21 Nov., and 3 Dec.

BY SUSAN CONLEY

EXPECTATIONS — THEY'RE POTENT ENOUGH to ruin any relationship, even the very specific one that can spring up between a theatre company and its audience. While remaining, in the main, strangers to each other, the familiarity that results from a group of popular practitioners and its loving witnesses can be as fraught as any bond between intimates. Barabbas... the company has an especially fond following, one that has faithfully supported the company's growth, and one that felt rather alarmed by recent changes in the group's make-up.

With Mikel Murfi's exit in mid-2001, the group, founded ten years ago by Murfi, Raymond Keane, and Veronica Coburn, was quite obviously altered, and in many ways, Barabbas...the festival seemed an effort not only to create a new framework in which the company

can be perceived, but also a means of providing its avid, faithful audience with a celebratory format in which to reconnect with the troupe.

Moby Dan, written and directed by Veronica Coburn, kicked things off. Five people meet in a Midlands town hall as part of their duty to the dole, but the course they are meant to be undertaking goes a different direction when they are inadvertently locked in the room for the night. Four of the five are not total strangers to each other — how could they be? It's a small town in Ireland, after all. The fifth is a Spanish woman, the most markedly foreign, and yet as the adventure unfolds, the Irish find themselves on unfamiliar ground as well.

The characters represent different aspects of Irish society: twins Deirdre and Eric represent the strong familial thread that runs through Irish life; Evelyn Cahill represents the older generation, a sector under considerable strain in these days of rapid change; Ruth Lehane, as the Spaniard, is an embodiment of ongoing cultural exchange; and Daniel, the crusty, hippy-dippy lad, is the Irish man alienated in his own culture. In an effort to pass the time, the group decides to stage the book that Daniel is reading: *Moby Dick*. Landlocked as they are, the choice is poignant on many levels; if they all have private yearnings, they're about to become public as the adventure picks up steam, and the metaphorical white whale becomes quite real to them all.

Performed in red nose, the story is a series of *coups de théâtre* that imaginatively change the scene from the dull town hall to the shifting landscape of the imagination; in one instance, as a curtain is continually drawn across the stage, the company physically use pages from

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AT SEA: Lehane, Guinane, Lacey, Molloy, and Cahill in *Moby Dan*

Melville's text to create their own sea-going vessel, and as designed by Carol Betera, this is one of the show's biggest treats. Strong playing helps along a text that sags somewhat in the second act — but as the tale begins to spin itself towards its ending, the creativity and fun of the piece lifted it out of what may actually have been an excess of clever ideas.

Gerry Stemberge's contribution, *Nightmare on Essex Street*, is an actor's-bad-dream story in which two performers, played by Coburn and Keane, discover themselves stuck in various backstage situations while performing some of the classics of Irish drama. About midway through, the pair take a coffee break and wonder about the landscape in which they've found themselves. Pure logic won't get them out, it

seems, nor will battling against the elements of each outlandish sequence. As they talk it through, they come to the conclusion that this is an experience that only actors, er, enjoy: that "people" — non-theatre folk — couldn't possibly find themselves prey to the revenge of the subconscious via their dreams. A computer nerd wouldn't have a bad dream about being unable to boot up... would he? This scene takes the piss out of assumptions "civilians" have about theatre folk, while reinforcing them at the same time.

When the show works at this high level of intellectual *double entendre*, it soars; when it doesn't, and extends thin jokes beyond their stretching point, it suffers from too much of a good thing (and often too much of the *same* thing —

KATE HORGAN

over and over). Luckily, in this instance, there were more hits than misses. The elaborate forms of the dreams encompass subconscious feelings of fraudulence, hubris, and utter panic — and the humorous approach mocks it all: the backstabbing, the insecurity, the pancy directors, the gossip, and the need to be the best in a very public arena.

Stembridge's text draws on familiar favourites, from Sheridan to Shaw, from O'Neill to O'Casey, (with an especially hilarious sequence that centres on *Juno and the Paycock*) all the way up to Behan and Beckett. The company do us the favour of respecting, indeed demanding, our knowledge of the theatrical canon; conversely, it's hard to tell whether the in-joke aspects of actors' carry-on will translate as well. The highly informed, partisan crowd at the opening night were

right there with them in spirit and practice, but the text counts a bit too strongly on identification of experience.

Keane's *Dog* rounded out the threesome, and one felt that the company took the precaution of satisfying that all-powerful audience expectation with the first two shows before launching Keane's text-free, abstract, movement-based musing on quantum physics and Eastern philosophy. If anything, it was this sort of experimentation with form and discourse that the festival format encourages — if not demands. For Keane's argument was that art and science are not only bedfellows, but are also happy to hit the sheets and see what comes up. It's all in the interpretation — the ability to put more than one thought next to another, to allow the two to meet, and perhaps mate, and to grow into a bigger picture while examining that



FREE THE BARABBAS TWO: Raymond Keane and Veronica Coburn

PATRICK REDMOND

opinions & overviews

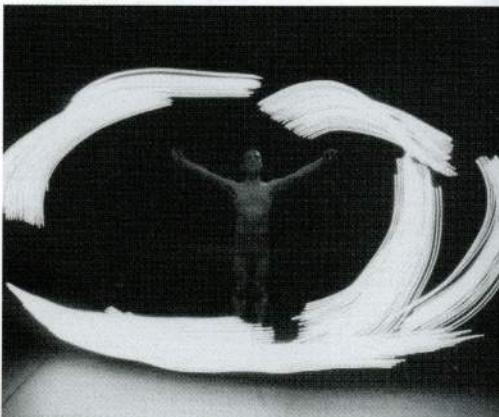
picture's smaller elements. As organic beings are composed of atoms, so *Dog* was composed of bits of light, sound, puppetry, model trains, light-suits, and spaceships — and as an organic whole, *Dog* was a most beautiful, stunningly realised, poetic piece of performance.

The same company as appeared in *Moby Dan* — Lynn Cahill, Daniel Guinane, Eric Lacey, Ruth Lehane, and Deirdre Molloy — here danced, acted, did silly magic tricks, controlled puppets, and handled a variety of illuminated props as they took us on a non-verbal journey that began with the Big Bang and ended with a whirling dervish dance of ecstasy. In between, the journey was both literal and figurative: a jog with a friendly dog became an out-of-body experience in which human and animal exchanged and shared each other's qualities; a hippie dude on a train tried to chill out with his mantra and in so doing broke down the fabric of dimensionality and time; a couple keen to join the "mile high club" suddenly became the embodiment of divinity.

More akin to dance than to traditional theatre, impressionistic images and set pieces flowed in and out of one another, giving the show an overall dreamy quality. Even when we were in the more conventional sequences that took place as the group interacted in everyday situations, there was an otherworldly feel to these mundane moments — snogging on a train, puking on a plane — that was primarily due to the lack of verbiage. While it appeared that the cast were speaking to each other — we could see the actors' mouths moving — we could not hear them. It produced a strange feeling of frustration, of being locked out somehow, yet one never felt alienated. It forced the audience to attend to the

unfolding relationships by looking for signs other than those that are verbal: we had to pay attention to the body, to the stroke of a hand, the quirk of an eyebrow, the twist of an ankle, to figure out who meant what and why.

It was a feast of visual and aural delight, and a marriage of theory and practice that was effortlessly executed, and with boundless style and grace. All aspects of the work were fully interde-



ART AND SCIENCE MERGE: Dog

pendent and one can't imagine its success without Mark Galione's creative lighting design, Roger Gregg's soundscape, Miriam Duffy's enchanting special effects, or Eimer Murphy's puppets. *Dog* was a successful meeting of the sacred and mundane, of the conceptual and the practical, and the esoteric and the obvious, while keeping a sense of humour and of the absurd. It was a fine line to walk, but it resulted in a gorgeous thing.

The delight with which the three festival shows were greeted spoke to an acceptance of the new order. As the

KATE HORGAN

company enter their new era, they delivered the kind of entertaining, creative storytelling that sets them apart as a group not afraid of having fun, aware of their own particular niche in Ireland's theatre community, and well able to deliver gratify their fans' expectations.

Susan Conley is a critic, filmmaker, and is art director of this magazine.

BLASTED by Sarah Kane

Bedrock Productions
Project, Dublin

22 November - 8 December 2001;
reviewed 26 Nov. BY BRIAN SINGLETON

WHEN *BLASTED* OPENED IN THE TINY Royal Court Theatre Upstairs in London in 1995, critics were unanimous in brutally castigating it, none more so than Jack Tinker in *The Daily Mail* who described it as a "disgusting feast of filth." Kane's first play, an instant *cause célèbre*, heralded what was to become known as a "new nihilism" in British theatre, characterised by a soulessness, and a society in which affection becomes transaction. In many respects Kane's "nihilism" is a product both of her own rejection of religion, and a lifetime growing up in Thatcher's Britain, in which the notion of society was rejected in favour of social engineering through monetarism. It was a period of greed, selfishness, and self-obsession, in which the western world stood by to watch the genocide in the former Yugoslavia.

Bedrock's Irish premiere production in the culturally sanitised new Project comes at the apogée of Irish society's period of naked greed and self-interest, coupled with a post-11 September paranoia and self-preservation. Does the media saturation of real-life apocalyptic

war images eclipse Kane's theatrical war, or can theatre's liveness provide a tangibility so absent from most people's experience of the macro-horror of 9-11?

Blasted does not turn away from social, political, and military atrocity but immerses us deep within it, to the point of implication. The play is set in a hotel room in Leeds, outside of which a Bosnian-type civil war is raging. Holed up in the room is a racist, sexist, homophobic journalist with a gun called Ian, together with a girl many years his junior, Cate, a vegetarian, a sufferer of what looks like epilepsy, and politically correct in an uncomprehending, naïve way. Their relationship is violent, sexual, and abusive — and yet there are moments of tenderness between them which belie the brutality of their physical interaction. Tenderness, but perhaps not love: Ian says he loves Cate dispassionately and with the same unerring regularity as he loads his gun with bullets. He attempts rape, forces her to masturbate him, and still she makes no attempt to escape. The reason is that the world outside offers a fresher and more virulent brutalism. This relationship is a transaction between two of society's dispossessed, two opposites in gender and politics, united by their own rejection by the outside world.

The hotel room, of course, belongs to neither one. It is a place of transience and impermanence. It is a temporary home to be purchased. But it provides both anonymity and security. Until, that is, the civil war outside encroaches and blows it up, throwing into the debris a soldier, as sinned against as sinning. The soldier turns Ian the abuser into the abused, as he rapes him and, Lear-like, gouges out his eyes. Here we reach the apocalypse where violation is heaped upon violation, which becomes the discourse in the last remain-

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ing moments of human interaction. We have moved from a world of room service to one of utter starvation. Cate assembles a makeshift crucifix out of the floorboards, clinging on to religious iconography long after God is so obviously dead. Cate is reduced to cannibalism by eating the now-dead soldier, and the play ends in small vignettes of the final despair and degradation of the journalist while Cate, touchingly, tries to feed a baby.

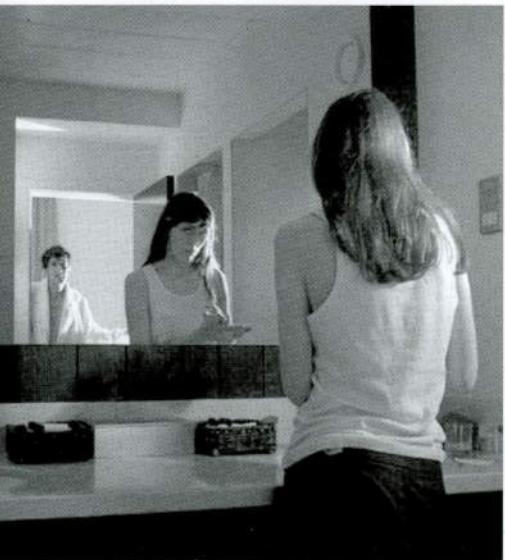
Bedrock's production did not flinch

humanity even in Ian's baseness. The Soldier (Aidan Kelly) was played with an Irish accent, even though the other two characters, and the text, were clearly operating in a Leeds hotel room. Was the Irishness of the soldier the director's revenge for The Troubles, or, simply, an attempt to localise this English play?

Directed by Jimmy Fay, the production opened with an orchestral soundtrack which engineered instantly an emotionalism, akin to the US network coverage of the atrocities of 11 September to the tune of Enya. The actors played with painful truthfulness, particularly in highly choreographed scenes of violence — despite some odd choices of accent. But the attention to detail was not matched elsewhere in the production, whose overarching realism set up expectations which were thwarted by poorly recorded sound effects of a telephone ringing and a car backfiring.

Most troubling of all was the play's lack of the shock value it had at its London première, despite the gruesome violence rarely matched in the Irish repertoire. The spectators around me made no audible or visible reaction to the play's shockingly real rape, let alone the scenes of cannibalism. Are such apocalyptic visions of humanity now just part of some "media cool," or did the mediatised atrocities and tendernesses in the aftermath of 11 September both desensitise us and ratchet up our horizon of expectation? Or is it the non-realism of live theatre in an avant-garde space which no longer shocks the young, rendered dispassionate by their favoured electronic modes of entertainment? *Blasted* is both cruel and painful and has no point of entry for those who wish to distance it. But perhaps realism is no longer the most appropriate medium in which to stage this play, as it obfuscates

ROS KAVANAGH



AUDIENCE AS VOYEUR: Blasted

from the violence, presenting it in gruesome realism, sometimes to the point of exaggeration. The disparity in age between Ian (Lalor Roddy) and Cate (Fiona O'Shaughnessy) was also emphasised by having the latter suck her thumb and speak like a child. Roddy's characterisation, though, subtly found a

the poetic beauty of affection and tenderness at moments when personal and political atrocities are the principal forms of communication and human interaction.

Brian Singleton is senior lecturer in the School of Drama, Trinity College.

CAUGHT RED HANDED by Tim Loane

Tinderbox Theatre Company

Northern Bank, Belfast and on tour

Reviewed on 11 February 2002 at the

Northern Bank Building

BY TOM MAGUIRE

ONE OF THE CHALLENGES FACING SATIRISTS of Northern Ireland's politics is that the reality may far exceed the grotesqueries which the dramatist can invent in caricaturing it. Undeterred, Tim Loane's debut play *Caught Red Handed* considers what in the future might be the last move in the political endgame in the North: a referendum on a united Ireland. The real-life context provided added urgency: at the time of production, local media were indulging in frenzied speculation about the census which might show that Catholics will soon outnumber Protestants here.

Loane's play kicks off with the death of the Leader of the fictional Alternative Unionist Party, who has just called a Day of Rage against the referendum; his acolytes are left to deal with the consequences. Even as the party hierarchy struggles for power between them, a solution appears in the form of Pat McStiofain, a Catholic farmer bearing an uncanny resemblance to The Leader. When The Leader's wife and son accept the doppelganger, the ruse seems to have worked until Pat extemporises in his role as sectarian bigot on a live television programme, throwing the whole of Ulster into a spiral of violence. The

plot further twists as Pat, The Leader's wife, and the son hatch a scheme of their own to wrest back the leadership of the party and to pull the Province back from conflagration.

Despite the setting in 2005, much of the play's humour relies on a recognition of the known: The Day of Rage strongly echoes the 1974 Ulster Workers' Council Strike. One of the challenges which Loane sets himself is to address the ways in which the intervening period has changed the political landscape.

David Craig's set provides a strikingly lush neo-classical mix of purple drapes, white walls, and plasterwork. Beneath a perilously hanging façade, the most prominent features are three doors balanced symmetrically on three sides, between which, as one might expect from farce, the action spins. The visual impact of such a rendering of the back rooms of Stormont was effective, while allowing other settings to be established with minimal changes. Incorporating video displays, the set also allowed for the use of live broadcast commentary from a character called The Reporter, thus emphasising the importance of both live and mediatised performance in political life.

It would be tempting, but unfair, to say that the production was merely a vehicle for Dan Gordon, whose performance as The Leader and in other roles was mesmerising. Gordon's capacities to capture precisely the nuances of the furious demagogue, the jobsworth attendant, and the bewildered political ingenue caught in the glare of the television cameras provided much of the dynamic of the performance. There are a number of other memorably theatrical moments too. Much of the early scenes rely on the toilet positioned behind the

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central door. Then there is the transformation of Pat McStiofain into a replica of The Leader ironically staged to the soundtrack of Stiff Little Fingers' "Alternative Ulster." This ironic edge cuts deepest when the theatre audience is itself implicated as the audience of a live T.V. interview and are asked to declare their position on a United Ireland.

