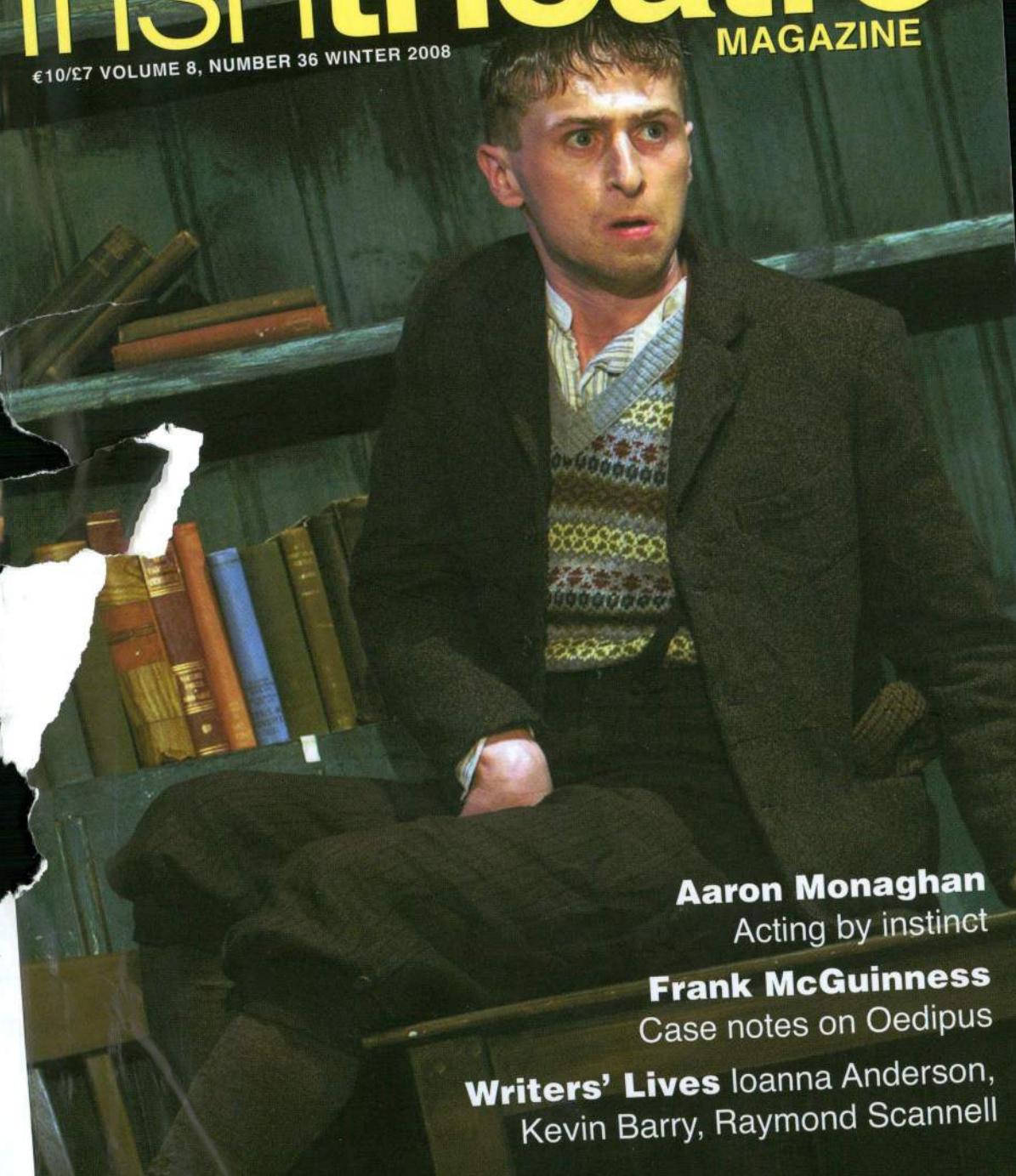


# irishtheatre

MAGAZINE

€10/£7 VOLUME 8, NUMBER 36 WINTER 2008



**Aaron Monaghan**  
Acting by instinct

**Frank McGuinness**  
Case notes on Oedipus

**Writers' Lives** Ioanna Anderson,  
Kevin Barry, Raymond Scannell



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*"A degree of humility is essential if we're to reach the heights we're eager to reach. We need to admit where we're at, not act as if we're there already."*

RAYMOND SCANNELL REFLECTS ON YOUNG ARTISTS' AMBITION: SEE PAGE 46

# irishtheatre

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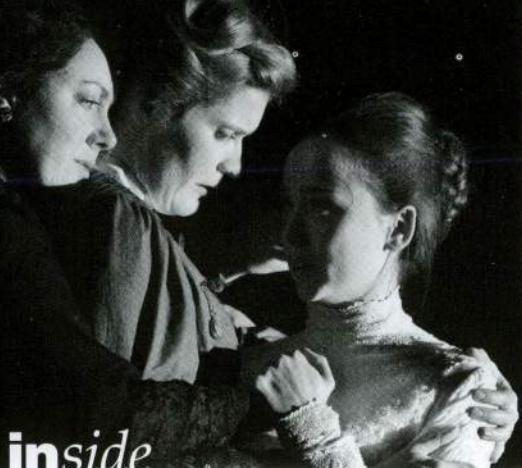
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**irishtheatre**  
MAGAZINE

VOLUME EIGHT,  
NUMBER THIRTY SIX  
WINTER 2008

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# Time to Pool Resources

**I**N EARLY DECEMBER ALL MINDS ARE on finances and funding. Our News section examines the potential impact on the arts of funding cuts, and the attendant anxiety. For those who experienced the last recession, there's a fear of artistic stagnation. But it's important to remember that the cultural landscape is totally different now. We can never return to the dole-subsidised, leaking building ordinance of the 1980s and '90s. Thanks to heavy Government investment and energetic leadership in the arts, the structures for cultural development are in place; it's time to use them imaginatively. Now that we have an abundance of venues and arts centres, including Wexford's Opera House and Dublin's latest arts centre, Rua Red in Tallaght, their programming capacity and management need to be completely re-envisioned, to avoid them becoming wasted resources, serving nei-

We can't return to the leaking building ordinance of the '80s and '90s; the structures are in place, now it's time to use them imaginatively.

ther audiences nor practitioners. The possibility of creating production 'hubs' by pooling administrative resources is often proposed as a way of moving away from the company-based model. Here's an opportunity to use these new venues to make this happen.

At ITM Central we're determined to be cheerful, not least because this issue marks the magazine's tenth birthday. We've celebrated the landmark by pub-

lishing all our reviews online. We're planning to develop the website further, but in the meantime we hope you enjoy the latest reviews on [irishtheatre magazine.ie](http://irishtheatre magazine.ie), updated every fortnight. A selection is published in this issue.