It is in the raising of such serious implications behind the farce that the writing is least successful, however. Loane's attack is aimed squarely at those politicians who prefer to dictate to the working classes than to trust them. However, he himself echoes precisely that position in giving a speech to The Leader's son at the end of the play which articulates what is clearly Loane's preferred interpretation of the place of

dissenting Protestantism in the politics of Ireland. Such inconsistencies occur too in the treatment of the son and wife, who are, respectively, gay and sexually unfulfilled. While correctives to the macho posturing of mainstream politicians are welcome, these Act One characterisations rely on precisely the same homophobic and patriarchal stereotypes that they set out to undermine by the end. It is to the credit of Richard Clements and Amanda Hurwitz that they drag strong performances out of these roles. Inconsistencies arise too in Simon Magill's direction. In Act One, he seemed unable to decide whether the scenes would be played with cartoon stylisation or more situational naturalism. Most obvious in certain set-piece moments, it left also a sense of uncer-



POLITICAL TRANSFORMATION: The cast of Caught Red Handed

PHIL SMYTH

tainty in the characterisation of Peter Ballance's Reverend McIlroy and Ian Beattie's paramilitary-turned-politician Watson. By the second act, this seemed to have been resolved.

More seriously, difficulties in the writing and direction combined to prevent the compression of the force of circumstances to drive the ordinary inexorably into the extraordinary. Allowing the setting to shift outside of the central room contributed to this, I suspect. The core dynamic flagged at points and not even the dialogue's shrewdly comic sideswipes could consistently compensate. These criticisms aside, it was an enjoyable evening at the theatre. Much of the writing is genuinely funny and was responded to enthusiastically by the audience. Moreover, I could hear discussions on the issues starting to fly as the audience left. To achieve both things on a cold wet Monday night is no small thing.

Tom Maguire is lecturer in Theatre Studies at the University of Ulster.

CHAIR by Operating Theatre

The Peacock Theatre

3-24 November, 2001; reviewed 23

November BY MATTHEW CAUSEY

AS IS THE CASE IN THE VAST MAJORITY of European and American commercial theatres, the aesthetic of psychological realism dominates the stages of the Abbey and the Peacock. While the film industry can afford forays into romantic surrealism (*Mulholland Drive*) or non-linear narrative (*Pulp Fiction*), and the plastic arts and new media readily embrace contemporary forms and novel audience configurations, the theatre often remains content with the realist tradition. The problem is not only a

lack of imagination, but financial necessity. Audiences get what they want.

Nonetheless, it is not surprising that in recent years, audiences and critics have at times criticised Ireland's National Theatre for a lack of daring — for not presenting innovative and experimental approaches to staging. That is why the inclusion of Dublin's adventurous Operating Theatre in the Abbey's Peacock Partners scheme is so encouraging. Roger Doyle and Olwen Fouéré's work with Operating Theatre explores the synthesis of music and theatre, seeking to define original forms of performance through the use of new media and music technologies. The company's offering through the Peacock Partners scheme is *Chair*, a bricolage of images, sounds, objects, and performance gestures, set within the space of a death row cell and the rememberings of its inhabitant.

Doyle is an acclaimed electro-acoustic composer and Fouéré is one of Ireland's best-regarded actors; their artistry is well exhibited here. Together with director Johnny Hanrahan, set and lighting designer Paul Keogan, costumer Catherine Fay, and sound designer Ciaron Eaton, they have created a fascinating and frustrating, evocative and distancing piece of theatre on the violence perpetrated first by an individual and then by the state. The trajectory of the work follows a narrative of sorts as a death row inmate revisits the murder she committed and prepares for her own. The central metaphor of the chair (electric and otherwise) runs through the work suggesting a passage toward ritual violence and death. Ending in a literal bloodbath, the work depicts the cycle of violence involved in crime and punishment.

One of the dangers of experimenting

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with new forms of theatre is that the risk of failure is very high; theatre audiences are not generally very forgiving. The time-based nature of theatre requires a commitment from an audience that is radically different than strolling through a gallery or museum, or watching a film. Theatre audiences can be easily turned against a work that seems needlessly obscure or lacks knowable characterisations and plot, and instead relies on scenic and performance structures to dominate. Operating Theatre walks this tightrope of aesthetic innovation — and as might be expected with such bold experimentation, some of it works and some of it does not.

The scenographic elements are the most effective components of *Chair*. The Peacock audience sits on either side of a central raised performance space, allowing them to view both the show and their fellow spectators. The platform is covered with white tiles and echoes Fouéré's white paper dress. The main props of the performance sit on the four corners of the platform, as do video monitors facing the audience. On one side of the platform is a glassed partition where Doyle sits, costumed as a prison guard, playing the keyboard and manipulating the electronics.

On the other side is a wall for video projection and a cell door leading to a narrow and unseen (except through the video) performance space. Video cameras are placed among the lighting instruments and focus on the platform. The video allows perspectives of the performance not available to the audience from their seats, and the projections of the unseen hallway heading towards the electric chair introduce a virtual space to the live stage. Fouéré's voice is wirelessly microphoned and subjected to a vari-



INNOVATIVE: Olwen Fouéré in *Chair*

ety of electronic manipulations including sampling, pitch shifting, and pitch to midi conversion, which allows her voice to "play" the electronic instruments. Her voice is then both organic and synthesised. The combination of music technologies and video processing creates intriguing extensions to Fouéré's body and voice, while extending the perform-

ance space to include mediated representation and virtual spaces.

Unfortunately, though, these interesting constructions of space and body are not linked in meaningful ways to the textual concerns of capital punishment, the collage of memories of the crime, and the preparation for death. It is interesting to note that the creators cite Andy Warhol's disaster series prints of an electric chair as a source of the work. Warhol's art has an uncanny ability to represent a depthless surface of an image that negates its linkage to the world. *Chair* follows a similar aesthetic in that the form suffocates the content but in the case of Warhol's art, this was the point: that the media is turning the world to image and one image is interchangeable with any other. Although the issues presented in *Chair* are volatile, the audience is left disengaged by the manipulation of the technologies. *Chair* lacks a seduction of form and content, narrative drive, or structural logic, which would draw the viewer into an evocation of a criminal mind and the issues of capital punishment. Yet, the work remains challenging, intriguing, and troubling. It is a thoughtful and sophisticated work of art. Good experimental theatre does not necessarily need to "work" to be useful. A rigorous investigation into form is its own success.

Whatever the above reservations, it is essential to note the importance of the National Theatre giving a platform for new forms of theatre and performance. Operating Theatre is a unique and critical component of the Irish theatre scene. They richly deserve our attention and support.

Matthew Causey is lecturer in the School of Drama, Trinity College.

A CLOSE SHAVE WITH THE DEVIL

by Ena May

Focus Theatre

31 October – 17 November 2001;

reviewed 3 Nov. BY JAMIE TANNER

IF YOU ARE HAVING TROUBLE HEARING, just come a little closer. Push your way past the others, right up to the front and you should be able to see a little bit better. There's a small voice telling stories of people and things that remain today only as faded black-and-white pictures. But the voice talks with a familiarity that brings those torn, yellowed photographs to life. The voice speaks of the ghosts from those photos as though they were yesterday, because for young Eily Doolin, they were.

When Ena May's collection of short stories was published by Lilliput Press in 1998, it was received with excitement by many, and now she has brought a glimpse of her work to the stage of the Focus Theatre. In *A Close Shave with the Devil*, May has woven four of her stories together to present a tapestry of life as a young girl in Dublin after the Second World War. Taking it one step beyond mere authorship, she has woven herself into this tapestry by providing the voice for her young heroine Eily, as well as a small city of supporting characters.

May trained under the late Deirdre O'Connell at the Focus' own Stanislavski Studio and on display here are all the talents she gained there. With a turn of the head she is transformed from Eily's nemesis, the adenoid-addled, skinned-kneed Itchy Rider to the Gaiety's proper Dublin gent of a doorman, even if his hat keeps slipping down over his eyes. When we meet Mr. and Mrs. Smith, she simultaneously plays Mrs. Smith, who is as wide as a Guinness barge, and her

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husband who, when standing next to her, "looks like a little grey monkey at the bottom of a purple mountain."

Throughout the performance, the audience laughs behind the protection of raised hands at Eily's painfully honest observations. The humour is needle-sharp and May employs the character of the young girl to cast an ironic and truthful eye over a society that is less than truthful to itself at the best of times. Eily doesn't really understand why it's evil to poke at the mashed-up bread stuck to the top of her mouth, but if the Father says it is, she'd better not.

Wisely enough, there is nothing flashy about Ronan Roe's design or Hazel Dunphy's direction here — much better to simply let the story be told. The backdrop, a black-and-white photograph, picks a girl out of a crowd as she smiles quietly at us. The cosy confines of the Focus provide the ideal space for May to weave her spell, and it is not long before the audience is catching frogs in jam-jars and ruining their new Bradley's sandals while running in the long grass. We travel half a century back in time to the sounds of a coalman's whip cracking on the back of a black and white mare. It seems a more pure, more decent world at first, made even more so when seen through the eyes of Eily, the charming young innocent. But even here there are people willing to take advantage of innocence. Even here there lurk many dangers.

We travel through Eily's stories with her, as children, but when her neighbour Mr. Smith tends to a small cut on her foot with too much care, we hold our breath as adults and watch helpless while she sits smiling up at him. At key moments throughout, we are snatched from our childlike fascination by adult fears for her safety. The dangers to Eily



TALESPINNER: Ena May

increase with each passing story and we wonder can she survive the next assault on her innocence. In the final story she meets the greatest threat, a sexual deviant so vile that the papers have called him the devil. With her very life in danger, Eily recognises the threat at the last minute but the cost of this recognition is the loss of innocence. As the light fades on the black and white photograph of the young Eily, that loss signals, for her and for us, the irreversible transition from child to young adult. This loss reminds us most vividly of what it

meant to be children. May's story is so vividly constructed that for a short time we became children again.

Jamie Tanner is a Dublin filmmaker.

DENIS AND ROSE

adapted from a Maeve Binchy story

by Gerard Stembridge

The Civic Theatre, Tallaght and on tour
Reviewed 18 February 2002 at the Civic

BY BELINDA MCKEON

PERFECTLY POLISHED, REASSURINGLY expensive, cut off from extraneous surroundings and with all its fittings exposed, leaving nothing to the imagination; if ever a set has resembled the characters who inhabit it, it is Blaithín Sheerin's bathroom-and-bedroom creation for *Denis and Rose*. The couple of the title were plucked from a Maeve Binchy short story called "Excitement," which apparently so fascinated Stembridge that he felt compelled to develop the drama of their marital discontent into a piece for the stage.

And it shows. The Binchy lineage, that is, rather than any evidence of what the writer/director of *The Gay Detective* and *Guiltrip* could find so riveting in the bland tale of a Dublin southside marriage dying a death over the red cabbage salad and the Clonakilty black pudding of Rose's infamous Sunday brunches. Clearly, what most appealed was the notion of a couple sharing the same space and living in the same time, yet never connecting, and Stembridge exploits this idea reasonably well by having the characters circle each other on stage without ever actually touching, talking about one another incessantly without once sharing a conversation.

But clever direction and skilful weav-

ing of their simultaneous monologues do not suffice to lend to the play a sense of purpose, as Denis obsesses over his chances of getting an executive washroom while his wife goes from expert brunch organisation to blundered adultery. How to go deeper into this predictable storyline? One could improvise by saying that one character is stuck at the anal stage while the other has not made it beyond the oral. But no fancy psychological resonances here; the Maeve moments are everywhere, lulling the audience into comfortable laughter. The question is whether we are justified in wanting to ask a little more of Stembridge than an evening of harmless diversion.

Knocking laughs out of the comforts of middle-class life is something, after all, which Stembridge has done before; but the satirical lens so crucial to his films *About Adam* and *Black Day at Blackrock* has been left to one side in this instance, and worryingly so. It is hardly difficult for a dramatist to draw from an audience such empathetic chuckles as were produced by Denis tiptoeing around his wife's irrational outbursts and Rose's exasperation with her unadventurous husband and her interfering mother; what is trickier is to render such moments very blatantly the crafted surface of a deeply unattractive reality. This is something at which Stembridge has previously proved himself a master, yet *Denis and Rose* leaves that art behind and serves up surface and underbelly as one frivolous package, vaguely displeasing but never actually disturbing, and never psychologically captivating. Hence, Denis will drift towards loneliness and depression, but his obligation to supply easy laughs for the audience will always serve as a safety net; the tension between Rose and her mother must never stray beyond the ter-

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rain of weary sighs and infuriated gestures; her relationship with her own young daughter will never be examined beyond sisterly anecdotes; and the breakdown of her marriage is explored in a similar way, always alleviating any shadow of darkness or suffering with a stock outburst of amusing frustration.

Donal Beecher as Denis relies less than does Mary O'Driscoll as Rose on the assumption that the audience understands everything — it's taking liberties somewhat when part of the script involves a character turning to the audience mid-flow and sighing, "Oh, you know yourself" — but then, his character is predicated on the prior knowledge that no one could but find hilarious this hapless nerd who can never say the right thing. That there is much to enjoy in Beecher's uptight, nervy realisation of Denis, however, should not be overlooked; O'Driscoll, too, is amusing as the bored moneyed housewife, yet there's something amiss. Perhaps it's that after Helen from

Paths to Freedom, portraying the southside wife has become a very difficult job indeed. Or perhaps it's the fundamental flaw of this play, which is that players, audience, and director are cosily seated at the same level of inoffensive humour, with no one looking at the story from a different angle, to tease out the more interesting layers of a story of downfall. *Denis and Rose* is expertly staged and easy on the eye, and makes for an entertaining night at the theatre. But ought Gerard Stembridge, or his audience, to be happy with as much?

Belinda McKeon is a freelance journalist and critic.

DIARMUID AND GRÁINNE

Passion Machine Theatre Company in association with Abhann Productions
On tour; reviewed at the Market Place Theatre and Arts Centre, Armagh, on 2 February 2002 BY DAVID GRANT

THERE ARE MANY THINGS TO ADMIRE IN Paul Mercier's contemporary retelling of the legend of *Diarmuid and Gráinne*. It has a coherent sense of style, a rich range of performances from an impressive ensemble cast, a lively sense of fun, and some inspired stage business involving mobile phones and electric fans. There is a sense that Passion Machine is reclaiming the legacy of early successes such as *Studs*, *Brownbread*, and *Home* from more recent usurpers like *Alone It Stands*. Its opening moments explode onto the stage and promise much, but by the interval we have absorbed so much plot exposition that we begin to wonder how much more there can be to tell, only to discover that the second half is just as densely packed.*

So, despite assured and often inspired performances from the likes of Denis



ANGRY HOUSEWIFE: Denis and Rose

Conway, David Gorry, and David Pearse, the main questions we are left with are less to do with the undoubtedly craftsmanship of the production, than a general unease about the wisdom of trying to present the ancient Irish myths on a modern stage. Their initial attraction is understandable. After all, a mythology in which politics and gangsterism are closely intertwined provides an obvious link with modern Ireland. (Meridian's 1989 version of *Volpone* exploited a similar phenomenon.) And Mercier finds clever current parallels for many aspects of the original story. The draught, for instance, with which Gráinne incapacitates the Fianna becomes a date-rape drug.

But despite the sophistication of the adaptation, the multi-episodic narrative on which the majority of the script depends rapidly becomes meandering and confused, and the cast of characters bewildering in its extent. Perhaps it would be fairer to blame the ancient bards for this, but a comparison with drama derived from ancient Greek mythology would suggest otherwise. The Mediterranean mythic tradition is just as incoherent in its scope, but Euripides and Sophocles had the knack of selectivity which Mercier fails to display here. Even Homer concentrates on just a fragment of the whole story in the Iliad, relying presumably on an assumed common heritage to allow his hearers to understand the context.

When it comes to the Fenian cycle, it is probably too much to assume that a modern Irish audience will be as well-versed in its own mythology as an Athenian audience was in theirs, and I imagine part of Passion Machine's enthusiasm for this project was driven precisely by the desire to reclaim this lost heritage for their target audience. But the



STICK 'EM UP: Diarmuid and Gráinne

real secret of the classic Greek canon was to make the plays capable of standing on their own. This was achieved by an emphasis on character and psychology rather than plot. The breakneck pace of this version of *Diarmuid and Gráinne* leaves little opportunity to engage with the characters who remain two-dimensional. It is hard to comprehend what fuels the passion that drives the couple on in their long flight from Fionn Mac Cumhail, and I what I took to be an attempt to convey the history of their relationship in a series of vignettes inspired by such diverse sources as *The Jerry Springer Show* and *The Weakest Link* only serves to confuse us still further.

There is a clear difference between a

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bardic tradition, where a story might have to be spun out over many sittings, and what is required of a single dramatic performance. Modern Irish treatments of the Greek myths tend to be based on interpretations of the source mythology by the ancient dramatists, who lend the new versions of the plays their shape and focus. Most recent attempts to render the Irish myths on stage have depended on the rambling endlessness of the original stories themselves. Big Telly's 1999 production of *The Pursuit of Diarmuid and Gráinne* made the same mistake of trying to tell the whole story at one go — a feat that was achieved only by dispensing almost entirely with the spoken word. Passion Machine's dialogue-based approach version was certainly more engaging, but perhaps Macnas's almost wordless version of *The Tain* provides the best model for dramatising Ireland's myths. Combining the exuberance of Passion Machine (no coincidence that John Dunne was Macnas' musical director as well) with the stylised physicality to which Big Telly aspired, Macnas' remains the most successful attempt to capture the elusive energy of Irish mythology for the modern stage.

David Grant is a lecturer in drama at Queen's University, Belfast.

DOG HOUSE by Gina Moxley

Draíocht Arts Centre

21-28 November 2001; reviewed 22

November BY MAURICE DUNPHY

GREAT YOUTH THEATRE — AND THERE'S plenty out there — is vibrant, sexy, and relevant, and is the result of intense exploration by director, cast, and crew as collaborators, and works best onstage when everybody involved has genuine-

ly committed themselves to the process. Such commitment, however and sadly, was not nearly evident enough in Draíocht's first in-house production by and for young people. Despite Gina Moxley's excellent script, Jim Culleton's weak direction denied a large, young, and inexperienced cast anything to energise their playing.

Commissioned by the National Theatre, London, and published by Faber in 1997, *Dog House* is set in a Cork housing estate. Moxley's staging and setting notes advise companies who re-locate the play to "adapt the language and idiom accordingly"; but although this production relocates it to the Blanchardstown area where Draíocht is located, the rest of the script is left exactly as written. The script remains pure Corkonian and creates serious problems for the cast. Blanchardstown locals don't "raz" each other, they "wind each other up," and so on.

Not much happens on the bland, suburban housing estate that is the setting of *Dog House*, and teenage life consists of endless tales of love, lust, and unwanted pregnancy. Their boredom is relieved only by fast-thinking, quick-witted Ger's comical anecdotes, which usually concern her bed-bound, Prozac-dependent mother. Everyone is constantly on the lookout for something juicier than the normal fare, which appears when the quirky, oddly-behaved Martin family move into the estate. But even the local teens with their overactive imaginations cannot fathom the secret, savage scenario behind the closed doors of the Martin household. In this hell-hole, recent widower Mr. Martin, who never appears on stage, dotes on his dog, fondles his shotgun, and regularly beats his children in what has apparently become a family ritual. He forces each of his reluctant children to play their part



NOTHING EVER HAPPENS: The cast of Dog House

and, in this miserable, proverbial "dog-house," fear is omnipresent. Their fearful secret remains intact until one of the children befriends local teen Jimmy, and the evidence slowly emerges.

The Martin siblings eventually reach breaking point and, at its climax, the only son prepares to shoot his father. Common sense prevails, thanks to newfound teen friendship and support, until fate intervenes and Mr. Martin dies in a car crash, swerving to avoid a dog which might or might not have been his own. In the final, graveyard scene, echoing Wedekind's *Spring Awakening*, Moxley subverts graveside solemnity into a celebration of survival and liberation by the brutalised children.

The cast engaged neither psychologically nor physically with the piece, resulting in stilted, under-realised performances. Although all were audible from the auditorium, too often they were incomprehensible, due perhaps in part to the aforementioned idiosyncratic and syntactic

difficulties. The flat-accented Dubliners (who appear a much more capable cast than this performance suggested) struggled to interpret sing-song Cork colloquialism but never made it their own. One notable exception was Eimear Morrissey who, from the outset, grabbed hold of, maintained and developed the high-energy, fast-thinking character of Ger. Morrissey's physical and vocal abilities perfectly captured Ger's comic-serious characteristics without strain.

Using Draoicht's main stage was a big mistake, as the gulf between actor and audience drained the cast's energy. The play would doubtless have fared better in Draoicht's excellent studio space, which is the ideal size for experimental, training-oriented work.

Designer John O'Donoghue's excellent, multi-functional set consisted of a two-dimensional gable-end and three boxes, used variously as garden walls, household furniture, and a night-club seating. This set-up should have assisted

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the play's snappy, episodic structure and enabled faster scene turn-arounds, but the trappings of a conventional stage and a sluggish backstage crew weakened its potential considerably. Barry McKinney's lighting captured excellently the shifting moods of the piece, while Amy O'Hara's costumes merely sufficed. The soundtrack mix of classical music and '80s pop was completely out of whack with contemporary youth culture. Where was the rap, hip-hop, and garage that epitomises it?

Culleton's tired, unimaginative and out-of-touch direction negated the sharp, episodic format of the play, and failed to capitalise on his cast's enthusiasm, leaving them with nowhere to go when their energy sagged. He ignored most of Moxley's sound ideas regarding flexibility in staging and setting and failed completely to capture the script's sharply observed gallows humour. Draíocht must be applauded for supporting local youth and community initiatives; one hopes they will pursue this approach further. However, they might consider engaging a Donnacadh O'Briain (Natural Shocks), a Darren Thornton (Calipo), or any of the many young and innovative youth theatre directors who are in touch with contemporary young people's culture and theatre trends.

Maurice Dunphy is a community arts worker with Tallaght Partnership.

THE FACTORY GIRLS

by Frank McGuinness

The Lyric Theatre, Belfast

8th February - 2nd March 2002;

reviewed 13 February BY PAUL DEVLIN

FOR SOME REASON FRANK MCGUINNESS' plays never get much of an airing in the

theatres of Belfast. People always seem to be heading off to London, Dublin, or Glasgow to see the latest production of a McGuinness play. Thus it was particularly exciting when the Lyric Theatre announced a revival, twenty years on, of his first play, *The Factory Girls*. With Carol Moore, co-founder and co-artistic director of the late lamented Charabanc Theatre Company, at the helm, it promised to be a good night of theatre. And so — largely — it was.

Set in a shirt factory in post-war Donegal, *The Factory Girls* explores the working lives of five women who protest against imminent redundancies, ineffectual management, and an unmanageable increase in their work rate by occupying their boss' office. The women resist pressure from their families and the church to "go back home where you belong" and in the days that follow, barricaded into the office, they debate the rights and wrongs, the naivety and danger, of the action they've taken.

McGuinness' women are a close-knit group who bitch and banter their way through the working day. They argue, slag, counsel and console each other — often within the space of a single scene — and are depicted by McGuinness with warmth and affection. As in other of his plays (*Carthaginians*, *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme*) McGuinness splits the action between big ensemble set pieces and smaller, more intimate exchanges between two or more characters. The repetition of this pattern ideally leads the audience to a deeper and more personal understanding of McGuinness' characters. In *The Factory Girls*, however, this juxtaposition of public and private often feels forced. Exits and entrances are engineered to facilitate the pattern, but the effect is less organic than



ACERBIC BANTER: The Factory Girls

in his later plays.

Moore's direction had the confidence of someone working in familiar territory. Having worked with Charabanc on plays such as *Lay Up Your Ends* (which treated the lives of women working in the Belfast mills), she is accomplished in the handling of female-led ensemble fare. She encouraged a strong cast to savour the rhythms and timbre of their characters' acerbic banter and the sense of obvious enjoyment they had in the delivery of McGuinness' slalom-dialogue easily transferred to the audience.

Moore positioned and moved her actors well for the majority of the action. With the exception of the odd smoke-break here and there, her female cast members stitched shirts relentlessly throughout the first half of the play. This not only realised and complimented the

work-based setting of the McGuinness' drama, it also established that the factory girls' turnover of work is already exploitative even before Rohan, their boss, proposes an increase in the rate.

There were also a few nice, almost filmic, touches in Moore's direction. Scenes began, in the mode of an establishing shot, with the women at work and were let run for a while before dialogue was given voice — a calculated and successful attempt to suggest the daily grind of hard-earned livings being eked out on the shop-floor. Other scene changes, however, were less successful and at

times unnecessarily long.

Sinead O'Hanlon's excellent, enormous set was a definite production highlight. Towering interior factory walls fully exploited the often under-exploited breadth and height of the Lyric's stage. Sight-lines beyond exits/entrances were fully dressed as corridors and it was this kind of attention to detail that convincingly conveyed the notion that beyond the main stage a larger factory was at work.

For the first half of the play the action occurred exclusively on O'Hanlon's well-realised shop-floor. Above the workers' heads Rohan's window looms as a constant reminder that the management is ever-vigilant. During the interval this window was removed, and the audience returned to a surprising and impressive new acting area hovering above and set back from the factory floor. This split-level

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approach was at first an exciting prospect.

But problems became apparent when the actors began to fill the new space. The office set was just too small. Moore gave herself the impossible task of moving her cast in a desperately confined area. The fluidity of movement that characterised the first half of the play gave way to a cramped and over-crowded second half. Moore, perhaps sensing this, overcame a few of her problems by staging some inventive off-stage exchanges. But on a few occasions a couple of her cast members came frighteningly close to the edges of the raised platform and there was a palpable sense of fear amongst the audience that someone was actually going to fall off the set.

On the whole, this was a strong ensemble production, but both Eleanor Methven and Barbara Adair gave particularly commanding performances. Methven, as Ellen (the leader of the women), delicately exposed the cracks in her character's hard, angry, bullying exterior without ever ranging into the sentimental. Adair, as Una, the oldest of the group, faultlessly exploited the comedic possibilities of her character's weird blend of child-like innocence and the wisdom of age.

McGuinness' play does seem to have greyed around the edges slightly in the two decades since its original production. The perhaps-once-unique setting it could boast has been undeniably diminished when we consider the ubiquitous appearances of similar settings in television dramas such as *Coronation Street* and *Clocking Off*. Thematically, the play covers what is now old ground — small town conservatism, the role of women — but the pace and energy of McGuinness' dialogue retains a freshness, honesty, and humour than many subsequent dramas have reached for but few have attained.

FAITH HEALER by Brian Friel

The Almeida Theatre at King's Cross
22 November 2001 - 19 January, 2002

Reviewed 28 November

BY IAN SHUTTLEWORTH

AS A BELFAST SCHOOLBOY, THE FIRST proper play I ever saw in a proper theatre was Brian Friel's *Faith Healer*, in the then-recently reopened Grand Opera House. I fell asleep. A dozen or so years later, as a professional reviewer in London, I saw the play again at the Royal Court, and this time I was so awestruck by Donal McCann's electrifying performance that for days I walked around in shame of my younger self's philistine response to his previous stint in the part of Francis Hardy.

McCann made the role of Frank his own, not through any kind of proprietorial impulse but simply by being so damn brilliant in it. I wasn't sure that anyone could stand comparison with such a mighty performance. Ken Stott can — he doesn't equal it, of course, but he acquits himself respectably.

Where McCann held an audience absolutely compelled by his looming, mournful recollections, Stott cuts a slighter figure. He speaks more quickly and lightly, even running the risk of gabbling a little; indeed, I suspect it may have been this (possibly nervous) speed which led him at one point on the press night openly to take a prompt — he was simply running too fast to keep himself entirely on the rails. Stott's characterisation, though, is also noticeably more wry than one might expect. He allows us to laugh a lot more, favouring us with a cynical smile of complicity rather than ruefulness at Frank's self-punishment, and his account of the typical gig in a small



THE WAY HE LOOKS TONIGHT: Ken Stott as the title character in *Faith Healer*

out-of-the-way village is so masterly that when he bursts into song with the incongruous "The Way You Look Tonight," he draws applause.

But the sensation is still there that this small-time travelling healer has a disquieting secret at his core, which we gradually learn over the course of four monologues — by Frank the healer, Grace his mistress or wife, Teddy his manager and finally Frank again — in the course of two hours without interval. On the one hand, Friel has each of his characters use exactly the same form of words at various points, so that central events and locations are etched so deeply that reliving them even carries an edge of ritual; on the other, he has them contradict each other, so that we are surprised to hear Grace's Irish accent, having been told by Frank that she is from Yorkshire, and are not even sure whether or not the two were married.

Geraldine James' Grace is brittle and

grimly passionate, inextricably bound by the events of her miscarriage outside a Scottish highland village and the events of the night of Frank's final, fatal display, even as she vainly assures herself and us that she is getting over them. Of course, this is given the lie by Teddy's account of identifying her body after suicide.

In Jonathan Kent's production especially, it is Ian McDiarmid's comic, insinuating Teddy that constitutes the fulcrum of the play: for all his small-time showbiz phoniness, he offers us a view of events on a palpably human scale, even in his sadness and his love of Frank and Grace, so that when we return to Frank's final account of that night in Ballybeg, it is still through Teddy's eyes that we comprehend the tragedy of Frank Hardy, faith healer. At almost every moment, McDiarmid gives the deceptive impression that he is opting for easy comedy, but the cumulative effect is both seductive and powerful.

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A further element of mystery and otherworldliness is added by Rob Howell's design: the location changes from a semi-derelict warehouse for Frank's scenes, to the respective rooms of Grace and Teddy and back again, behind a curtain which slowly crosses in front of the stage as a "wipe," so that each time, the scene and actor behind have changed in complete silence and as if by a kind of magic.

It is an extremely impressive production — but perhaps it allows us to be too consciously impressed. My greatest single disappointment was the applause which rang out at the end of each scene as well as at the final curtain: it was deserved, to be sure, but I couldn't help thinking that this is a play which really ought to provoke pensive silence rather than clapping. Perhaps I've just been spoilt by those earlier encounters.

Ian Shuttleworth reviews theatre for the Financial Times among others.

FALLING INTO PARADISE

by Josh Tobiessen and
company members

Catastrophe Theatre Company
Town Hall Studio, Galway, and on tour;
reviewed on 5 February 2002
at the Town Hall BY JUNE FAVRE

WHO ARE WE AND WHY ARE WE HERE? Are we in control of our lives, or is someone else writing our script? Those questions have been intriguing philosophers and dramatists throughout time, and are asked again by the characters in the Catastrophe production *Falling into Paradise*.

Falling into Paradise clearly draws from existentialism and theatre of the absurd; there are hints of Ionesco, Beckett, and *The Truman Show*. The two char-

acters, "A" (Josh Tobiessen) and "B" (Cormac O'Brien), play off each other like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, discussing and arguing over their untenable situation.

The first act, *Falling Pianos*, opens with "A" coming to life seated on a chair in the centre of the stage. He is dressed in black and white, and his white clown-face has the letter "A" stamped on the forehead. (For those who are mime-phobic, never fear — the mime sequences are bigger than life with an overabundance of energy that pokes fun at the form.) "A" begins telling a story about his friend Mickey, an extraordinary piano player, who would stand by the piano "cracking his knuckles and flexing his fingers like a fistful of frenzied ferrets." We learn that Mickey's piano-playing days were over when he was killed by a falling grand piano.

"B" (Cormac O'Brien) rises from a huddled mass on the floor and tells "A" they are the figment of a writer's imagination with no past and no future beyond the last line of the script. Tobiessen, in a portrayal as frantic as those ferrets, doesn't believe "B," but "B" has proof. He brandishes the script in front of "A" proving they are nothing but fictional characters. "We don't even have names," "B" cries, "How can we have friends?" Over the next half hour the two try to think of ways to avoid the final line on the last page, signifying the end of their existence.