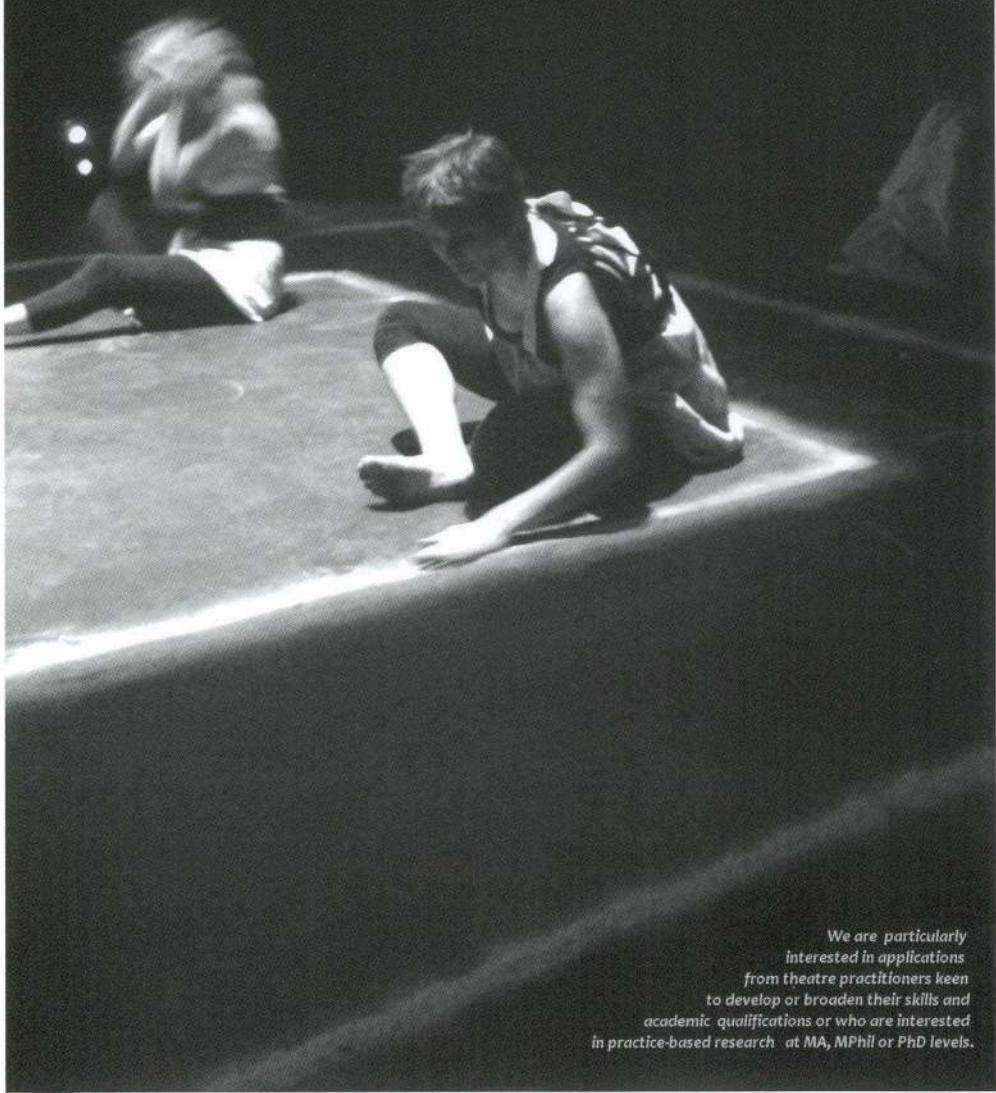
Flowers, compliments and gripes (if you must) may be sent to us, as always, at [admin@irishtheatre magazine. ie](mailto:admin@irishtheatre magazine. ie). Here's to the next decade.



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## **what's news?**

**PETER CRAWLEY** reports on the latest news – on the impact of impending funding cuts and Dublin's newest arts centre.

# Filling the Empty Chair

**I**T IS, APPARENTLY, A TIME FOR LEADERSHIP. WITH THE Arts Council's grant for 2009 of €75.7 million down 10.5 per cent from 2008's €86 million, deputy chairperson Maurice Foley made bleak forecasts: inevitable cuts, fewer festivals, less theatre, job losses, no Christmas. Such decisions, however, require people to make them. Currently, the Arts Council is functioning without a chairperson or the six members

whose terms expired last August.

Foley and the Arts Council's Director, Mary Cloake, have been managing expectations severely downwards. The announcements of "significant reductions in the levels of funding" and that "conditional commitments will have to be reviewed" are likely to chill RFO clients, and even The Abbey, to the marrow. Statements have resembled asking the passengers of a troubled flight to

adopt the emergency position, while being nervously aware that the cockpit is still missing its captain.

According to one arts executive, the Arts Council's focus on parsing the extent of its budget cuts ignores larger issues: "like having proper bases for artists. Finding better uses for the venues that are there. In times of crisis you need leadership. To not even appoint a leader is an issue."

That appointment is the job of Min-

ister Martin Cullen. In August, when chairperson Olive Braiden and six other council members concluded their five-year terms, no new appointments were made. Instead, the Department asked departing council members to stay on for an interim period, retaining their positions until October 1st. With crucial grant decisions to be made before Christmas, and still no new appointments announced as *ITM* went to press,



BILL CULLEN

rum put it, "I think we just want to know how bad it's going to be. People are eager to hear news, even if it is bad news."

There has been some comment that any position on the Arts Council must now resemble a poisoned chalice. Yet each time the Council is due to be replenished there is intense lobbying for positions. With appointments now several months overdue, frustration at the Council

**WITH CRUCIAL GRANT DECISIONS TO BE MADE BEFORE CHRISTMAS,  
AND THE DELAY IN APPOINTMENTS, FEARS ABOUND AS TO WHETHER  
THE DEPLETED COUNCIL CAN HANDLE SO MUCH RESPONSIBILITY  
AND THEIR DECISIONS CAN EARN THE CONFIDENCE OF THE SECTOR.**

fears abound as to whether the currently depleted council can handle so much responsibility and their decisions earn the confidence of the sector.

The five remaining members of the board are sufficient to provide a quorum for the Council, under the deputy chair. But while the Arts Council learned of its budget earlier than usual this year, it is understood that the existing Council had not addressed itself to making funding decisions. As Tania Banotti of Theatre Fo-

and among its clients is turning into anxiety.

Once, the name Bill Cullen – self-made millionaire, car-dealer, fundraiser and most recently the face of the Irish version of *The Apprentice* – for the new chair seemed like feverish speculation. Now, with almost any decision better than indecision, he does not seem such an unlikely proposition. Whoever Minister Cullen points his finger at, he needs to do it quickly. He might add, for the sake of clarity, the phrase, "You're hired."

# Storytelling in Hard Times

Storytellers and Upstate Theatre are already facing the threat of funding cuts.

WITH THE THEATRE SECTOR BRACING itself for the Arts Council's funding decisions for 2009, some companies have already been contending with unfavourable allocations. Last December, when Upstate Theatre Company was informed that its annual grant would be cut by twelve per cent – from €140,000 to €120,000 – it appealed the decision to the Arts Council's impartial appeals board. The appeal was upheld, but the company was later informed by the Arts Council that the cuts would still be enforced. In late May the board of the company issued a forceful statement in which it condemned the Arts Council's position, further suggesting: "that the Arts Council's appeals process is meaningless in real terms".

Storytellers Theatre Company must hope that they are wrong about that. Keeping largely quiet about a much more severe and surprising decision to withdraw funding from it

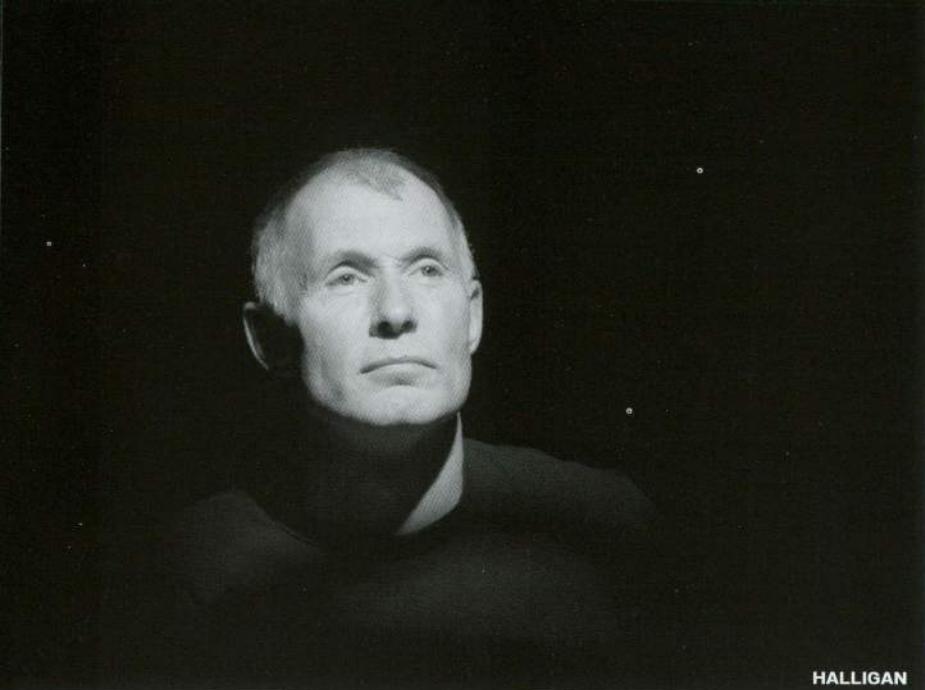
completely, the company – one of seventy-seven on the Arts Council's Regularly Funded Organisation programme – also won its appeal. It is now awaiting the outcome of a new funding application for 2009, a decision unlikely to be made before the appointment of the six vacant positions on the Arts Council. "So we're

in the same position as everybody else, really," says Storytellers chairperson, Mary Elizabeth Burke-Kennedy.

Given the bleak warning from the Arts Council's deputy chair, Maurice Foley, that may be true. On Budget Day in October, Foley stated that "significant grant cuts are unavoidable" and, managing expectations severely downwards for RFO clients, that "conditional commitments will have to be reviewed".