They decide the best way to avoid the dreaded "nothing" is to stop talking. "A" restlessly begins whistling. "B" is annoyed, but "A" proudly proclaims, "We're surviving." They worry about boring the audience. No matter. If the audience is bored that is the responsibility of the author. The characters cannot

be blamed; after all they are just acting out what the writer has given them. Next they rampage through a series of mime exercises — being boxed in, running up a spiral staircase, but "B" suddenly stops, looks at the script and discovers all the movements are also there in black and white. Even worse, the



SIGNIFIERS: Falling into Paradise

script is double-spaced. The act ends with the characters defiantly looking "nothingness" in the face, but it hasn't gotten them yet.

The bare stage of the first act becomes a cluttered mess for the second, titled *Things to Look for in Paradise*. Books and papers strewn about the floor, a skull and bones, a cut out window, cardboard boxes, and a rifle on a stand greet the entrance of a sombre "B". "A" enters, seating "B" on a box that puts his head in the direct line of the rifle barrel. The upbeat antics of the first act are replaced

with a sense of impending doom. There is a playful interlude as the two make up games using the rifle to represent a tightrope, a cuckoo clock, a propeller, and an umbrella. But the games must stop. The two characters discuss the good points of nothingness: no more noise, no more crucifying phrases. Now the cry is "no more," "no more." No more will they be used as the helpless tools of the writer. These two characters are not in search of an author, but are trying to escape from an author.

Although an entertaining evening, *Falling into Paradise* does not take full advantage of its absurdist potential. You leave the theatre wishing the brief hints of Pirandello, Ionesco, and Beckett had been taken further. In *Falling Pianos* there is a reference to a hippo in the closet. Why not make it a rhinoceros, expanding upon the Ionesco theme?

The intimacy of the Town Hall Studio Theatre is a perfect setting for this two-character romp. Director Paul Haze deftly balances the hyper-kineticism of Tobiesen's "A" against the stoicism of O'Brien's "B." Haze's sure-handed direction manages to successfully seam together the two distinctly different acts. Establishing Catastrophe less than a year ago, the trio of Haze, Tobiesen, and O'Brien have created a spirited theatrical company. Choosing the name Catastrophe took courage, but *Falling into Paradise* is far from a catastrophe. The pace is quick and the actors are appealing. Their next step is to be courageous enough in the choice of material to go beyond derivative characters and themes.

June Favre, a freelance writer from Colorado, is completing an MA in Drama and Theatre Studies at NUI Galway.

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FODDER by Alice Barry

Noggin Theatre Company

Andrew's Lane Studio

29 October – 10 November 2001;
reviewed 8 Nov. BY PETER CRAWLEY

THERE IS A METHOD IN ALICE BARRY'S madness. The two short plays that make up Noggin Theatre Company's *Fodder* illustrate what an artistic feeding ground the writer and actress can make of mental disarray. Take *PamElla*, in which we discover the case history of a highly-strung, tightly upbeat young woman whose fragmented personality reveals a legacy of psychological abuse. Then there's *Cat Melodeon*, where the death of a young girl's father leads her to become mute, ostracised, and troubled. "They fuck you up, your mum and dad," as Philip Larkin put it. "She's mad... in a good way," Barry's Pam opines. Although these two plays are markedly different in tone, each is a drama of disorder. What raises one above the other, however, is not the depth of madness on display but the directorial method incorporated.

In the sterile white surrounds of Steve Neale's set, Barry herself performs *PamElla*, the unhurried monologue of someone who appears to be under clinical scrutiny. Moving across the white floor from a desk to a mimed mirror, Barry's tentative movements set the scene before her oration. The fourth wall in this room is a two-way mirror. Under our observation, Pam makes nervous digressions, anxiously breaks into pop songs, and enacts the history that led her to this apparent institution. Her journey begins in Cork where an over-bearing, posh mother unloads a stack of neuroses onto Pam's developing shoulders, her schoolteacher and her brother contribute to her abuse, and the

traumas continue across the water when Pam departs for London.

Barry's self-deprecating characterisation saves Pam from audience alienation. Frequent cross-eyed grimaces punctuate the train wreck of her psychodynamics, which become increasingly mangled while her mental descent is notched off in brief stylised episodes. In these sequences the desk light by Pam's chair glows red and casts its hue on her curiously serene visage. As though posing for a portrait, Pam's calm, poetic speeches are made entrancing, as a microphone accentuates the dispassionate voice in these narrative time-outs. And although they shed little light on her troubled psyche, they do provide guiding beacons in the stormy seas of the monologue's progression.

Credibility is robbed from her story, however, as the disorders accumulate. Chance remarks and a date to a famine benefit prompt her to adopt a diet of cabbage soup and paranoia. The now-anorexic Pam ends up as a company receptionist trilling "Chesterfield and Byyyr-erne" into the telephone while developing an unrequited crush on her boss that assumes stalker dimensions with the onset of her split personality. Where Pam spoke with a timid, staccato voice, Ella is a loud, gyrating, belly-button-pierced femme fatale urging Pam on to the hurriedly arranged climax of her confused tale.

Director Raymond Keane's usual flair for the physical falters in the confines of the play. Where Keane's work for Barabbas can sacrifice text to movement, Barry's script simply doesn't provide the breathing space for desktop dancing, while the wild hair and liberated spirit of dangerous alter ego Ella make their point without requiring her to copulate with the furniture.

Cat Melodeon benefits far more from an imaginative and playful approach to stagecraft. Directed by Barry herself, the sweet tale of a melodeon-playing girl growing up under the guidance of a kind-hearted travelling encyclopaedia salesman begins in a box. The actors emerge from the trunk, which also contains a huge encyclopaedia that cleverly diminishes in size as the girl grows older, yielding smaller versions from the hollow book like a succession of Russian dolls. A Turin shroud device is hung on an invisible washing line to represent Cat's childhood bullies, voiced by an accent-hopping Jonathan Shankey who energetically portrays the entire cast of characters in Cat's life.

The trunk itself becomes a versatile set piece and the economy of Neale's design allows the pair to perform captivating scene transitions with an imaginative and loveably rough-shod use of Velcro fasteners. This play shows what a lightness of touch Barry has when it comes to comedy, in both her writing

and direction. Cat's journey from accidental patricide (an unfortunate accident involving a vigorous harmonica solo and a skipping rope) to mute recluse, to dictionary-definition-spouting girl, suffering wife, and avenging adulterer is nicely handled. Better still is the clever choreography of scenes, such as the hilarious courtship of a married Cat and her new-age hippy beau, Eddie. Scored by a cheesy '70s pop soundtrack, their love develops in a rapid montage that winks knowingly at every cliché in the romance novel. Here, unlike *PamElla*, Barry's text leaves plenty of room for physical manoeuvre.

Diane O'Keeffe is sweet and sympathetic as Cat, with Shankey enjoyable as everyone who touches upon Cat's life: abusive nuns and priests, haughty girls and gossiping wives, a horrible crotch-holding husband, the matriarchal Moya, and the decent Liverpudlian encyclopaedia salesman. Sadly Barry just can't avoid the knee-jerk pathos of a resurfacing incestuous



STEVE NEALE

SECRETARY TURNED STALKER TURNED FEMME FATALE: Alice Barry in *PamElla*

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trauma, wedging such a revelation suddenly and awkwardly into the final moments of the play.

Given the choice between amateur psychology and intelligent stagecraft, Noggin is more successful at using its head than examining it.

Peter Crawley writes for publications including The Irish Times and is its news editor.

FOR THE PLEASURE OF SEEING HER AGAIN by Michel Tremblay

Peacock Theatre
1 February – 9 March 2002;
reviewed 14 February 2002

BY PATRICK LONERGAN

AS MICHEL TREMBLAY'S PLAY BEGINS, we are told that we are not about to see a *Three Sisters* or a *Hamlet*. Instead, we are asked to witness the writer's remembrance of Nana, his mother, whom he is summoning to the stage "for the pleasure of seeing her again." "You will laugh," he promises us, "and you'll cry too" — and when the play concludes ninety minutes later, these words have been proven largely accurate: most of the audience leaves the Peacock smiling, although some remain seated, still in tears after the play's inspiring conclusion.

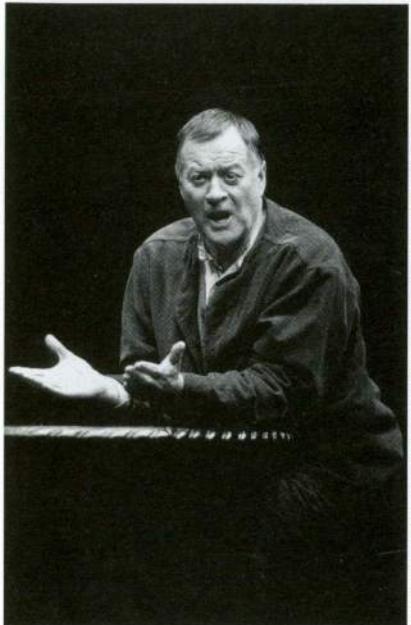
In a series of short scenes, Tremblay shows how his development as a writer was influenced by his mother's love of invention, exaggeration, and performance. Leading us from his childhood to his mother's death in his early 20s, he presents a beautifully achieved portrait of a woman gifted with an exuberant imagination. Nana's impersonation of family members and her love of romantic novels entertain her son, but also provide her with consolation from a life she finds stifling. Tremblay's point is simple:

Chekhov and Shakespeare may have influenced his writing, but his mother shaped his imagination. The play therefore is a touching defence of the place of — and the necessity for — the theatrical in everyday life.

Gordon McCall's light-handed direction, aided by the subtlety of Tony Wakefield's lighting and Paul McCauley's design, ensures that the attention of the audience is focussed on Maria McDermottroe's Nana. This places considerable responsibility on McDermottroe — which she carries brilliantly, capturing the restlessness of Nana's imagination without indulging in histrionics. She is assisted by the generous restraint of Des Cave, who as the Narrator is happy to allow Nana to monopolise the audience's attention.

This careful pace is maintained until the play's conclusion, when Tremblay attempts to give his mother a theatrical goodbye that poignantly contrasts with the penultimate scene, in which, suffering from terminal illness, Nana admits that she is terrified by an inability to imagine her son's future after her death. This finale draws the play's preoccupations and themes together, and affectingly enacts Tremblay's love for his mother. It was disappointing, therefore, that these last moments seemed rushed, when, as the play's title implies, we ought to have been given the time to take pleasure in Nana's happiness.

For the Pleasure... was written to celebrate the 30th anniversary of Tremblay's *Les Belles Soeurs*, the controversial play that established his reputation. Written in the Montreal dialect of joual, the play inaugurated the career of a dramatist now regarded as one of the most important figures in the formation of Québécois culture and identity. In 1988,



I REMEMBER MAMA: For the Pleasure...

Tremblay caused similar commotion in Scotland when *Les Belles Souers* was translated to a Glaswegian dialect as *The Guid Sisters*, earning Tremblay the title of "the greatest Scottish playwright Scotland never had." Tremblay's use of language — not to mention his politics — means that he has a great deal in common with Irish dramatists like Synge and O'Casey, but, as *The Guid Sisters* showed, he is also a writer of global importance.

The problem is that an Irish audience unaware of Tremblay's status in Canada will miss a great deal of the significance of *For the Pleasure*. When Nana encourages her son to think for himself, the Peacock audience grins nostalgically at a

typical childhood scene, but a Québécois audience would see in that encouragement the roots of Tremblay's fierce independence, making the play politically and creatively exciting in ways that an Irish audience simply will not notice. It could therefore be argued that *For the Pleasure* travels with its superficial and sentimental elements intact, but leaves much of its power in Canada.

This difficulty is compounded by a disappointing translation. Linda Gaboriau does not attempt to reproduce Tremblay's *joual*, instead using a bland English that seems geared towards an international audience. Cave and McDermottroe both showed an instinct to compensate for the script's lack of character by shifting occasionally from their Canadian accents into an Irish intonation and rhythm — to which, interestingly, the Peacock audience responded warmly.

Nevertheless, to present the European premiere of a major play is an impressive declaration of the National Theatre's status in world theatre, and the Abbey deserves credit for its ongoing engagement with theatre from outside Ireland. The success of this engagement must ultimately be judged against the reactions of Irish audiences — and, in this case, the audience responded positively, despite the fact that more could have been done to compensate them for what was lost in the transposition from Montreal to Dublin. Due principally to the charismatic and disciplined performances of Cave and McDermottroe, *For the Pleasure of Seeing Her Again* is a satisfying celebration of the creative imagination, and a beautiful tribute from the playwright to his mother.

Patrick Lonergan is completing research on contemporary Irish drama at NUI Galway.

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FREEFALLING by Owen McCafferty

Barefaced Theatre Company

The New Theatre, Dublin

27 November – 8 December 2001;

reviewed on 8 Dec. BY JAMIE TANNER

JUMPING OUT OF AN AEROPLANE AT something-thousand feet is easy. It requires no real skill or intelligence. Some would argue that sufficient intelligence is actually a prerequisite of staying in the plane. Freefalling is, in fact, as easy as falling off a log. The hard part is trusting that a thousand things won't go wrong with the parachute and that it will keep you off the six o'clock news. From somewhere in the skies above the New Theatre, Barefaced Theatre Company have taken their first jump and Owen McCafferty's *Freefalling* seems to be the perfect choice for a company looking to explore the physical thrill of theatre.

Stories about rebellious youths trying to move against the flow of society are by no means rare, but rarely are they dealt with in so honest a manner as this. For the two unnamed teens that meet in a park one night (Tom O'Leary, Louise Lewis), the realisation that the current is too strong to swim against comes too late, and they are eventually swept under by the tide of inevitability.

When the play opens, they don't even know each other and they certainly have no clue as to the twists that will turn them through this night. From the word go the pacing is fast. The two actors portray their everyday hum-drum as robots who repeat their routines with perpetual speed until the crescendo when they launch into animated tirades, complaining to the audience of everything from her boring barroom conversations to his father's "You got to learn the hard way" philosophy. If one becomes worried for

the safety of the actors under such sustained physical duress, respite arrives as the two strangers meet for the first time in a beautifully understated scene.

In this respect, Simon Manahan's direction is razor-sharp. He takes us on a roller-coaster ride, balancing the highs and the lows with an innate sense of rhythm, creating a physical and thoroughly exciting piece of theatre also capable of surprising us with quiet, tender lulls. The atmosphere is greatly enhanced by the sound design by LXS, and Robert Furey's subtle lighting design helped transport us from hot, smoky bar to cold, lonely forest.

McCafferty's script is well crafted and allows the two actors to play the supporting cast of larger than life characters themselves. Lewis' physical performance is larger than life, almost too large for the small confines of the New Theatre. O'Leary on the other hand imbues his character with a wonderful naturalism. He does what great actors can do: make you believe every word he says. His skill as an actor is unmistakable; it is riveting to watch every moment of his vibrant, sweaty performance as he captures and personifies the essence of the play and watches his life fall out of control with merciless speed.

During the course of one night they feed each other's angst over desires for freedom and dreams of being important. They take it in turns, helping the other one act out their fantasies, probing deeper into their darker desires. Intoxicated by the thrill of possibility once more, they cross the final threshold of society, the law, and steal a car. These unlikely outlaws are dragged through a night of bloodshed past the point of no return and too scared to turn back if they could. Like Bonnie and Clyde, they draw closer

to a crescendo that shatters all their dreams instantly. This is the point in the freefall when the parachute opens.

The last part of the play has the frenetic climax just witnessed. Cold, lonely and frightened they lie in a forest and take stock. Once again, the rhythm of the direction forces an unexpected change in tempo and as they wait for the sun to come up they have reached journey's end and they've taken you with them. Barefaced Theatre Company have done what they set out to do — this is a theatrical thrill ride. If you don't think you are the type who could jump out of a plane, this will at least help you to understand those who do.

HINTERLAND by Sebastian Barry

A National Theatre, Royal National Theatre, and Out of Joint co-production
Reviewed on 6 February 2002 at the
Abbey Theatre BY GERRY DUKES

JOHNNY SILVESTER IS A DISGRACED politician and former national leader. His extra-curricular activities while holding political office are the subject of investigative tribunal proceedings. He is still married to the daughter of a former national leader, though he has been involved in a long-standing affair with a woman vaguely associated with journalism. His former lust for power was so keen that he willingly sacrificed his closest friend and most loyal supporter on the altar of political expediency. It takes no great imagination to interpret the sources of Barry's plot as deriving from the career of the disgraced former Taoiseach, Mr. Haughey, just as no great imagination has been exercised in the construction of that plot.