Storytellers' new application for funding is not as an RFO, but as an annually funded client. For most arts organisations, neither programme looks any more – or less – secure than





HALLIGAN

the other. With the company's funding guaranteed for 2008, Storytellers have been able to continue working, producing *A Midsummer Night's Dream* with the Irish Chamber Orchestra and touring student workshops nationally, while arguing their case that due processes had not been observed in summarily removing them from the RFO scheme and that criticisms made of the company's policy and practice were unjustified.

Although it remains to be seen whether funding will be restored, what the company has lost is time, its artistic director Liam Halligan concedes. RFO clients learn their funding allocation for the following year in June, but Storytellers have had to revert to the uncertainty of hearing their decision in December. Given that they have new plays under com-

mission but are unsure if they can produce them, the staggering of momentum will have consequences for the future. "It's put us in a very difficult position," says Halligan. "If we learn what we have in December, we won't be able to produce anything until at least late summer."

For Upstate's part, the company's tone had softened into acceptance following subsequent meetings with representatives of the Arts Council. "Clearly we have acknowledged that for this year's allocation, the door is closed," Declan Gorman told *ITM* in July. "We respect the system; once the Arts Council had exercised its right to stand over its original decision, there is no other mechanism for seeking redress this year. So we've bitten the bullet and accepted it to be the case."

# KEEPING RED IN THE BLACK

"NO, IT'S PROBABLY NOT the best time to be opening a new arts centre," says Karen Phillips, the newly appointed director of Tallaght's Rua Red. "But we're quite confident in the range of facilities we have. And I think arts organisations always thrive in challenging environments." In a reversal of the 1980s recession, where impoverished arts companies functioned with a paucity of infrastructure, the current economic downturn reaches an Ireland with a possible surplus of venues if there are dwindling funds to keep them occupied.

Rua Red, however, which represents a €10 million investment on the part of South Dublin County Council,

was a long time in the making. Encompassing two galleries, a sixty-seat performance space, several workshops, music rooms and a dance rehearsal space, the state-of-the-art new centre replaces Virginia House, the former home of Tallaght Community Arts, which closed seven years ago. While Tallaght Community Arts is to become the new venue's anchor tenant, Phillips is also seeking to involve as many professional artists in the space as possible.

"The aspiration of the centre will be to facilitate community groups coming in to produce work. But the gallery space and performance space will provide an opportunity, not just



for local people, but the wider community to come in and experience professional arts, whether it's on the walls or in the theatre space."

The performance space, with a similar capacity as the Civic Theatre's Loose End studio space next door, hopes to avoid duplicating its neighbour's activities. "It will be much more about small ensembles and spoken word performances," says Phillips. Originally from Scotland, but based for several years in Ireland, Phillips' background is in arts development and she does not underplay the significance of the new undertaking.



SOUTH DUBLIN COUNTY COUNCIL WILL SUPPORT IT, BUT WE ALL KNOW WE'RE GOING INTO A RECESSION. **I'M CONFIDENT THOUGH, THAT PEOPLE WILL COME INTO US.** THE ARTS WORLD WILL CONTINUE WHETHER WE'RE IN A RECESSION OR NOT.

"It's obviously a huge investment by the South Dublin County Council," she says. "They want the project to work." Funded entirely by the SDCC - the Arts Council has been supportive of the centre, but has contributed no funding - Red Rua is not impervious to the effect of an ailing economy. "You can never be 100 per cent guaranteed," says Phillips, although she

points to a healthy level of interest from companies seeking to rent rehearsal space in anticipation of the venue's official opening next February.

"Obviously South Dublin County Council will support it, but we all know we're going into a recession. I'm confident though, that people will come into us. The arts world will continue whether we're in a recession or not."

# Another Academy in Waiting

The latest proposal for actor training is NUI Maynooth's Dramatic Arts Academy

**F**IRST WE HAD THE IRISH ACADEMY of Theatre Arts, the hugely ambitious and now perhaps financially unattainable recommendation made by the Forum on Acting Training in response to the demise of Trinity College's actor-training programme. Then came the National Drama School, the suggested new title for the Gaiety School of Acting, should its long-delayed, DCU-accredited degree-programme ever materialise. Now there is a new player on the suddenly competitive landscape of hypothetical performing arts degrees: the Dramatic Arts Academy.

After more than a year of meetings

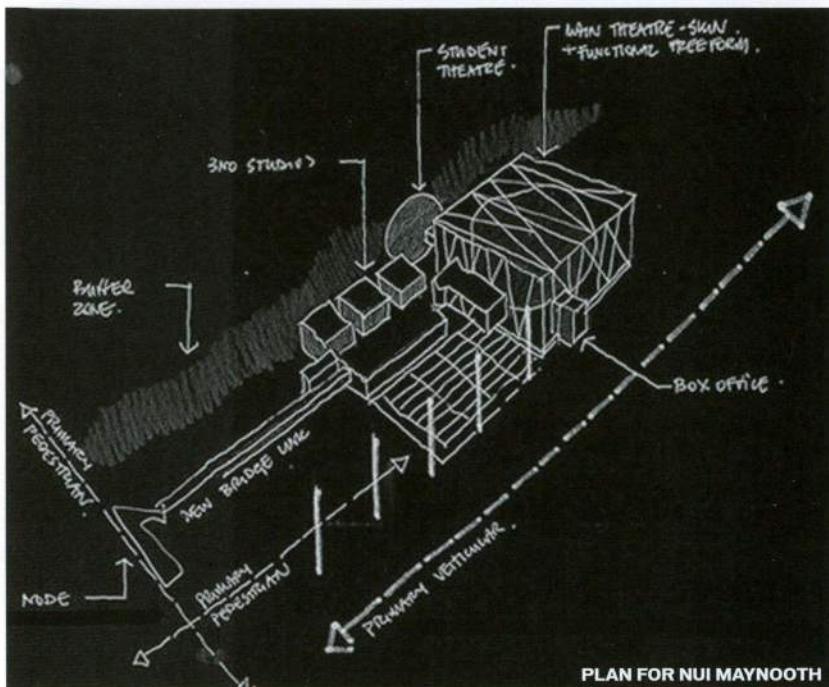
prised by the energy and momentum of The Cathal Ryan Trust, developers and part-funders of the proposed new Dramatic Arts Academy in NUI Maynooth. Announcing plans in July for full undergraduate degree programmes in Acting and Stagecraft, together with Higher Diploma, MA and MFA programmes, the Trust also unveiled plans for a combined drama education centre and 600-seat public theatre.

The Ryan Maynooth Centre, with an estimated cost of €20 million, has been designed by Smith & Kennedy architects, the winners of an architectural competition. Construction is scheduled to begin next year.

WE'RE LOOKING FORWARD TO DISCUSSING OUR PLANS **WITH IRISH THEATRE PROFESSIONALS WHO HAVE A LOT OF EXPERIENCE** AND LEARNING TO OFFER, AND GET THEIR VIEWS ON THE CURRICULUM.

and consultations, the Forum announced a long-term recommendation for the founding of an academy backed by the Department of Arts, Sports and Tourism. Those who followed this lengthy process will have been sur-

Given that the Forum had called for a flagship building and an integrated series of programmes beyond actor training, the new Academy gives the impression of beating them to it. Danielle Ryan, a RADA graduate,



daughter of Cathal Ryan and spokesperson for the Trust, almost said as much. "There's been a lot of recent discussion in the arts world about the creation of an acting Academy, including the recent Forum on Acting Training report," she said. "We're looking forward to discussing our plans with Irish theatre professionals who have a lot of experience and learning to offer, and get their views on the curriculum and facilities."

Despite the early momentum of the bold project, with RADA's Lloyd Trott named as a programme developer and Dermot McCrum appointed CEO of The Drama Academy Development

Company created to steward the project, its thunder has muted in recent weeks. Unable to provide details of their finances in July, McCrum said the company would meet with several "funders, supporters and potential patrons" while also informing Minister Martin Cullen about the project "and our remaining funding requirements".

The Company had aimed to have a clear picture of the project's overall budget and funding sources by early October. When *ITM* sought comment from McCrum's company in November, however, a PR spokesperson said there was no further development to announce, nor projected date for the

institution of the Academy. The Company was also unable to say when they would be in a position to make further announcements. Tom Madden, Head of Theatre Studies at NUI Maynooth, was similarly reluctant to offer any updates on the Academy's development, allowing only that, "a lot of things have to be looked at."

The thorough investigations of the Forum are turning into a seemingly uphill process (its call to establish a similar academy hardly squares with the Department of Arts' current belt-tightening), and the efforts of the Gaiety School of Acting have been financially frustrated (it was unable to secure sufficient subsidy from the HEA this year to implement its degree course). So prospective students are advised not to expect the swift arrival of the Dramatic Arts Academy.

Regardless of the extent of The Cathal Ryan Trust's finances, actor training has never been a low-budget enterprise, and all degree programmes must contend with the financial implications of operating within an academic model. *ITM* has learned that no representatives of the new Academy have yet made a formal submission to the HEA for student subsidy – a process that necessitates an agreement on student numbers and may involve a two-year validation period. The Ryan Maynooth centre might have seemed ready for take off, but its flight now looks delayed.

# BANKING ON THE ARTS

DOES THE CREDIT CRUNCH automatically create another unwanted trend – a sponsorship squeeze? In recent years various arts companies and festivals have benefited from the largesse of banks. In July 2007, when the Dublin Theatre Festival had sought to vastly increase its State subsidy for the fiftieth anniversary, without success, Ulster Bank appeared as the event's title sponsor, contributing €1 million over a three-year contract.

The following month it was announced that Allied Irish Banks would contribute sponsorship of €250,000 to Rough Magic Theatre Company, again over three years, to support various activities, including its SEEDS Programme. Ulster Bank has since lent its support to The Gate's thirty-two county tour of *Waiting For Godot*, and title sponsorship of £1 million (Stg) over three years to the Belfast Festival at Queens, a festival which in recent years has seemed in constant jeopardy.



GATZ (ULSTER BANK DUBLIN THEATRE FESTIVAL 2008)

The current banking crisis, however, has prompted worries of such sponsorship going the way of 110 per cent mortgages, or sinking faster than shares in Lehman Brothers.

Carol McMahon, Ulster Bank's Group Sponsorship and Events Manager, did not sound unduly troubled when *ITM* enquired about the bank's portfolio of arts sponsorship. "From our point of view, next year is the final year of our three-year contract with the Ulster Bank Dublin Theatre Festival. We'll obviously be looking at that the same way we look at every sponsorship, to see how it performs for us. We can't make a decision about [continuing it] at this stage. But it was a very successful year two for us. Their figures are up. And it's ticking all the right boxes for us."

Arts sponsorship is regarded as a "second tier" platform for corporate

contributors, who focus primarily on sports. (Ulster Bank also sponsors GAA and events.) But the arts provide a less crowded area for sponsors, and offer access to a demographic that sports do not traditionally reach, namely younger people and women, according to Ulster Bank's research. "We wanted to make a firm commitment to arts sponsorship," says McMahon, "and own the arts space in that respect."

Ownership isn't exactly what a corporate sponsor gets for its money, but nor is a bank motivated by pure altruism. "We always look at arts sponsorship with a commercial eye in respect of how we can drive it back to the business," says McMahon. Everything must serve as an incentive to open an account, or promote a particular product. "So we have to deliver for the business."

Although McMahon admits that the downturn makes it harder to project future sponsorship engagements, and that the bank is not seeking to extend its roster of favoured arts groups, none of that sponsorship is at risk of repossession. "We see [sponsorship] as essential to the business. It shows a confidence level. In this climate, it portrays the bank as a solid, confident bank. The last thing we'd do is pull out of a contract."

## entrances & exits

IAN R. WALSH tracks the latest backstage movements in Irish theatre.

Bedrock Productions has appointed **COLIN BAIRD** as Producer/Company Manager, replacing **VALERIE MURPHY**. Baird has been a producer of the 2007 Glasgow Merchant City Festival.

Artistic Director **JIMMY FAY** will return to run Bedrock in January, following his one-year sabbatical as Literary Manager of the Abbey Theatre.

**JO EGAN** has stepped down as Creative Producer of Kabosh. **HUGH ODLING-SMEE**, previously Development Manager at the Lyric Theatre, Belfast, has replaced her.

**UNA CARMODY** has joined the Arts Council's staff as Head of Audience Development. Her replacement as CEO of The Helix has not yet been announced.

**MADELINE BOUGHTON** has joined Culture Ireland as Director of Projects and Promotion. She is a former Arts



**ODLING-SMEE**

Manager with the British Council and has worked with a range of leading theatre organisations.

Meridian Theatre Company has appointed **CARMEL O'LEARY** as Development Manager.

**TRISH HAYDEN DRENNAN** has joined Barnstorm Theatre as Company Administrator and PRO. She was previ-



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HAYDEN DRENNAN

ously a member of the production office. She replaces **FRANCES O'CONNOR** who has taken up the position of Assistant Director of Cork Printmakers.

Acadamh na hOllscolaíochta Gaeilge, NUI Galway, has appointed actor and director **DIARMUID DE FAOITE** as its new Performing Arts Executive. He has taught drama at all levels and has worked in professional theatre and television for many years.

**CIARAN MCQUILLAN** has been appointed Outreach Manager for Tinderbox Theatre. He was previously Outreach Manager with Prime Cut Productions and replaces **JOHN McCANN**.

**CLAIRE McEWEN** has stepped down as

Company Manager of Calypso Productions.

**OLIVE BRAIDEN** relinquished her position as Chair of the Arts Council of Ireland after five years in the position. At the time of going to press, a new Chair had yet to be announced.

**LYNN CAHILL** has stepped down as CEO of the Cat Laughs Comedy Festival, Kilkenny. She is to be Arts Manager at Christ Church Cathedral in Waterford City. **SALLY ANNE TYE** has been appointed Director of Public Affairs for the Abbey Theatre. She has twenty years experience of arts marketing, press, fundraising, and education in theatres throughout the UK.



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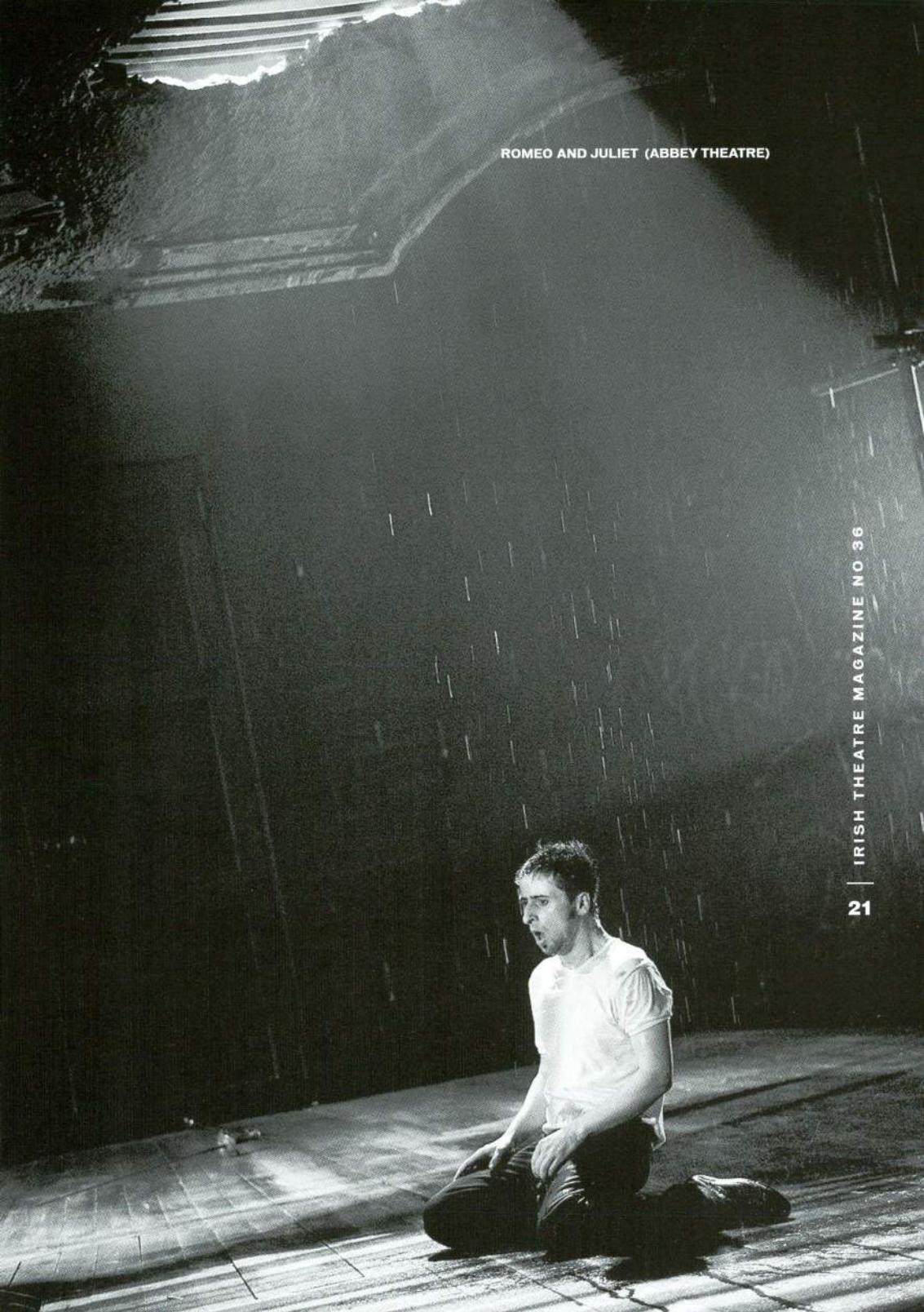


From the Playboy to Romeo and now Martin McDonagh's 'Cripple Billy', **AARON MONAGHAN** brings his distinctive physical expressiveness to every role he plays. But there's no 'method', he tells **SARA KEATING**, 'the play will tell you how to approach it'.