Mixing factual and fictional ingredients is an entirely legitimate procedure,

particularly if the product of the mixing carries the marks of craftsmanship. Shakespeare and Joyce, Capote and Mailer have each produced promiscuous works that are fine achievements. Fact and fiction are welded or melded



HE'S DEAD, JOHNNY: *Hinterland*

together for the construction or generation of significance. Barry's play, on the other hand, seems to be overborne by the much-publicised "facts" of a scandalous career, so much so that the real

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play gets lost behind a myth. Barry is not entirely to blame for this — he has been ably assisted by director Max Stafford-Clark and Patrick Malahide who plays Johnny Silvester. None of the three has heeded Beckett's wise warning (issued in 1928): "the danger is in the neatness of identifications."

In a recent interview (published in *Theatre Talk: Voices of Irish Theatre Practitioners*), Barry said that his new play brings to a close a series of seven "familiar" plays, beginning with *Boss Grady's Boys* and now concluded with *Hinterland*. He goes on to say that "*Hinterland* is a father play — father of the nation as well. The series started off as a desire to see where I was in the world, to see what I was...." The play Barry wrote is not well served by the distracting political overlay that occludes his thematic centre, the exploration of flawed fatherhood.

The entire action is set in the library or study of Silvester's "stately" mansion. While Silvester may bemoan his virtual imprisonment and isolation, he enjoys it too because outside there is merely opprobrium. From here he can control access to his person, majestically granting a television interview (conducted off-stage) and confiding to an undergraduate student writing a term paper his holistic vision of the nation. Lucianne McEvoy gives a pert performance as the student. Typically, Barry gives her the name Aisling; he is apparently unable to resist underlining his ironies. Es Devlin's set design is efficient and wonderfully suggestive of an opulence tempered by a bullying vulgarity. Johanna Town's lighting is mellow and menacing, harsh and corrosively revealing by turns.

Some of the playing is very distinguished, particularly that of Dearbhla Molloy as Silvester's wife, Daisy and of

Phelim Drew as the depressive and suicidal son, Jack. Both wife and son are the primary victims of Silvester's careerism, perhaps better described as bonapartism because he is a little man afflicted by big ideas. Ordinary domesticity does not, nor has not, featured as a desirable condition in the skewed universe he inhabits, nor has marital fidelity or care of and interest in his offspring. Wife and son do not feature large in his consciousness and Barry does not give his characters much to play with. Molloy and Drew, working with the comparative little they have been given, ineluctably impress that there is a far better play here than has been allowed to emerge in the collusion between Stafford-Clark and Malahide.

While the play may be about flawed fatherhood, about the way in which a public life is constructed so as to conceal private failings and abuses, in its present state it is inchoate and radically unfinished. It is surprising, to say the least, that three reputable production companies have backed it. The times are indeed out of joint.

Gerry Dukes is a critic and academic, an editor and biographer.

KNOCKNASHEE by Deirdre Kinahan

Tall Tales Theatre Company in association
with the Civic Theatre, Tallaght
On tour; reviewed 30 Jan. at the Civic
BY BELINDA KELLY

DEIRDRE KINAHAN'S CONVOLUTED AND passionate new play is a study of defeat, and a multi-faceted analysis of transformation. There are three characters: Patrick Annan is an artist who has lost his family and the use of his legs. He remains so tormented by this loss that he must romanticise his past, and this in turn inhibits his creative and emotional

development. The action of the play centres around preparations for a party that Patrick is throwing to celebrate a momentous occasion. He is convinced that the spirits that once disabled him will return to their homeland to heal him and reunite him with his missing mother. At the close of the play he decides to confront his fears and to consciously plan his future. Although Patrick's character is at times a little larger-than-life, he is written with complexity and bittersweet charm: "I get suspicious too when a woman wants to go out with me, in order to look kind and loving, like a sexual Mother Teresa."

Twenty-something Brigid is also suffering from loss. She has recently moved to Knocknashee, Co. Meath, where Patrick lives, to recover from her heroin addiction and prove to the authorities that she can care for her young daughter again. She works in a sandwich shop where Patrick is a frequent patron, and they have struck up a tentative friendship. Brigid is without the crutch of drugs, and without the love of her daughter. In the play she becomes conscious that she was following her mother's journey, and it this awareness that strengthens her conviction to redirect her life.

The third character, Hughie, is Patrick's neighbour, an older eccentric who discloses in the course of the play that he is implicated in the ongoing Gardaí searches in the area: the police are looking for the bodies of people killed by the IRA and concealed in secret graves. Hughie was



GRIEVING AND LOSS: Knocknashee

inadvertently involved in the secret burials, and as a result he now has frequent delusions and has been diagnosed as a paranoid schizophrenic. He believes he has lost his sanity.

The play's primary force lies in its treatment of disability. The actor playing Patrick is disabled and uses a wheelchair. As his limbs are uncovered, the audience has first to accept his deformity before it can begin to relate to his journey. The strength of this production is that it succeeds in teaching an audience to overcome any fears of disability it might have and to therefore listen to the story. Like Patrick's character, Hughie is so traumatised by his past that he cannot view his present. The play's attempt to deal with the complexity of murders in the North is its weakest plot strand. Hughie is merely a metaphor for the Republic and is therefore too hollow to support what it meant to be such a significant strand of the play. It is impressive, however, that Kinahan has

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tried to handle a subject that desperately needs dramatic expression.

The dense and overwrought narrative structure is almost vindicated by the sincerity and dedication of both director and cast. Maureen Collender directs this production with an assured and creative vision. Her cast remains confident and committed throughout the play. The production is greatly enhanced by a beautifully vivid set and lighting design (Robert Lane and Lee Davis) that manages to capture the physical and spiritual elements of the text. Nabil Shaban's performance as Patrick is remarkable. He managed to extract all the character's strengths and weaknesses. Shaban plays Patrick as an egocentric clown one minute, and a self-loathing manipulator the next. He would make a fascinating Lear.

Mary Murray's performance is also a revelation. Her comic timing and pathos are perfectly pitched. She breathes vitality and life into the valiant Brigid. Despite Hughie's problematic characterisation, Joseph M. Kelly somehow manages to sustain a through line and brings vulnerability and intelligence to the role. This fine ensemble work is a tribute to Maureen Collender's zealous direction. She clearly knows how to cast and has encouraged her company to work intuitively.

Knocknashree is a play about our perception of real and imagined losses. It also analyses the supremacy of identity; that by using language to label perceived defeats in our society we create a reductive process that needs to be addressed. Finally, it is a play that is weighed down by the arc of its own ambition. Nonetheless, it is a provocative and noble work that has restored my faith in the power of the medium.

Belinda Kelly is a writer and critic.

LETTERS TO FELICE

by Stephen Edwards

The Pavilion Theatre, Dun Laoghaire

29 September - 20 October

Reviewed 4 October BY DEREK WEST

STEPHEN EDWARDS' *LETTERS TO FELICE* was the most ambitious in-house production staged at the Pavilion in its first year of operation. It functioned as a challenging exercise: Edwards took the obsessive exchanges between the writer Franz Kafka and the eponymous object of his affection. Kafka, living in Vienna, wrote some 1,500 letters to Felice, who lived in Berlin; her side of the correspondence has been lost to posterity. Edwards edited Franz's letters — but suffered from not quite knowing what to leave out.

He set the whole piece to music. This was risk-taking. Edwards noted in the programme that Kafka "by his own admission, felt no affinity with music or dancing" — and then proceeded to set his narrative to music (melodic but not memorable) and dance. The most vivid and concentrated contribution to this aspect of the production was by Caimin Collins, who played Kafka's silent, Buster Keaton-esque alter ego, named "K." As a mute Private Franz, Collins silently shadowed the main action, through a plaintive mime, which made for delight and distraction.

As Kafka's outer shell, Jonathan Shankey was denied poetry, music, and movement (appropriate punishment for his lack of "affinity"). He was lumbered with the task of delivering repetitive, unsparkling speeches denoting Kafka's incapacity to engage in a full-blooded face-to-face, hit-the-sack relationship with Felice. The means of conveying this story of unconsummated passion were many and varied, but so exhaustive and

fussy that eventually one was obliged to lose interest in Kafka's limp libido.

Possibly the most interesting facet of the production was the incorporation of two of Kafka's major prose works, *Metamorphosis* and *The Trial*, as parallel commentaries on the impossibility of Franz engaging in normal human intercourse (hence the transmogrification into a beetle) and his labyrinthine self-questioning correlating somehow to an interminable lawsuit.

The narrative was carried through 38 (!) voraciously energetic episodes. Director Karen Louise Hebden opted for fast delivery, and in this she was extremely well-served by her cast. They worked like hell, "snapping" or "dissolving" from one scene to the next, navigating the quick changes of set, costume, and character with a manic efficiency. I think I detected only one slip-up — when Kafka's Dada came on as the postman or vice versa (I'm not sure which). But who could blame Brian de Salvo, as he was engaged in a performance that resembled one of those cabarets on the DART that have to be launched and concluded between stations.

The ladies in the company had the more rewarding tasks. Poppy Tierney played Felice with a tuneful, manicured elegance that never once slipped. She was well suited to the "romantic comedy" genre to which this show makes claim. However, it was the very icy impeccability of her performance that began to pall. Maxine Fone (whose Rita in *Educating Rita*, a previous production at the Pavilion, had been both sharply accurate and unfailingly feisty) was uncomfortable in the range of parts she had to carry here, operating in an intense and grating overdrive. On the other hand Stella Feehily was an imposing presence in all her incarnations — tall and languid, with a

singing voice of warmth and sensuality.

The underlying difficulty with *Letters to Felice* was that it seemed to come out of nowhere and end up nowhere. It was the product of a private vision — Edwards has had a continuing fascination with Kafka and this was his opportunity to develop it. It was a showcase for the versatility of the performers. It was a showcase for a new theatre, testing its technical potential. It was clearly a showcase for the writing, composing, and directing talents of the Edwards-Hebden partnership. But somehow this



LOVE TOTEM: Letters to Felice

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was too introspective. It did not reach out. It failed to connect in any significant fashion with its audience.

In the weeks after *Letters to Felice* was presented at the Pavilion, it was announced that Hebden, the venue's director, was leaving after only a year in the job. Under her leadership the identity and mission of the Pavilion remained an enigma. She set a varied programme in motion and, even as she departed, left lots of ideas simmering, but it is hard to see *Letters to Felice* as more than a lightly disarming novelty, which has little context in the Irish theatre environment. The long-term viability of in-house productions will depend on a vision which will catch the imaginations of the denizens of Dun Laoghaire.

Derek West has recently edited a report, "The Arts in Our Schools" for the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals.

LOVELY BETTY

devised by Kelly Campbell, Karen Egan, Tom Murphy, and Mark O'Halloran
Bewley's Café Theatre
14 January-16 February 2002;
reviewed 17 Jan. BY NICK COSTELLO

LOVELY BETTY TELLS THE STORY OF three twentysomethings who are about to be evicted from their Rathmines flat. It's set in the present day, with by-now-stock references to the economy, the Dublin class system, and the boredom of being a member of a directionless but over-opinionated and badly educated middle class. Essentially the piece is a character-driven comedy made up of an uneasy mix of absurdist moments in straight, played-forLaughs theatre.

The strongest and most convincing of the three characters is Urlar (Mark O'H-

loran), a product of Gonzaga College's liberal education system. He is, as he says himself, an ideas man. In his case the ideas are few and far between and firmly follow the instincts of his wide-vowelled South-side pack — an ill-informed, egocentric autocracy masquerading as green warrior intellectuals. Incidentally, and unsurprisingly, Urlar has a sister called Fuinneog and can clearly see a future where he ends up with a girl from Alex (Alexandra College — the upper-middle class Protestant girls' boarding school). O'Halloran plays the character convincingly, with a firm grip on his fundamental shallowness and vanity, not to mention accent. He also has the benefit of the funniest lines in the piece.

Also strong, and almost constantly on stage, is Dags (Kelly Campbell), a Goth who worships Urlar. The sub-structure of the piece is provided by Dags' art school project of which Urlar is the unconscious subject. This allows Dags to show us the deep insecurities of her character through a truly dreadful song about her love for him. Needless to say, Urlar notices none of this, which drives poor Dags to dangerous acts of desperation — most notably a very unsuccessful scene where she tries to transform herself into his ideal mate, an Alex girl. Campbell plays the character as prickly, shrill, shy, and unhappy — quite like every Goth you've ever seen hanging around the Temple Bar Music Centre, the poor confused dears. She is consistently convincing and anchors the play.

Dags is the love interest of the third character, Ciaran (Tom Murphy), a control-freak zookeeper who divides his attention between Dags and N'Kala, a baby giraffe at the zoo. Ciaran is the odd one out in this trio. He is the least conspicuously middle class — and one wonders where the three would have

met, much less how they ended up sharing a flat. Ciaran's character plays most of the absurd action of the piece and does so with varying degrees of success. Tom Murphy seems awkward as compared to O'Halloran and Campbell's ease and control, though for the last ten minutes, his character explodes in a gleefully anarchic and hilarious transformation into N'Kala.

So what of the eponymous Lovely Betty? She is a venerable radio set that broadcasts the *Ronan Collins Radio Show* every day. Lovely Betty is a link to the world outside the flat and is the one thing all three truly love. She is the object of a half-hearted struggle for ownership and provides the information that eventually sends Ciaran over the edge. The radio has the potential to solve all the characters' problems, and so perhaps does deserve the godlike position she is ascribed in this piece.

The student-flat set is detailed and convincing, from World Wildlife Fund posters to dodgy foreign liqueur bottles and the inevitable guitar; the couch, needless to say, is rarely unoccupied. You can almost feel the damp chill of this subdivided Rathmines period residence. The costumes are simple and appropriate with some skilful and rapid body painting for Tom Murphy's N'Kala. The lighting is minimal and effective within the limits of the Bewley's rig. Karen Egan's direction is efficient and energetic and creates a real sense of place, particularly in the conver-

sations between Urlar and Dags.

Lovely Betty is a mixture of realist and absurd sequences that doesn't quite come off. Though the writing is often funny, the plot progresses too slowly and in some scenes the character of Ciaran feels almost redundant. Like the characters in TV's *Upwardly Mobile*, Ciaran, Dags and Urlar aren't as well-written as they deserve to be



HAIRY: A battle over the title character in *Lovely Betty*

and become the victims of their own devices. This is doubtless the result of the devising process, which has strengths and pitfalls in equal measure. The authenticity of much of the dialogue and the up-to-the-minute jokes in *Lovely Betty* are indicators of many of these strengths. However, the self-consciousness of much of the absurd sequences and the isolation in tone and character of Ciaran would seem to indicate a failing equally inherent in this process. It really can go either way. Most tellingly though, the spectacular radio set

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that is Lovely Betty would appear to have been sidelined as the human characters in this process take centre stage.

The soup on the day was a hearty leek and potato.

Nick Costello is a freelance writer.

MANSFIELD PARK by Jane Austen, adapted by Myles Dungan

Rattlebag Theatre Company in association
with the Civic Theatre, Tallaght
31 October – 24 November 2001;
reviewed 23 Nov. BY PETER CRAWLEY

JANE AUSTEN LENDS HERSELF READILY TO the priorities of any reader. Whether it's chocolate-box escapist, punk scholars, or theatrical adapters, Austen's wit contains something for everyone. Really, there should be no problem extracting some essence of her works and extrapolating those ideas to create something uniquely "now" in the camouflage of "then."

But while Rattlebag Theatre Company's production of Myles Dungan's adaptation begins with a snigger (a tableau of actors stifle a giggle, before bursting into laughter) and unfurls on a jaggedly raked stage (Austen with a contemporary slant?), it quickly becomes as reverential as it does referential. Resorting to leadenly delivered quotation, the script and performances break whatever promise is made by the skewed angles of Sonia Haccius' set.