# Playing by Instinct

**I**DON'T REALLY HAVE AMBITION", Aaron Monaghan confesses, in a voice so low I fear my recorder might not pick it up. "I mean, I suppose if you ask me what part I would like to play, I'd have to say Hamlet – that's what you're supposed to say, right? But I don't really think about acting like that, about what I'd like to do next, or where I'd like to be in five years time, or what it all means to me. I just know that I want the next part and that I want to do it well."

The contrast between the slight, shy man who barely fills his seat and the actor who commanded a thousand-strong audience at the Olympia Theatre in Druid's production of *The Cripple of Inishmaan* the week before could not be more striking. That Monaghan admits to no clear career goal is astonishing too, as his remarkable, tortured performance as the eponymous islander in Martin McDonagh's tragi-



ROMEO AND JULIET (ABBEY THEATRE)

comedy surely marks him out as one of the finest actors currently working on the Irish stage. For the twenty-eight year-old actor, entry into the world of acting was an accident, although any other possibility now seems inconceivable.

**All of a sudden, I found that my physicality began to connect with the emotional demands of the work we were doing and it all started to make sense. I found my passion for acting, and realised why I was doing it.**

tor – I was going to be an architect – and anyway I didn't know you *could* be an actor.

"But then in the space of one week my whole life changed. I turned eighteen, got my Leaving Certificate results, and was offered a part in a play by Declan Gorman [of Upstate Theatre Company], who had seen me in some youth drama I'd been involved in. I thought 'okay, I'll put college off for a year, do the play, and then go on to be an architect', but during that year someone handed me a form for the Samuel Beckett Centre in Trinity College, and I got called for the audition. I remember walking up the stairs to the Dance Studio for the call-back and suddenly knowing that this was what I really wanted to do."

Despite being accepted on to the prestigious acting course, Monaghan was still uncertain about his future. The programme was to be the making of him both as an actor and, in many ways, as a person.

"I had a very difficult first year in college," he says. "The class became very close, but I was hovering on the edges. It was very intense, but I was quite shy and quiet. I didn't open up at all, and my work was really suffering because of that. Although I was getting really into the movement and dance elements – and we had a huge amount of physical work in our training – I found I wasn't connecting emotionally with any of the work. I would look around me at the theatre and just see the strings, the mechanics of it. I'd look at other people doing exercises, thinking that the whole thing was a con; that they weren't really doing it, really feeling it at all."

"In fact, I nearly failed my first year, and that summer I had a bit of an emotional meltdown. I found myself changing and I didn't know how to handle it, but when college started again, I knew I had nothing to lose; I thought I was going to get kicked out anyway. But then all of a sudden, I found that my physicality began to connect with the emotional demands of the work we were doing and it all started to make sense. I found my passion for acting, and realised why I was doing it.

"There was a speech and drama class being run locally," Monaghan says. "I was about sixteen and thought it was something I'd like to do. I didn't think I'd be any good at it, but it became this one hour of my week that I really looked forward to, this hour to myself. But I didn't ever think I was going to become an ac-

SHE STOOPS TO CONQUER (ABBEY THEATRE)



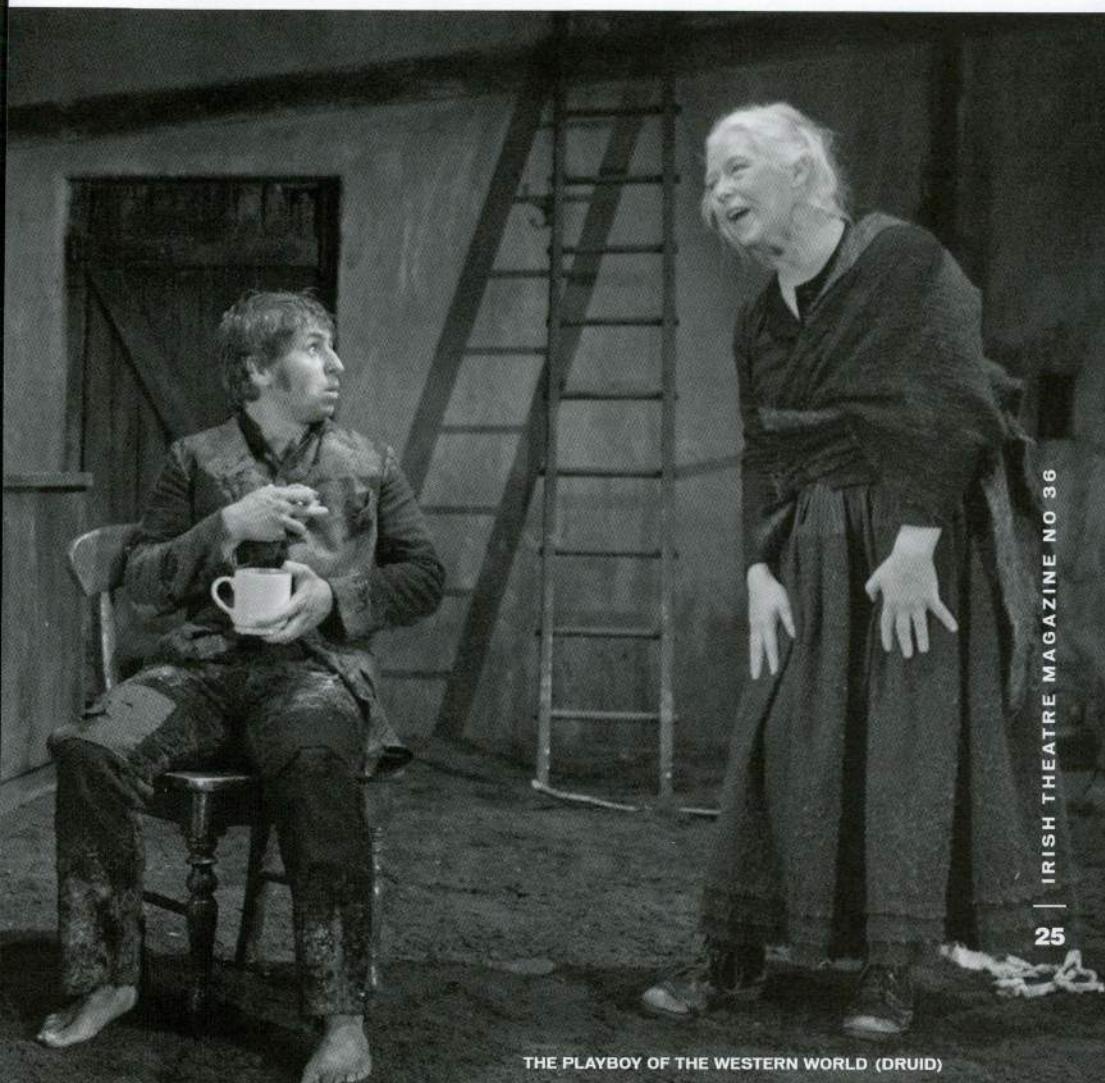
"I had always been holding back before, because I wasn't comfortable with myself, but I began to realise that with acting I could put that little shy boy into my work, whereas before I was almost embarrassed by it. Slowly, I began to find that the work was changing me, that the plays were changing me, and that I could actually lose my [shyness] in my work. Suddenly I began to experience the world differently, and that was what excited me."

Having graduated from the three-year acting programme, Monaghan found himself back in Cavan, again questioning his future as an actor. "The year that I was finishing college my dad was dying," he says, "and after I graduated I went home to be with him. Well, that was the end of acting; there wasn't really anywhere down there for me to look for work. At the same time Pádraic [McIntyre], an actor and director from the area who was working in London and doing really well, also found himself back in Cavan, and there we were, in the middle of nowhere, with these stunted careers.

"Mary Hanley, who had introduced me to acting in those speech-and-drama days, was running the Ramor Theatre in Virginia at the time, and she suggested that we start a company and make our own work. She said we could use her office, so we wouldn't have any bills, and we'd just have to manage the thing artistically. Eventually we did our first show, and we didn't really know how far it would take us, but the response



KEITH PATTISON



THE PLAYBOY OF THE WESTERN WORLD (DRUID)

was phenomenal. There was very little theatre touring in the area at the time, and it turned out that there was a real thirst for it."

However, it was a matter of suiting the audience as well as themselves, as Monaghan acknowledges. "At the start we had big ideas about what we wanted to do, but of course we were constrained because we had no money – although we were

funded by the Arts Council last year. So we thought about shows that were small and ‘out there’ – I think we were going to do *Howie the Rookie* – but we realised that the audience wouldn’t go for that. So our first show was *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, and then we did Billy Roche’s *Belfry*, and even then the priest was on the pulpit giving out about what was going on at the Ramor.

But the audience were committed, and when we realised that, we began to challenge them a bit too. We did Michael Harding’s play *The Tinker’s*

**I don't understand when actors talk about their 'process' or their 'method'. A play will require you to work in a certain way; the play and the production will tell you how to approach it.**

*Curse*, which – looking at Traveller [culture], and with two men falling in love – was a big ask; and then *Conversations on a Homecoming*, which was another demanding play. But then we brought them back to something more comfortable, that they could relate directly to, with *Shoot the Crow* and now our next production of Patrick McCabe’s *The Dead School*.“

Livin’ Dred, as Monaghan and McIntyre’s company is known, has been commended by the Irish Times Theatre Awards for its commitment to bringing theatre to regional audiences. It has also been commended for the artistic quality of its work, which, as Monaghan explains, has featured many of Ireland’s finest actors and designers. “In the first few years it was literally a case of just ringing people up, really, and asking for favours,” he says, “asking them if they’d be prepared to come down to Cavan to do something for two or three weeks. And people were.”

As Livin’ Dred began to take off, so did Monaghan’s career, and he quickly made his mark in Irish theatre in productions such as *The Shaughran* and *She Stoops to Conquer* at The Abbey, with his intense, physical presence. Monaghan gradually became a key player in the semi-ensemble that works with director Garry Hynes, taking lead roles in Druid productions: *The Year of the Hiker*, *The Empress of India*, *The Playboy of the Western World*, and *The Walworth Farce*.

He is bemused by the way critics talk of his “relationship” with Garry Hynes: “I mean I wouldn’t call it a ‘relationship’ – in the same way that I don’t understand when actors talk about their ‘process’ or their ‘method’. A play will require you to work in a certain way; the play and the production will tell you how to approach it. And with Garry, it’s not that we have a ‘relationship’ as such; it is more like she knows that she can ask certain things of me as an actor, and I suppose I can ask certain things of her, and when you’ve worked with each other before it becomes easier: you don’t have to do the ‘introductory weeks’ together, you can start working on it immediately, bringing what you have already. And

that was especially important for me with *The Cripple of Inishmaan*, because I'd never performed McDonagh, and his whole dark world was new to me."

Whether you apply the word "method" to Monaghan's approach to the role of Cripple Billy ("It's Billy," he insists, like his character in the play), the physical manifestation of his character on stage is a startlingly realistic embodiment of disability. Monaghan did some research for the role, "because I wanted [Billy's illness] to be as true as possible."

"Although I really believe that research should be done before you get to the rehearsal room, it was important to me that I investigated various illnesses, to see, physiologically, what Billy might have had. But I couldn't find anything. McDonagh isn't specific about it: he merely says that Billy has a bad arm and a bad leg, so I began to experiment with the physicality – if I turned my leg one way what would it do to the rest of my body, to my arm – and then I tried to incorporate the problems we know he has breathing into that as well. Mikel Murfi came in then to make sure that what I was doing was safe."

Monaghan admits that the physical aspects of his performance are more than demanding: "it is actually quite painful. I'm using every muscle group, and putting a lot of pressure and weight on one side of my body. I warm up before I go on stage very intensively. It's a long and slow process – about two and-a-half hours – stretching everything out, and I switch sides every two nights to make sure I do no damage."

However, Monaghan is well-used to performing under difficult circumstances, and as he regales me with an anecdote about his recent turn in *Romeo and Juliet* at the Abbey, his pensive mood lifts and there is a flash of the actorly energy that makes him such a compelling theatrical presence. "I had a vomiting bug," he begins, with grimaces and gestures, "and I would walk off-stage after every scene and just collapse into a chair in the wings. I remember there was this fight scene that I had with Karl Sheils and I literally lost my vision half way through. I completely blacked out. I could have really hit him, really hurt him – I had no idea. But, you know what they say: the show must go on."

"Isn't it funny," he observes, as he retires into his modest reserve. "You never ask why – why must the show go on? – you just do it, and it does." 

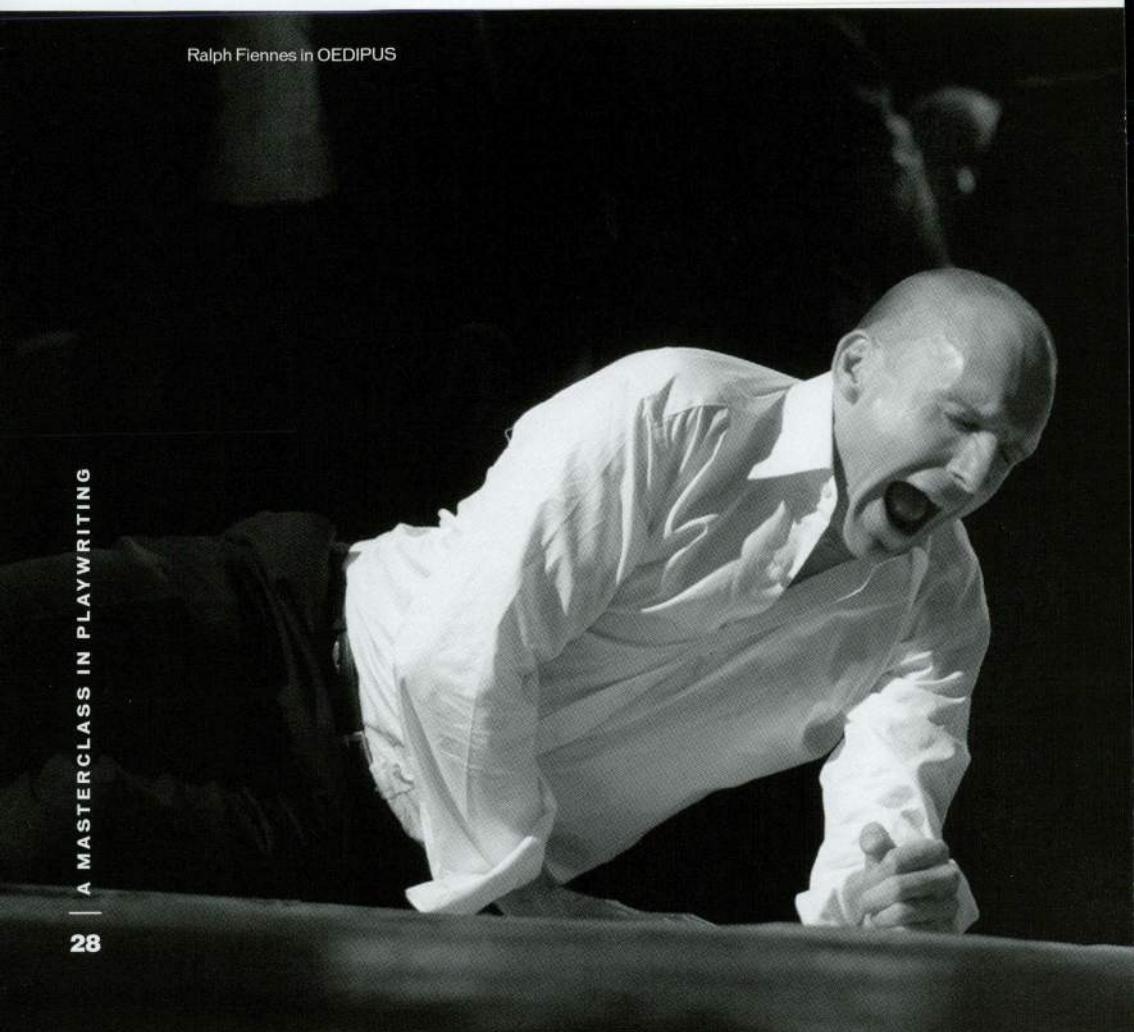
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*Druid Theatre's production of The Cripple of Inishmaan transfers to the Atlantic Theatre, New York (9 December – March 1 2009). Livin' Dred's tour of The Dead School concludes at Droichead Arts Centre, 2-3 December.*

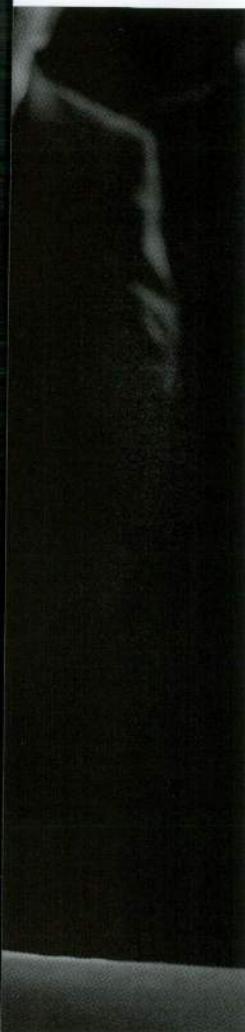
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*Sara Keating is a journalist and critic, and is a judge for this year's Irish Theatre Awards.*

Ralph Fiennes in OEDIPUS



# A MASTERCLASS IN



It's twelve years since **FRANK McGUINNESS** first attempted to translate Sophocles' devastating tragedy, *Oedipus the King*. 'It's a play that claws into you,' he says, as his new version runs at London's National Theatre.