Now an adaptation that jettisons all of Austen's dialogue in favour of its own is something to be applauded. Dungan's adaptation neatly trims the story down to its bare essentials, paring down characters to allow for a minimum use of actors. But it seems that once Dungan has severed ties to the author, he loses confidence in his own voice and finds substance in the

words of others. Thus in making the references more accessible there are shades of Chekhov and borrowings from Shakespeare. Similarly, much of the cast seem to have adopted a voice unnatural to them, making several roles allude to real persons, with little to support such curious decisions. Why, for example, should Sean Duggan's Mr. Rushworth, the butt of every put-down, assume a blithering Senator David Norris persona? Why does Niamh O'Shaughnessy's flippant Mary speak with a Katherine Hepburn twang?

Conversely, Austen's story remains unaffected. Poor cousin Fanny is adopted into the wealthy Bertram family and divides her time between reading, attracting condescending remarks, walking in the garden for 15 minutes, recuperating after walking in the garden for 15 minutes, and developing affections for her clergyman cousin Edmund. Meanwhile, the love games between mismatched pairs, the tangle between the morally virtuous and morally bankrupt, and the opposition between country idyll and city corruption set up the dynamic of the play. In the end, of course, the radical affront to decency that adultery symbolises is all put right by the ethically unimpeachable marriage between two cousins.

If originality is just undetected plagiarism, Dungan is unashamed in his references. The sign-posted delivery from the cast, however, means that you practically see quotation marks hovering above the small stage. "You cannot, sir, take from me anything that I will more willingly part withal": Damien Delaney's Edmund echoes *Hamlet* in response to Rushworth's leave-taking.

Reprimanding the heroine he gratingly announces, "Fanny Price, this is much ado about nothing." When Rushworth asks for the title of the play that the fam-

ily gathering will rehearse, he is told, *As You Like It*. "No, we mustn't improvise," he chides. As weak a gag as it is, it gives some insight into the straitjacketing reverence that prevents this production from saying anything new.

So while Haccius' contemporary cos-



UPPER-CLASS ENNUI: Mansfield Park

tume design features such intriguing updates as fetching wool-weave bodices; tasteful John Rocha-style frocks; and riding boots and jodhpurs, the show remains a pretty costume drama. There seems to be a conflict between what the production claims to be, and what the play is.

In spite of the laborious delivery of some clanking lines (where the audience has usually crossed the finish line of a

gag several moments before the punchline is successfully negotiated) the youthful cast acquit themselves handsomely. Devaney makes a charming Edmund, and O'Shaughnessy a suitably conniving Mary. Duggan's Sir Thomas is more assured than his buffoonish cuckold Rushworth, but then again Austen's prattish characters have never provided much in the way of empathetic qualities.

On the night of viewing, Aoife Molony's stand-in Emma Moohan was a joy to watch in her three roles, delicately delineating character between the flighty adulteress Maria, a hypochondriacal Lady Bertram, and a timid Mrs. Price. In the impeccably virtuous and consequently boring role of Fanny, Catherine Farrell judges the tone of her performance nicely and keeps the character from becoming too bland a presence to care about. And while John Lovett is reassuringly weaselly as Henry Crawford, the effort involved in delivering the ornately phrased jaw-breakers of his barbed witticisms hardly seems worth it. It also enforces the general feeling that these lines were written to be read, rather than spoken.

Such awkwardness isn't helped by a sound design of infuriatingly repeated string loops and the baffling inclusion of a chopping orchestral version of the Righteous Brothers' "Unchained Melody." More invigorating is director Joe Devlin's use of the levels that Haccius' set allows. The power play of characters pursuing each other up and down a gradient on the chess-board set neatly exploits the politics and tactics of the marriage market. Sadly though, the potential in Austen's wicked wit, well-exploited by other recent Austen adaptations such as Inis Theatre's *Lady Susan*, remains largely unexplored.

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MARKING THE TERRITORY

Irish Museum of Modern Art

19-21 October 2001; reviewed on 21
October BY MATTHEW CAUSEY

IN OCTOBER 2001 THE IRISH MUSEUM of Modern Art hosted a three-day performance art event, *Marking the Territory*, curated by the distinguished performance artist Marina Abramovic. Twenty-three artists from 16 countries performed or contributed videos, photo documentation, or installations. The weekend was a unique and fascinating opportunity for people in Ireland to witness a wide-ranging collection of the work of European performance artists. The connections between the innovations of performance art and the traditions of the theatre are clearly seen in some contemporary European and American avant-garde performances. The links to performance art in contemporary Irish theatre is less obvious. *Marking the Territory* was a useful event to encourage the exchange of performance and theatre artists in the Republic.

The history of performance art begins with the cabaret and theatre experiments of such early 20th-century European avant-garde movements as Italian Futurism, Dada, and Surrealism. Disappointed with the limitations of painting and sculpture, and looking to create a synthesis of all art forms, artists created cabaret events which incorporated poetry readings, musical works, short plays, and exhibitions of plastic arts. Even earlier, avant-garde artists of symbolism and German expressionism similarly reformed the theatre. In postwar America, the gestural painting of abstract expressionism (Jackson Pollock) led to the genre of Happenings in which artists abandoned the plastic arts for performance.

Performance art proper came into its

own in the 1970s in what can be read as a response to the strictures assigned to the high modernist movements of minimalism and colour field paintings. Like conceptual art, performance challenges art as a commodity to be hung in a gallery and marketed as product. Performance in art asserts itself as an ephemeral phenomenon, present through the body, yet disappearing in time. The important element of performance is the present body of the artist in a timed event.

1970s performance artists including Abramovic, Vito Acconci, and Chris Burden felt it essential to present the body in art in extreme and dangerous events. The goal was to challenge the representational nature of art and present a border wherein the theatre and theatricality in culture could be challenged. Abramovic has created many important and extreme works in her career, including *Rhythm O* (1974) in which she allowed spectators to use a variety of implements (gun and bullet, scissors, knife, feathers, etc.) on her body. After six hours the performance was stopped, by which time she had been cut, painted, and had the loaded gun held to her head.

Apologists of performance art, including Abramovic, claim broad differences between the theatre and performance art, yet as theatre theorist Herbert Blau argues, the theatre always haunts performance. The more performance artists attempt to rid themselves of many of the perceived problems of the theatre (e.g. illusion, proscenium arch, impersonation) the further they become enmeshed in its technologies of representation.

Many of the works on view at *Marking the Territory* rehearsed the work of previous theatre experimenters and performance art pioneers. Certainly many of the works of the show demonstrated a

desire to be transgressive or resistant to current culture, art practice and spectatorship, but in many ways they seem historically impotent. The works presented at *Marking the Territory* were of a familiar strain to those accustomed to the strategies of performance art.

In *Madonna* Amanda Coogan stands



LIQUID: Amanda Coogan in Fountain

motionless on a pedestal, fully dressed in a dark suit, and bares a single breast. In *Fountain* (2000), a work presented on accompanying video to the show, but not performed at the event, Coogan, dressed in only a shirt and tennis shoes, sits on a floor, her vagina opened to the camera, and urinates. Paolo Canevari in *Chiuso* wears a suit of old tyres in a room where spectators must view him through peep-holes carved in the doors. In *Differences*, Canevari, stamps the head of individuals with the words, "Muslim," "Catholic,"

"Protestant," etc. Wim Devolye, in his video *Sybille II*, shows close-up shots of erupting pimples and blackheads. Pascale Grau, in the video *Endorphine*, slowly spins in a circle singing "Killing Me Softly" while thousand of small bugs crawl over her body. Nedko Solakov in *A Life (Black & White)* has two people repeatedly paint the walls of a gallery.

There is something terribly tired, solipsistic, narcissistic, and unchallenging in these works, which assert the importance of the body and personal identity, but are incapable of demonstrating the dangerous position in which the body finds itself in mediated, technologised, virtualised environments of commodity culture. Collectivity and concern for community are here consumed in a flat fascination with the self. The assertion of the materiality of the body will always maintain its importance in art, but within contemporary culture that gesture needs more sophistication than simply bareing a breast or dancing on a lump of lard until you collapse. The problems of 21st-century western culture complicate the presentation of the body as a unified and knowable subject. Furthermore, the events and aftermath of 11 September seem to strain the credibility and ethos of these cries for attention.

However, there are artists in the show whose work does resonate in truly troubling ways with our current times; interestingly, performance figures only tangentially to their art. Spanish artist Santiago Sierra, in an event documented for the show, *160 cm Line tattooed on Four People*, hired four heroin-addicted prostitutes for the price of one fix to have a straight line tattooed across their backs. Paolo Pivi, an Italian artist, in a video titled *100 Chinese*, takes 100 Chinese

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individuals and places them in various unified formations in a gallery space. Kendell Geer (UK) creates installations of multiple monitors piled amongst tangled webs of video cables, VCRs, and loudspeakers, playing either a video loop of a close-up of snapping teeth with lips pulled back violently (an image appropriated from the film *Hellraiser*) in *Medusa Dreaming*; or the soundtrack of sado-masochistic films in *Truth or Dare*. These works dynamically address the contemporary problems of the categorization and control of difference, the exploitation of peoples, and the traps of media and technology.

It is important to remember, as Abramovic has suggested in a backhanded compliment, that the theatre as a genre has become more interesting in its borrowings from the strategies of performance art. Contemporary works by Pina Bausch's dance theatre, and performance pieces of the Societas Raffaello Sanzio and the Wooster Group are extending the borders of theatre, performance, and art in exciting ways. Ironically, many of the artists in *Marking the Territory* might learn from these theatre companies how to once again respond to their times. Otherwise it may be prudent to suggest that performance art is a depleted and antiquated gesture of a historical moment best remembered, not reenacted.

MY BRILLIANT DIVORCE

by Geraldine Aron

Druid Theatre Company

Town Hall Theatre, Galway

23 November - 8 December 2001;
reviewed on 28 Nov. BY MARY COLL

ONE OF THE GREAT CHALLENGES THAT comes with success and high achievement is that expectations are raised



HELLO, MA? My Brilliant Divorce

accordingly, as in the case of Druid Theatre Company, from whom audiences have come to expect excellence of writing, performance, and production. There is the additional anticipation of that unique Druid quality which is difficult to define, but which has given the company its eminent status nationally and internationally. It is the art of expressing aspects of the Irish psyche and subconscious through work which mirrors inward truth, allowing us to see something of ourselves more clearly at the same time as it projects that truth out to a wider audience with

PAUL McCARTHY

absolute lucidity. In this context a Druid world premiere directed by Garry Hynes is always something of an event.

Hynes' decision to commission a new play by Geraldine Aron for Druid inevitably set anticipation in motion; Aron has one of the longest relationships of any writer with the company. In rekindling this relationship Druid inevitably evoked a sense of its own history, at a time when the company has been absent for long periods from its home stage in Chapel Lane. This created the notion of a homecoming of sorts, but *My Brilliant Divorce* did not deliver on this promise. A one-woman show set in contemporary London, the play features a central character who attempts the impossible feat of simultaneously straddling both the Atlantic Ocean and the Irish Sea. It flounders by failing to locate itself anywhere either physically or emotionally, and only serves to further advance the impression of a company which is itself more than a little displaced.

Aron's previous work with Druid clearly demonstrates her ability to create strong, vibrant characters who are emotionally complex and utterly credible. But Aron's writing in *My Brilliant Divorce*, though witty and entertaining, rarely probes the various shades and emotional dimensions of thirtysomething reluctant divorcee Angela Kennedy-Lipsky, played with huge energy and conviction by Glenne Headly. With Angela we journey with relative ease through the years, from the initial departure of her husband for a younger and more beautiful companion, to the eventual triumph of new love over adversity. It is not a difficult or troublesome journey: we are more than familiar with the route, since it is the well-trodden terrain of television sitcoms and popular novels aimed at audiences of a

particular age, stage, and gender. In fact the trip is so simple and so unremarkable that one wonders why the director felt it necessary that we should embark upon it at all; the mild amusement we derive along the way does not seem sufficient justification.

It's all dressed up in a spectacular package of special effects, with clever electronic props dashing on and off the stage; Jon Buswell's lighting is beautifully done; and Francis O'Connor's overall design excellent. This only distracts temporarily, however, from the fact that, when stripped down to its bare essentials, *My Brilliant Divorce* is all sound and fury, signifying nothing. The presentation makes it seem as if Druid thinks that it's much, much more, and this places an impossible demand on the writing. Headly brought much energy to the role, and succeeded in making a genuine connection with the audience at times, but the production did not have sufficient momentum to sustain itself for its 90-plus minutes running time. What might have been an entertaining (if excessively familiar) story for an hour at lunchtime groaned under the strains placed upon it.

Mary Coll is a Limerick-based poet, critic, and broadcaster.

ON SUCH AS WE by Billy Roche

The Peacock Theatre

3 December 2001 – 26 January 2002;
reviewed on 12 January BY HELEN MEANY

YOU KNOW WHERE YOU ARE WITH Billy Roche: *The Wexford Trilogy* and *The Cavalcaders* have established his dramatic landscape of small town life coloured by understated wit. Sometimes, though, you don't know when you are. *On Such As We*

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introduces the familiar contours of Roche's Wexford, every naturalistic i dotted and t crossed by Bláithín Sheerin's set. We're in a barber's shop, run by Oweney (Brendan Gleeson), which has been in his family for three generations. Easy-going, kind-hearted, but no fool, he muddles through, humorously bemoaning the lack of customers but not exerting himself unduly to attract more. Above the shop he provides rudimentary lodgings for a young artist, who delivers canvases in lieu of rent, and for an orphaned boy recently made redundant when the local hotel closed down. These are befriended by an exuberant schoolgirl (Pauline Hutton) who offers artistic advice to one and affection to the other with equal enthusiasm.

There seems no reason why all this shouldn't continue in its low-key way, but drama requires something more. That stimulus is provided by the absent character, PJ, whose existence threatens all that is decent in the town. A rapacious property owner, he is steadily buying up local businesses, with designs on Oweney's shop. Oweney, meanwhile has designs on PJ's vivacious wife (Antoine Byrne), a woman with taste who is understandably disappointed in her marriage to a plot device. Both a symbol and cause of change, PJ is the archetypal malefactor, dominating a cartoon world.

Perhaps the broad, black-and-white brush strokes of the plot are striving towards universality, but the effect is one of diminishing credibility. Even when violence erupts briefly at the end of Act One, and when later Oweney's shop is trashed, we can't believe in the threat posed by PJ, or by his underling, the mock-macho, pelvis-thrusting Eddie (David Herlihy).

Graceful ensemble playing and a mem-



HEY BIG GUY: On Such as We

orably engaging performance from Brendan Gleeson testify to American director Wilson Milam's way with actors despite obvious problems with some of Roche's characterisations. The young artist embodies every kind of cliche about the tortuous nature of the creative process, while the character of the tedious schoolgirl, Sally, seems entirely dispensable.

More seriously, the fact that the period of the play is unclear leaves all the action unmoored — we could be anywhere between the early 1970s and the present. The snatches of music interspersed throughout — played on the radio and sung by the cast — are from the 1940s,

'50s, and '60s. The characters who gather cosily in the shop for chats could have strayed from an episode of *The Riordans*. But what's this? Oweney is courting Maeve with red wine and bruschetta, and her boutique — a 1970s term, surely — features stripped walls, original art work, and a designer coffee shop.

This play had a long gestation, which could explain the ambiguity about time. But in the naturalistic tradition, universality seems best achieved through specificity of locale and period. The more concrete the details, the more invisible and easily transcended they become. By floating the action in a limbo between past and present, Roche has fatally undermined it. What remains is essentially a gentle entertainment, a soap opera, staged in short episodes, with some sparkling dialogue, and wistful moments. Even the final parting of the lovers is poignant rather than moving; neither of them seems too perturbed and we realise that nothing is really going to disturb this world.

Helen Meany is an Irish Times arts journalist.