**T**WELVE OR THIRTEEN YEARS AGO I commissioned a literal translation of *Oedipus* from Ciaran McGrogarty, a classical scholar from Inishowen, Donegal. I grappled with it then, but it was too hard. I couldn't do it. In the interim, I've written versions of other Greek plays, less well-known – *Electra*, *Hecuba*, *Helen* – and had recently returned to *Oedipus*, working on the text just for my own pleasure. I found that I could see new aspects to it now, because of my own life experience. By a strange, nice, co-incidence, Jonathan Kent asked me last year if I'd like to write a new version for him to direct at the National.

I wanted my version to be as direct as possible. Sophocles is a fantastic storyteller, and *Oedipus* is a masterclass in play writing. It's all in the plot, and how he builds up the details. Horrendous details, as it becomes clear that a human being did this, that Oedipus has violated the words 'mother' and 'father' and that the horror is real. There is no mercy; every act of pity leads to the inevitable end and is no help, just a hindrance.

# PLAYWRITING

The story is a myth, and we're told what happens by Tiresias in the first five minutes of the play, so it's not about surprise. What Sophocles has to do is to humanise the horror of each revelation. He takes you every step of the way, relentlessly, so that the 'how' of what happens reveals 'who' these people are. It's the difference between knowing something and actually experiencing it. The characters have to go through it, they're saying: 'I need to know who I am'.

The Greeks knew an enormous amount about constructing a piece of theatre. The clarity and visual exactness of these plays is so striking - it's cinematic. And that's what makes them feel so contemporary and so perturbing. We're still learning from them.

I asked for the literal translation to be as indecipherable as possible, to get close to the original. The words of the Chorus are the most difficult in this play, they're so dense and packed. I've sacrificed their classical allusions, but the sense of political turmoil comes through, as they keep changing their minds about Oedipus.

The important thing is to let the play speak for itself. Of course you bring your own terror and panics and subconscious fears to it, but I'm not trying to present a new interpretation of it, or advance a theory about it. I'm not clever enough. And this is not research, it's new writing. Contextualising it is the job of the director, not me.

I haven't updated the setting, or brought in contemporary global or political parallels, because, for me, that gets in the way. Audiences are very intelligent, and make their own inferences. In the previews, we found that there's a lot to learn from how audiences react, and that's the power of this story.

I tend to write versions of plays that obsess me, that perplex me. I approach



**Oedipus:**

**I walk in a cloud of darkness.**

**An evil wind blows through it.**

**But it will last forever -**

**No change to night of day.**

**My heart is torn in torment,**

**Pierced by swords of sorrow.**

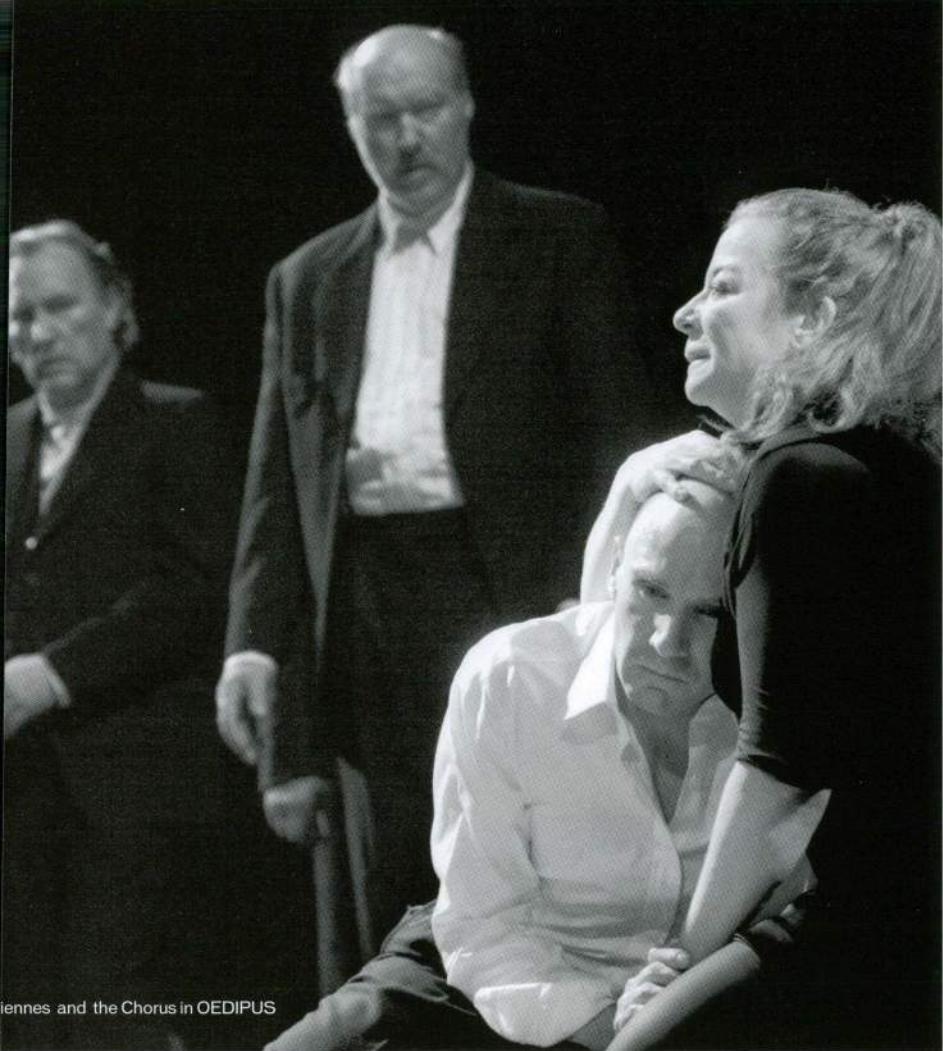
**The memory of what I was -**

**The memory of what I did -**

**They sting through to my bones.**

*Frank McGuinness (after Sophocles)*

Claire Higgins



Helen Mearns and the Chorus in OEDIPUS

them from the position that I don't know what they're about and am trying to work that out. So you put yourself on the line with this, you put yourself under threat. There are some plays – like *Miss Julie*, which I translated recently - that great actors and directors will always want to do, plays on which every generation has to stake their claim. And I want to leave my mark on them, like graffiti; to say 'McGuinness was here'.



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*In conversation with Helen Mearns.*

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Oedipus, in Frank McGuinness's new version directed by Jonathan Kent, runs at the National Theatre, London, until 4 January, 2009. It is reviewed on Page 93.

# THE MUSIC OF THE TRIBE

BRIAN FRIEL's recent versions of plays by Chekhov and Ibsen ripple with the themes that have preoccupied him over the past six decades writes EMILE PINE, as she reflects on his achievement in his eightieth year.

**S**ISTERS STANDING STRONG AGAINST THE TIDES OF CHANGE. A woman suffocating in a stifling milieu. A society that makes acts of beauty and nobility impossible. These descriptions resonate with Brian Friel's work over the past six decades, and in two new productions in this, his eightieth year, express the conditions of the central heroines of two "after" plays – a revised version of *Three Sisters* by Anton Chekhov, and his new version of *Hedda Gabler* by Henrik Ibsen.