OUR TOWN by Thornton Wilder

Island Theatre Company

On tour; reviewed on 7 November 2001
at the Belltable Arts Centre, Limerick

BY MARY COLL

THORNTON WILDER'S PULITZER PRIZE-winning play, first produced in 1938, is considered one of the great classics of American theatre. However, not all classics travel well beyond the particular era where they have relevance. This one in particular suffers from more than a little jetlag. Depicting the everyday lives of ordinary men and women who form the fabric of a small town in rural America at

the turn of the 19th century, its innocence and simplicity are perhaps the most striking features for today's audience — these and the scale of production that the script requires. The large cast size means that *Our Town* is not an obvious choice for a contemporary professional company; Island Theatre Company confronted this problem here by combining a professional cast with less experienced actors and members of the local community — the total cast numbered 28. This could have led to a series of disjointed and uneven performances, but one of the strengths of Terry Devlin's production is its continuity and credibility, and in particular the subtle and effective use of younger actors whose presence on stage throughout was perfectly understated.

Island's *Our Town*, warmly narrated by Jim Queally in a cameo character study of a genial old Stage Manager, takes some liberties with Wilder's original format in terms of stage direction and structure, but these do work well to progress the action. The setting is bare and deliberately underdesigned by Dolores Lyne, relying on mime and the imagination of the audience to fill in the spaces and places of a small town. This is a pragmatic, effective device sustained with competence by the cast, though one where any deviations become particularly jarring — especially when phantom horses are occasionally led through the gable walls of houses, or doors and furniture are conjured up in what was previously the middle of Main Street. Gerry Meagher's lighting is crisp and atmospheric, and the costume design by Jacquie Fitzpatrick captures the colour and texture of the period.

The drama of the play centres on the developing love of George Gibbs (Liam O'Brien) and Emily Webb (Anna Olson),

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sweethearts who live on opposite sides of the street, attend the same school, and marry straight after graduation. It is a saccharine-sweet story, saved from being utterly cloying by the strong and assured performances of both actors, who capture the innocence of the lovers while adding a dimension of individuality and humour. They are well supported by the finely observed performances of Gary Hetzler, Helena Enright, Gene Rooney, and Cormac Costello as the two sets of adoring parents, and by the ensemble cast.

Wilder's play moves back and forth through the lives of people who seem to exist in a single dimension, and whose world is presented devoid of the contrasts and conflicts that we understand as parts of the full depth and breadth of living. It offers moments for individual performers

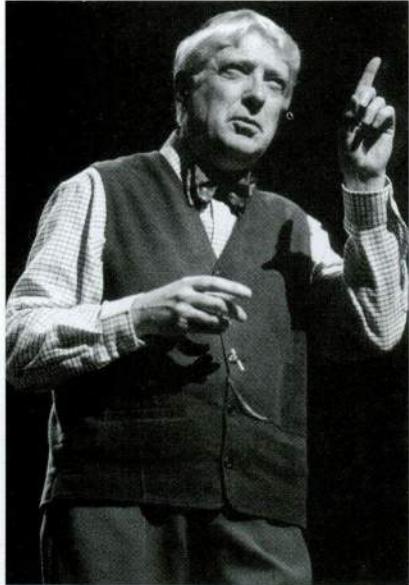
to briefly sketch a sense of themselves, and to capture the attention of the audience. This is achieved repeatedly here with skill and assurance, but it still leaves us wondering if this could possibly be all there is to say about life in a small American town — this rather bland and inoffensive journey from birth to death. The play's soft-focus vision of the world is alien to our own, and contemporary audience resistance is inevitable. Whether making the effort to overcome it is worth the effort is the question that hangs over the work and remains unresolved by Devlin's production.

A PRIME LOCATION

Galloglass Theatre Company

On tour; reviewed at the Civic Theatre,
Tallaght, on 15 November 2001

BY SARA KEATING



FOLKSY: Jim Quearly in *Our Town*

THE DEVICE OF META-THEATRE BREAKS the theatrical illusion: it reminds the audience that what is on stage is an artificial creation. Shakespeare was a master of this, as in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or *The Taming of the Shrew*, where the play-within-the-play construct prods us into an awareness of our role as spectators. He also engaged the more subtle device of self-conscious allusion, pointing up the similarity between human life and the life on the stage.

But when the theatrical illusion is itself shakily created and self-conscious allusion is used self-deprecatingly, meta-theatre becomes a dangerous device: it invites the audience to join in the satirisation and pre-empts our judgement. This is certainly the case with Austrian writer Johann Nestroy's short play *Previous Relations* as performed by Galloglass: when the characters make tiresome comments about the sometimes pointless

nature of theatre, we cannot help but agree. *Previous Relations* was part of a potentially interesting theatrical project — to chart the changing fortunes of a Georgian house through the presentation of three short plays — but from the outset *A Prime Location* struggled to hold our attention. The plays, as chosen by director Theresia Guschelbauer, jarred cacophonously with each other and failed to provide us with any sense of a unified theatrical event.

Previous Relations was written in 1862 in the melodramatic style popular at the time, but it was presented here without the energy necessary to sustain melodramatic effect. The plot adheres to formula: several cases of mistaken identity and social faux-pas build up to a predictable denouement and inevitable promises of happy ever after. The actors' exaggerated performance style and stilted poses, however, did not mesh with the play's more realistic elements. One assumes the play was chosen for its historic and cross-cultural interest and potential contemporary relevance, but it came across as dated, staid naturalism whereas a more surreal, self-deprecating approach could have exploited the piece's potential humour.

The juxtaposition of *Previous Relations* with Sean O'Casey's *Bedtime Stories*, while claiming unity of setting and similarity of theme, just didn't work. While O'Casey's fame is founded on its epic tragi-comedies, he also wrote a number of one-acts, including this brilliant, tightly constructed farce. The plot, again, adheres to the formula of farce (surreptitious bedtime shenanigans, mistaken identities and social misdemeanours...) but there is an inescapable Irishness about the play, which jars with the foreignness of *Previous Relations*. Even the setting here appears



PERIOD PIECE: *A Prime Location*

wrong: the house maintains too much Georgian grandeur for the characters, all obviously struggling to rise out of the Dublin tenement culture, to really ring true. The characters, however, are fully realised both in text and performance and are easily identifiable as O'Casey creations. The prostitute Angela, played with gusto by Anne-Marie MacAuley, is strikingly reminiscent of Bessie Burgess; while a convincingly irritating Ciaran Taylor plays Mulligan, the whining social ingrate, who could easily be a young Captain Boyle. It was easier to relate to this play than Nestroy's — doubtless because the culture presented is familiar — but the

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final scene, manipulated with silhouette and carnival music reminiscent of early silent cinema, drags the characters from real life in to cartoon. This defeats the naturalistic sway of the earlier scenes and the comedy peters out to the detriment of the hard work that went before it.

Kalahari Blues by Miriam Gallagher, a purpose-written and ultimately purpose-less sketch that masquerades as a one-act play, provided a "coda" to the evening. Set in the present day, it is the story of two struggling artists who take up residence in an old Georgian house that is a haven of possibility, where "anything you desire" is readily (or rather virtually) available via the intervention of a team of internet entrepreneurs who propose to make millions for themselves and the struggling artists by exploiting their imaginations for the benefits of a worldwide audience. The play revolves around one word — "virtual" — and the over-exploitation of the word's double-meaning destroys the significance any turn in the actual (and very loosely structured) plot could take. Although it is an attempt to expose the voyeuristic tendencies of modern life, Gallagher's play has nothing new to show us, and while the set is appropriately de-glamorised by designer Anna Fleischle for a more modern effect, none of the dialogue or action rings true. The characters are never elevated beyond the stereotypes they embody: the pensive and frustrated writer, the affected artiste, the ruthless web-designer and her ultracamp sidekick are all forgettable clichés.

The actors obviously struggled in a half-empty theatre to invest the energy that was needed to make this trilogy work. But there was a strong sense that they were undercommitted to the material: whole passages were thrown out like punch lines, but without the verve. Gallo-

glass had what sounded like an ingenious and defensible idea in *A Prime Location*; but poorly chosen texts and a lack of sure direction saw it all go terribly wrong.

Sara Keating is a Dublin-based writer and arts administrator.

QUEST 2: THE GOOD PEOPLE TRY HARDER by Karen Louise Hebdon, based on the fairytales of W.B. Yeats
The Pavilion Theatre, Dun Laoghaire
19 December 2001 — 19 January 2002;
reviewed 19 Jan. BY SUSAN CONLEY

FUNNY THING ABOUT SEQUELS — IT IS only the rare few that actually live up to the creativity and flair of the original. Last year's *The Quest for the Good People* was a monsoon of fresh air in a children's holiday entertainment scene that is traditionally clogged with pantos starring talking socks and ageing divas. The highly professional quality of all aspects of *The Quest* spoke of a respect for the nascent aesthetic sense of its young audience, without flaunting its sophistication in an alienating fashion. While this year's show can boast many of the same strengths, and even raised the bar that bit higher, there were several disappointments that indicated that the concept may have run its course.

Fairytales, before Disney & Co. got their hands on them, were dark, frightening, cautionary stories, ethical fables designed to entertain and scare the dickens out of children whose natural robustness and curiosity made them prime candidates for unmanageable behaviour. The stories, while often magical and fanciful, involving divine intervention and talking animals, were mini-morality tales in which goodness was rewarded and badness punished. Yeats' tales are no exception, and rely heavily on the Irish mythol-

ogy of the Good People — the fairy folk — who are fearfully respected by mere mortals terrified of their wrath and their power to make human lives a trial at best, a living hell at worst.

Hell is the jumping-off point for *Quest 2*: the fairies are fallen angels who fell along with Lucifer (Liz Schwartz); the fairies' hesitation in choosing God as their sovereign caused them to be stripped of their wings, cast down to earth, and charged with the task of doing three good deeds if they wanted to be welcomed back into heaven before the Christmas. The Good People's mischievous natures are meant to be an insurmountable barrier to their ability to make the deadline. As they are better known for spiriting off living children and replacing them with changelings, or for luring greedy adults into danger with the promise of fortune, the chances that they would be able for the task of the three good deeds seem slim indeed.

This is, of course, the conflict central to director Karen Louise Hebden and composer Stephen Edwards' creation, and in *Quest 1*, the good people had a significantly harder time fighting their naughty natures, and were just as likely to sabotage their own good works out of a desire for mischief that ran counter to their desire to get back into God's good graces. In *Quest 2*, the wide-ranging assortment of troublemakers — a greací, a merrow, a puca, the Ban-Sí, and the Fir Darrig — are overwhelmed by the Devil's

badness; their own troublemaking powers take a backseat to Beelzebub's. The fact that Lucifer plays next to no role in the first act, though, is a dramaturgical disaster, and seems to signify that the effort that went into devising this sequel stretched the material to its breaking point: by introducing a non-fairy lead character, one is led to assume that Yeats' oeuvre hadn't much left to yield. By the time the second act begins, we've become accustomed to the problem/magical solution rhythm of the piece and as the very, very long story of the Colleen Baun (played by the inappropriately blonde Poppy Tierney) takes centre stage, it's gotten far too predictable for its own good. Not even Steven Blount's lighthearted and enjoyable way with the young audience could lift the increasingly turgid proceedings.

But there was quite a lot of good going on. The lushness of Neil Irish's set was breathtaking: great branches twisted and



HOT STUFF: Liz Schwartz as Lucifer in *Quest 2*

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turned overheard, entwined with fairy lights and big pink flowers; gnarled tree roots leading the way up the stairway to heaven; ramps and trapdoors allowing for a variety of physical elements that movement director Caimin Collins did well to wrest out of the wordy text. Add to that healthy doses of smoke, handfuls of glitter, a great wash of soap bubbles, and a chess board that glowed in the dark, and it added up to as beautiful a storybook setting as could be desired. Edwards' score revived last year's theme tune "If only we could be good" and it is a lovely piece of music indeed — unfortunately, in many cases it felt like new lyrics had been created that didn't suit the existing tune.

A sequel seems to declare that "You can't get too much of a good thing." But you can. In this case, this particularly applies to the show's running time: at two and a half hours, it is far too much to ask from a roomful of young ones, especially when they are not being encouraged to make the kind of noise that panto demands of its audience. The richness of the imagination and invention of this production was somewhat lessened by its need to keep piling it on; when in truth, there was more than enough artistic and dramatic activity to have kept the audience happy for half the time.

THE RITE OF SPRING choreographed by David Bolger

CoisCéim Dance Theatre
On tour; reviewed 24 January 2002
at Project, Dublin BY JOOLS GILSON-ELLIS

ELEVEN DANCERS IN AN IRISH CONTEMPORARY dance production is almost as extraordinary as the music (and ballet) that one caused riots. David Bolger's *Rite of Spring* for CoisCéim flung the

sheer exuberant intensity of Stravinsky's score out into the cultural air of Dublin (and beyond). His version has a cheekiness we've come to expect from Bolger, but in the end it seemed to me to compromise the original, even as the dancing delighted: I loved it, but it didn't work.

Bolger's dancers strut the stage with machismo and a cornucopia of femininities. Stravinsky's wrenching harmonics seem to force the sudden synchronicity of all the dancers. This is thrilling. Here Bolger's choreography has a rhythmic angularity, elbows thrusting skywards. The work is best at these times when the dancing meets the violence of the music head-on. Bolger's re-working of the original narrative of *The Rite of Spring* updates and domesticates it. The male lead is ironing his shirt at the opening, puncturing the epic from the outset. The choreography, whilst thrilling in its percussive following of the Stravinsky score, veers much more towards *West Side Story* than Dionysiac abandon. The humour is infectious, as gals and lads prepare for a night on the town. This is vintage Bolger — blokes being blokey, knocking back the drink, girls faffing over frocks.

While this is delicious, it only meets the Stravinsky with a side-glance. The heft and weight of this great score is too much for frivolity. There is great fear in this music. Bolger's interpretation is brilliantly irreverent, but it has trouble melding such naughty tactics with the unmitigated violence of the sound. The male dancers sometimes give yobbishness a threatening edge in their stomping approaches, retreats, and tussles. The female dancers, cast as they were as ingenues, were less believable in their aggression. The work needs an uncompromising intensity. When the girls in

their blonde waist-length wigs gang up on the female lead (Mariam Ribón), it would all have been a lot more chilling if this violence were sacrificial. I didn't believe them. When Pina Bausch began to make her *Rite of Spring*, she asked her dancers, "How would it be to dance knowing you have to die?" Such a question is unasked in Bolger's version, because the Chosen One is sacrificed not to the God of Spring, but to domestic toil. The final image of the female lead ironing a man's shirt undoes the Rite of its Slavonic ritual and seals it instead in suburbia. I understand the image is supposed to parallel the sacrifice of a virgin to the God of Spring, with the sacrifice of girlish pleasure to domestic toil — but the joke just doesn't have any mileage. It's cute, but that's it. The work needed more emotional depth.

This was particularly true of Ribón, who is a beautiful dancer, but doesn't have the emotional range to compel an audience to believe in her passion or her despair. In contrast to this are extraordinary images of the male lead, Benjamin Dunks, suspended from his belly in mid-space. The ache of pieta that this gives us suggests that he rather than she is for sacrifice. This body arches painfully backwards, like the best of hysterics, or (seeing as this is a man) Christ. Such moments capture a different intent than Bolger's habitual one — they suggest a darker foray into consciousness than

VINTAGE BOLGER: CoisCéim's *Rite of Spring*



this Rite allows.

Paul Keogan's set design is a vast bronze cell — walls of metal hemming in hysteria. At the outset these 20-foot walls reflect moving bodies — scarlets and flesh, but by the end they are smeared with body marks and sweat. Keogan lights it with sensitivity and violence. Joan O'Clergy's costume design is a visual delight. We meet female creatures first with their manes atop them, tossing hair into the music. Later they parade onto the stage like art nouveau lamps, with little black bobs. At another, they vamp it around their men in scarlet and heels. Gorgeous as this is, I did start to feel that given a choice I'd prefer more welly than wigs.

Perhaps marketing this production as radical is pushing it, but it was a pleasure to see nonetheless. Visually fabulous, critically dodgy, it's a cheerful Spring for Irish contemporary dance, to have a work

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amongst us that has such sheer ambition and sass.

Jools Gilson-Ellis is one of the directors of halfangel and lectures in performance at UCC.

the shape of things by Neil LaBute

The Gate Theatre, Dublin

5 – 23 February 2002; reviewed

9 February BY PETER CRAWLEY

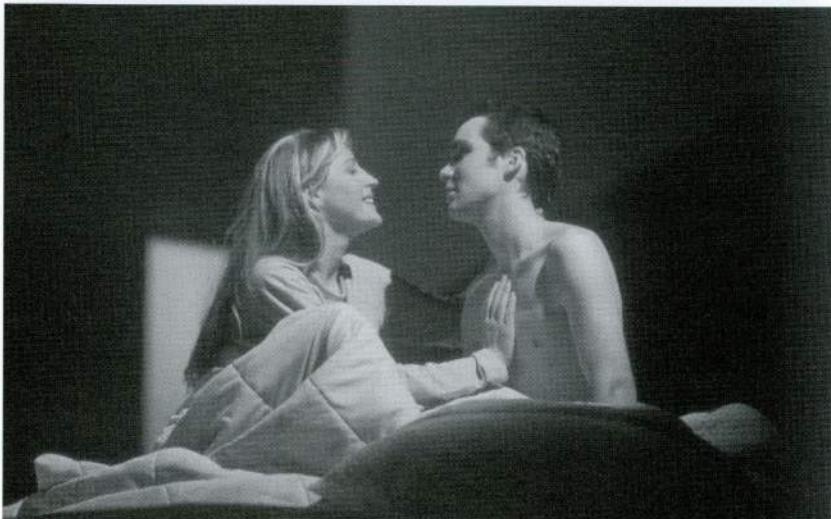
"ART, LIKE MORALITY," SAID G.K. Chesterton, "consists in drawing the line somewhere." Neil LaBute's referential new play begins with someone literally crossing that line in order to deface the crotch of a statue. Evelyn, the transgressor in question, may symbolise the artistic reappraisal LaBute is aiming for, but like his play, her attentions aren't aimed high enough. Spray-painting a phallus over the plaster leaves of a retrofitted cover-up, she gets no closer to the meat of the matter. Similarly attractive and provocative, LaBute's play may decry superficiality, but it rarely delves beneath the surface.

Cillian Murphy as the shy, doughy Adam intercepts Flora Montgomery's Evelyn in her art attack. Soon enough the two students are involved in a relationship which borrows equally from *Pygmalion* and *Fatal Attraction*. Under Evelyn's dangerous (read: sexy) influence Adam keenly changes his bad habits and slothful behaviour, falling in line with the *Cosmo* magazine-sanctioned definition of a man. Off fall the pounds, in go the contact lenses, out come our suspicions. Meanwhile his best buddy Phillip and Phillip's fiancée Jenny also notice Adam's transformation. Vincent Walsh as the snorting sceptic isn't too impressed. Elizabeth Dermot Walsh, the near-miss love of Adam's life, thoroughly approves.

Now LaBute isn't renowned for light entertainment, so it doesn't require much intellectual athleticism to figure that not all what it seems. But to aid the less interrogative, and perhaps for the benefit of latecomers, the script is peppered with textual allusions — *Pygmalion*, *Frankenstein*, *Metamorphosis*, take your pick. Once the script has cajoled you into understanding, it makes a lengthy explanatory scene drag all the more. The play isn't so helpful, however, for those who must produce it. Pointed time lapses and constant scene and costume changes don't make things easy for Michael Caven's production nor his four actors, but together they make a virtue out of necessity.

Designer Joe Vanek exploits the modern art theme to construct a malleable set of polar white boxes, positioned by lab-coated stagehands to conjure up the shape of things — living rooms, cafés, and lecture theatres. These lengthy transitions are covered by a booming hip-hop soundtrack while further diversions arrive in the form of projected glimpses of high art icons flitting across the walls in a pop cultural pastiche. These image blips and sample-based music tracks complement the play's themes intelligently, incorporating existing material to make something new. It's like spray-painting a statue or carving a sculpture out of flesh. If you're not prepared to get down in your seat to Caven's selection of phat tunes, however (and on the night of viewing, apparently only one of us was), then the blurring of high art and pop culture isn't gripping enough to distract from a stumbling pace.

The performances rarely falter though. Elizabeth Dermot Walsh makes an endearingly ditzy young conservative, rushing into an unwise marriage, intimidated by



anti-capitalist theatre: *the shape of things*

posturing intellectuals, but touchingly secure in her decency. Vincent Walsh keeps close to caricature, grunting "yeah"s through his jockisms, yet he still makes his character seem more human than LaBute's writing would have allowed. If Flora Montgomery is saddled with a character close to her previous screen persona Trudy (another sexy, dangerous character encouraging a mild mannered no-hoper to change his spots), she plays fast and loose with Evelyn's identity, making a mature postgrad behave like a free-spirited teenager. (There's a reason, we find out.) Cillian Murphy simply shines. Long after Evelyn has been thoroughly discredited as a real person worthy of empathy, Murphy's Adam must hold our sympathies, and that he just about does it is a feat. That he delivers the humour of his lines with laser-guided precision in the guise of someone hardly trying is modestly mag-

nificent. His physical transition from portly security guard to Tommy Hilfiger model is also nicely handled.

A little more cumbersome are the references peppered throughout the script. A reoccurring joke involves Adam quoting from Dickens, Wilde and Kafka — never to be understood. Conversely the Adam and Eve myth, which underpins Evelyn's temptations (her initials spell "eat") and Adam's fall, is hardly subtle. Together with Evelyn's ultimate vilification, the creationist fairytale allusions do little to challenge LaBute's reputation for misogyny.

For the main part, *the shape of things* is an entertaining piece, intelligently directed and nicely portrayed. Once LaBute's agenda has been comprehended, however, the play doesn't follow through on the punch it tries to deliver. It's sad that the theatre so often seems uneasy when it

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attempts to comment on pop culture. Finishing with a videotaped moment that circumvents the authority of writer and director, at least *the shape of things* implicates itself in the manipulation of contemporary art.

THE STAR CHILD AND OTHER STORIES

adapted from Oscar Wilde stories by
Mary Elizabeth Burke-Kennedy

Storytellers Theatre Company
On tour; reviewed 4 January at Draíocht,
Blanchardstown **BY BELINDA KELLY**

ONCE UPON A TIME STORYTELLERS Theatre Company courageously decided to stage three tales adapted from Oscar Wilde's collections of stories: "The Starchild," "The Happy Prince," and "The Selfish Giant." These stories are seminal in Wilde's career: they were his earliest work and their emergence in 1889 instigated six years of phenomenal productivity. Independently, they are evocative treasures, and all share the sophisticated conviction that a youthful imagination is perfectly tuned to access the realm of magic realism. The good news is that the Oscar Wilde Centre at Trinity College originally commissioned the adaptation of these stories. The bad news we can get to later.

The cast of seven remained on stage throughout Bairbre Ni Chaoimh's production. They had access to an array of hand puppets cleverly placed about the set. The puppets are designed to portray the animals that feature in the original tales. However, in Mary Elizabeth Burke-Kennedy's adaptation there is no omniscient narrator to illuminate the dense narrative structure. Instead, the actors use only the hand puppets and their voices to relate the tales. As the show lasted almost 90 minutes without



HORNY: The Star Child and Other Stories

an interval, this structure became increasingly laboured and repetitive, and the expositions proved unnecessarily long. The plots lacked cohesion and focus. That's the bad news. For the sake of balance, however, it must be stated that while grateful parents took sneaky catnaps, the children present were captivated for the duration of the show. It was a pleasure to see a young audience being so attentive to the elemental art of storytelling.

All the tales examine love in its myriad of forms. "The Starchild" is the story of a foundling who is discovered by a poor woodcutter. The parable looks at issues of equality, justice, and compas-

sion. The cast moved effortlessly from choreographed movement (by Muirne Bloomer) to physical theatre. Brendan McDonald gave a refreshingly brave performance as the starchild. He took the imaginative leap that these parables required and his instinct paid him handsomely. Sarah-Jane Drummeay played a beautifully vivid child. "The Happy Prince" concerns social justice and humanity. This adaptation was at times overtly didactic and needed more pace, but its choreography and movement were beautifully pitched. "The Selfish Giant" featured clever puppetry by John McCormick and fine ensemble acting from the cast. This adaptation most suited the narrative device in which all the animals gathered to discuss the outcome. In the audience, children started to chat about angels and death.

The Starchild and Other Stories featured a hat trick of design talent. It was a welcome sight to see serious imagination on show in the form of sound, lighting, set, and puppet design. Trevor Knight designed the sounds that cleverly moved the tales from dungeon to forest. The inventive lighting by Paul O'Neill was instrumental in enabling the audience to enter the play's many worlds. It's just a pity there were relatively few sound and lighting effects used. Clodagh McCormick designed the exquisite and highly unusual shadow puppet show. The set by Chisato Yoshimi was designed as an abstract and immense forest with the puppets hanging from two silver trees. A backdrop of black and white swirling images brought a perspective of depth that enhanced the animals' isolation. Yoshimi clearly has a bold understanding of colour and texture and her innovative design was the highlight of this production.

STRIKING DISTANCE

by Raymond Scannell

Graffiti Theatre Company

On tour; reviewed at Firkin Crane, Cork,
on 2 November 2001 BY TOM CREED

IT IS PÉRHAPS INEVITABLE THAT A REVIEW of a new play about troubled young people in Cork will reference Enda Walsh's *Disco Pigs*, the play which put a vibrant young Cork theatre on the map. Graffiti Theatre Company's latest production for second-level students reminded me strongly of having seen *Disco Pigs* a number of years ago with my fellow sixth-year students. This was something very different to the endless stream of "schools productions" of Shakespeare and O'Casey: this was relevant, this was entertaining, this was exciting. Classmates who never gave drama a second thought were clearly astounded: here was theatre that didn't patronise, that spoke to them as equals, that was more than just a study aid.

The world of *Striking Distance*, Raymond Scannell's second play, is one of endless hours spent in video arcades, of constant pressure at school and at home, of hiding one's emotions, of frustration and rage. Emelie FitzGibbon's high-energy production deals with issues of bullying and anger with a sensitive touch, but packs a final punch that is as uncompromising as it is thought-provoking.

Fergal and his mother have moved from the city to a coastal town to escape a violent past. Fergal meets a local girl, Aoife, who offers to show him around in an attempt to find out who he is and why he has moved there. Barry, Aoife's boyfriend, is none too happy about this stranger spending time with his girl, and sets out to make Fergal's life a misery.

The title refers both to Fergal's attempts to harness his anger and not lash out, and

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to Strikes' Drop, the cliff-top location where crucial moments of the play take place. There, Fergal is drawn into Barry's game of "Strikes," in which the boys drop sticks and other missiles from the cliff in an attempt to hit passing cars. When Barry causes a car crash on the road below, Fergal is forced into secrecy and threatened with increasing doses of punishment and humiliation unless he keeps his mouth shut. Meanwhile, Aoife compounds his misery by playing him off against Barry, making both boys jealous and leading to Fergal's final explosion of violence and frustration.

Scannell dramatises Fergal's inner turmoil through the graphic novels which he reads constantly. The naturalism of the "real-life" scenes is intercut with lyrical, alliterative, and dynamic narration from the three actors, who relate the adventures of the hero "Feral," an alien from the planet Urbanon, newly arrived on a strange and unforgiving planet. Feral meets and begins to fall for the ambassador Evo (Aoife), but is faced with an enemy in the smelly and evil troglodyte (Barry) who is going out with her. The narration becomes harsher and sparser, until "Feral's rage" is echoing so loudly in Fergal's head that violence is the only outlet.

The play distinguishes and dramatises specifically male and female types of bullying, with Barry's physical humiliations and Aoife's mind-games combining to drive Fergal/Feral to despair. The three actors give committed, sweat-



HANGING ON: Striking Distance

soaked performances, with Anne Fitzpatrick and Scannell himself bringing charisma and humanity to the roles of Aoife and Barry, while Simon Delany's towering central performance as Fergal avoids the clichés of victimhood and reaches heights of emotion and honesty which, at the play's frantic and heart-breaking climax, truly leaves the audience breathless. Though the language seems excessively florid at times, Scannell's writing is in general remarkably spare and mature. The character of Fergal is particularly well developed, to the extent that we sympathise with him though his actions are extreme.

The set, by Olan Wrynn, loops in a figure-of-eight around and behind the audience — and Strikes' Drop, stripped down to a steel climbing-frame, is the setting for a truly nail-biting fight scene. Cormac O'Connor's sound design resounds with fog-horns and video-game sounds, and parents, teachers and

other students appear only in voice-over, harassing Fergal and isolating him from the world, a world from which, for him, there can be only one release.

School groups are given a post-performance workshop in which they discuss issues raised by the play with the actors and company members. Seeing the production at a public showing with no workshop, we leave the theatre with only the final heartbreakingly image burnt onto our minds: as Fergal stands on the cliff-top to leap to his death, the pages of a graphic novel thrown into the air rain down on us and the theatre resounds with a final cry of freedom.

Tom Creed is a Cork-based freelance director currently working with Corcadorca and Meridian.

TWELVE ANGRY MEN by Reginald Rose

Lane Productions

Andrews Lane Theatre

30 October 2001 - 2 February 2002;
reviewed 25 Nov. BY SARA KEATING

THE ADVENT OF CINEMA AND THE subsequent Los-Angelesisation of the world has necessarily provoked a re-evaluation of the role of theatre as entertainment and theatre as art. Audience figures, constant technological development, and the integration of "art cinema" into the mainstream would suggest that cinema wins out on both counts. It is always interesting, however, to see what happens when the two forms are intermeshed or when film is translated into theatre or vice versa; and it is reassuring to see that the production of Reginald Rose's *Twelve Angry Men* at the Andrews Lane Theatre surpasses the Sidney Lumet screen treatment.

Twelve Angry Men started its life on screen: it was originally written as a TV

drama in 1957, and reworked as a highly successful film staring Henry Fonda in 1962. Rose translated the story into a stage play in 1963 — but to what purpose and further effect? What was the point in translating media unless something new and original was going to transpire? Terry Byrne's current production offers an exciting answer: the tension in the film becomes immediate and palpable, and we are invited to participate with the jurors in the moral debate and exposure of the justice system that is the basis of the story.

The tight plot involves 12 jurors deliberating on the guilt or innocence of a youth accused of murdering his father. The evidence weighs against the accused, but one dissenter — an obvious symbol of democracy — prompts a crisis of conscience among the other jurors and raises questions about the American judicial system that are still relevant today. In the film the characters' stances are set up immediately through the use of close-up, which directs us towards various perspectives as the film actors speak to the camera in something like a confessional. In the theatre, however, we are all individual film directors, concentrating on the characters we identify with and adapting our perspectives as the jurors do.

Twelve Angry Men is about the awakening of each character's conscience, and also our own: it is a wake-up call to the way that we often let personal prejudices colour our view of the world. While in the cinema the camera directs our attention, in theatre we have the freedom of focus and are rewarded for our attention by having a range of ideas opened up to us. We are allowed to make up our own minds which way our vote would fall.

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The visual exploration of the film is replaced by a verbal exposition that is clearer, and produces a greater climactic effect. In theatre the action becomes part of our here-and-now and this immediacy makes the jurors' judgement paramount: while in the film we are aware of the outside world, in the theatre the world outside is merely "offstage," a

moral vacuum. As a result, the jury room becomes more claustrophobic, and while in the film time can be broken without dispelling the tension, in the theatre the clock that ticks for the men in the jury room also ticks for us.

The film's scenic shifts are cleverly recalled in Joe Killick's vaguely cinematic lighting and Katherine Sankey's simply constructed set. The subtle lighting is used to further effect by evoking an atmosphere that embraces the audience, particularly during the onset of a storm where the auditorium darkens, the tension heightens, and it almost feels like the temperature itself has dropped — bringing us further into the moral and physical world of Rose's drama.

Byrne's strong direction exploits all the script's potential humour while remaining true to the important social message of the play; but uneven performances let the overall production down somewhat. *Twelve Angry Men* is an old-fashioned play that relies on verisimilitude, and while it was quite easy to believe that all of these men were angry, it was more difficult to believe that they were all American. Peter Vollebregt and Sean Power pull off their accents with conviction but the wavering accents of Joe Hanly and Hugh McCusker, who both had big roles in the drama, intruded upon our suspension of disbelief. Our inability to fully believe in the characters thus diluted the moral microcosm — but this is a small flaw in an otherwise excellent production. As the jurors exit to give their verdict to the courtroom, we are left questioning our own assumptions and inadequate judgements; the resonance and ambiguity of the ending makes this truly compelling drama.



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