Both *Three Sisters* and *Hedda Gabler* reflect well-worn Frielian concerns such as family, tradition, fate and exile. They engage with these concerns in very different ways: while the three Prozorov sisters remain determined to face their future with dignity, Hedda chooses to end her fate by shooting herself with one of her father's pistols. And while the final tableau of the Prozorov sisters is moving, the reality of choosing death, as audiences of the Gate production are aware, is not "achieved with beauty", but is shocking and bloody. It is characteristic of Friel that there is this doubleness of vision: women who endure and women who simply end.

If the final moments of a play can be said to serve not only as the climax, but

THREE SISTERS (ABBEY THEATRE)



as its defining meaning, then the Abbey production of *Three Sisters* managed this definition both beautifully and intelligently. David Leveaux directed the three women with delicacy; the anguish of Masha (Derbhle Crotty) was heart-breaking as she lost the love of her life, but no less compelling was Irina (Emily Taaffe) as she absorbed the news that her fiancé had been shot dead in a duel. Together with Olga (Justine Mitchell), they clutched at each other, huddled pathetically against the backdrop of Mike Britton's impressively austere set. But in their solidarity the women managed to rise above the merely pathetic and passive. In their determination to go on despite, or perhaps to spite, their bleak

fate, they called to mind the steely resolve of the five Mundy sisters in *Dancing at Lughnasa*.



In contrast to their solidarity, Hedda Gabler (Justine Mitchell) is a lonely figure, jealously guarding her privacies. Finally, driven to despair at the undignified sexual accident of Eilert Loeborg's death, and the machinations of Judge Brack (slickly played by Andrew Woodall), Hedda chooses the only exit that she sees open to her. Under Anna Mackmin's direction, Justine Mitchell moves agitatedly about the stage, venting her frustration, as Friel's stage directions put it, "playing a wild, near-manic dance on the piano".

But if Hedda seems subdued by her husband's remonstrations, and finally withdraws to the inner room, as if brushed aside by Tesman (Peter Hanly) who is absorbed by his new project with Mrs Elvsted, her death still has the power to surprise and shock, as a defiant act of resistance.

Yet as Tesman and Brack hover over Hedda's body, declaring that "people just don't do things like that", Hedda's image is already fading. What we are left with is the image of Mrs Elvsted (Andrea Irvine), kneeling centre stage holding Loeborg's notes to her chest, under the glow of a golden spotlight. Friel's translation enlarges the scope and depth of Mrs Elvsted's character, particularly in her early "step-by-step" description of why she decided on Loeborg as her new project and how she secured his devotion to her.

Though the text's stage direction at the end is for Thea Elvsted to follow the others into the back room, the director has chosen to place her at the front of the stage, staring out at the audience. Mackmin's direction, and Oliver Fenwick's atmospheric lighting design here underscore the production's clever message; it is not Hedda but Thea, the inveterate social climber and moulder of men, who is the arch manipulator of this claustrophobic play. And in doing so, this production creates a link between the seemingly meek Thea Elvsted and Natasha,

HEDDA GABLER (GATE THEATRE)



the conniving cuckoo-like wife of Andrey Prozorov in *Three Sisters*. The productions speak to each other, through their dissimilarities and their coincidences.

Each production also reflects back to its Russian or Norwegian original. It is im-

portant in this context to note that *Three Sisters* and *Hedda Gabler* are not simply translations, but versions 'after' their originals. In the word 'after' there is the implication of imitation, and the suggestion of Friel following in the footsteps of Chekhov and Ibsen. The

**Translation is more than a simple transposition; it is a transformation of meanings. The word 'after' admits the gap of meaning between the original and the version.**

process of coming "after" is a complex one, where one builds on what came before, paying homage to it, yet also making something new.

As the process of naming (in English and in Irish) in Friel's *Translations* makes clear, the translation from one language into another is more than a simple transposition; it is a transformation of meanings also. So, the word "after" suggests not only homage, but admits the gap of meaning between the original and the version. The way Friel chooses to use the space that "after" opens up is bold in its dramatic license. As Ros Dixon argues (in an unpublished paper), Friel uses the process of translation to stress Natasha's vulgarity in *Three Sisters*, making her a more obvious villain and leaving less up to the interpretation of the actor and director.

Fintan O'Toole points out in his programme note for *Hedda Gabler* that Friel has given the play a new first line, immediately creating an atmosphere of unease with aunt Juliana's "I was afraid of that". The addition of a long speech from Tesman, looking forward to a future of children with Hedda, both emphasises his ability to live in a fantasy world, and creates empathy with Hedda, who shrinks from the prospect of having to bear these children, and in so doing, to lose another part of her independence. Friel's direction that Hedda sit "absolutely still, rigid, upright, her eyes closed tight, her face a mask", is a significant extension of Ibsen's direction that Hedda "clenches her hands as though in desperation", and tells us much about Friel's interpretation of Hedda as both a repressed and oppressed character, whose suicide is clearly forecast by this scene.

But the negative aspects of Hedda's character are also stressed, as when Friel changes Hedda's description of Thea as a "fool" to the more contemporary "bitch". This is not simply an updating, however, but a change of tone.

Other noticeable insertions include Judge Brack's recurrent quotations of Americanisms such as "jumbo" and "razzle-dazzle". It is unsurprising that Friel, always so concerned with language and here engaged in translation, highlights both the character of different languages, and the role of language in denoting





OUROBOROS' TRANSLATIONS

character. So that Brack's "hell-raising" sets him clearly apart from George Tesman, who is summed up by his old-fashioned and fussy exclamations of "Oh my goodness". The frequency of this American trope is, however, one of the few jarring notes in an otherwise effective updating of Ibsen's nineteenth-century language to a fluent and modern idiom. Perhaps Friel is expressing an anxiety at the current predominance of American expressions in today's language?

In the 2008 edition of *Three Sisters*, Friel has revised some elements of his original 1981 translation, for Field Day. In the first scene, Irina's name-day is no longer translated as "birthday" but left intact, with its connotations of Russian culture and tradition. Friel is trusting more to the audience to manage the task of translation themselves. In this, he illustrates that the process of translation is never complete, but always evolving and shifting, like language itself.

If *Three Sisters* and *Hedda Gabler* can be read together as opposite versions of analogous situations – Masha and Hedda would make an interesting comparative study – then how do these two productions reflect back on Friel's own art? The central themes of tradition and disintegration, home and exile, self and other run mercurially through Friel's work, from its breakthrough beginnings in *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* through to *The Home Place*, his most recent original play. Friel's work is notable for how often it treads and retreads the same themes as those that characterise the Russian and Norwegian texts he has translated. In 'Seven Notes for a

Festival Programme', Friel described his attraction to Russian characters who "know in their hearts that their society is in melt-down and the future has neither a welcome nor even an accommodation for them ... but they still invest everything

in it". (quoted in Christopher Murray, ed. *Brian Friel: Essays, Diaries, Interviews, 1964-1999*, Faber, 1999). This is a fitting description for so many of Friel's own characters who are caught in a world which does not have room for their aspirations and traditions, per-

haps particularly for the trios that we meet in *The Freedom of the City* and *Faith Healer*, who share a complete investment in faith, in hope, in a vanished future.

In a year when there are two major productions of adapted works by Friel, it's tempting to try to use them to sum up his career to date. Perhaps that's what this article has tried to do in a small way. But the territory that Friel has mapped is too vast. His career has now spanned six decades; his most popular plays are watched, enjoyed, and studied. The MacGill School in July was dedicated to him, and celebrated the diversity of his work. Lectures on *Translations* probed not only the play's political meanings – for example Theo Dorgan discussed the play in the context of the post-Celtic Tiger world – but also its artistic meanings, as Harry White illuminated the ways in which Friel's language strives towards the beauty of music.

The recent Ouroboros productions both of *Translations* and *Making History* allowed the plays to be considered together, posing questions about how we construct our own histories. Yet there were also moments to appreciate the lesser-known Friel, as staged readings brought plays out from Friel's catalogue that have not been revived so often. The readings that stood out for me were a lively and moving *The Enemy Within*, and *Molly Sweeney*, in which Cathy Belton gave an electric performance as Molly. These are plays that warrant full productions on their own merits, with the additional bonus of giving audiences more insights into the full canon of original Friel plays.

Friel's work has always tried to articulate the "language of the tribe". But we can also say that even at its most fluent, it is always about the insufficiency of language, and this point is inherent in the process of translation itself. Yet what Friel takes from this insufficiency is a richness: his plays always reach to make words "no longer necessary", striving to be not the language, but the music of the tribe. 

*Carysfort Press celebrating 10 years publishing for the Theatre*

# Interactions: Dublin Theatre Festival 1957 - 2007

*Edited by Nicholas Grene and Patrick Lonergan with Lilian Chambers*

Irish Theatrical Diaspora Series : 3

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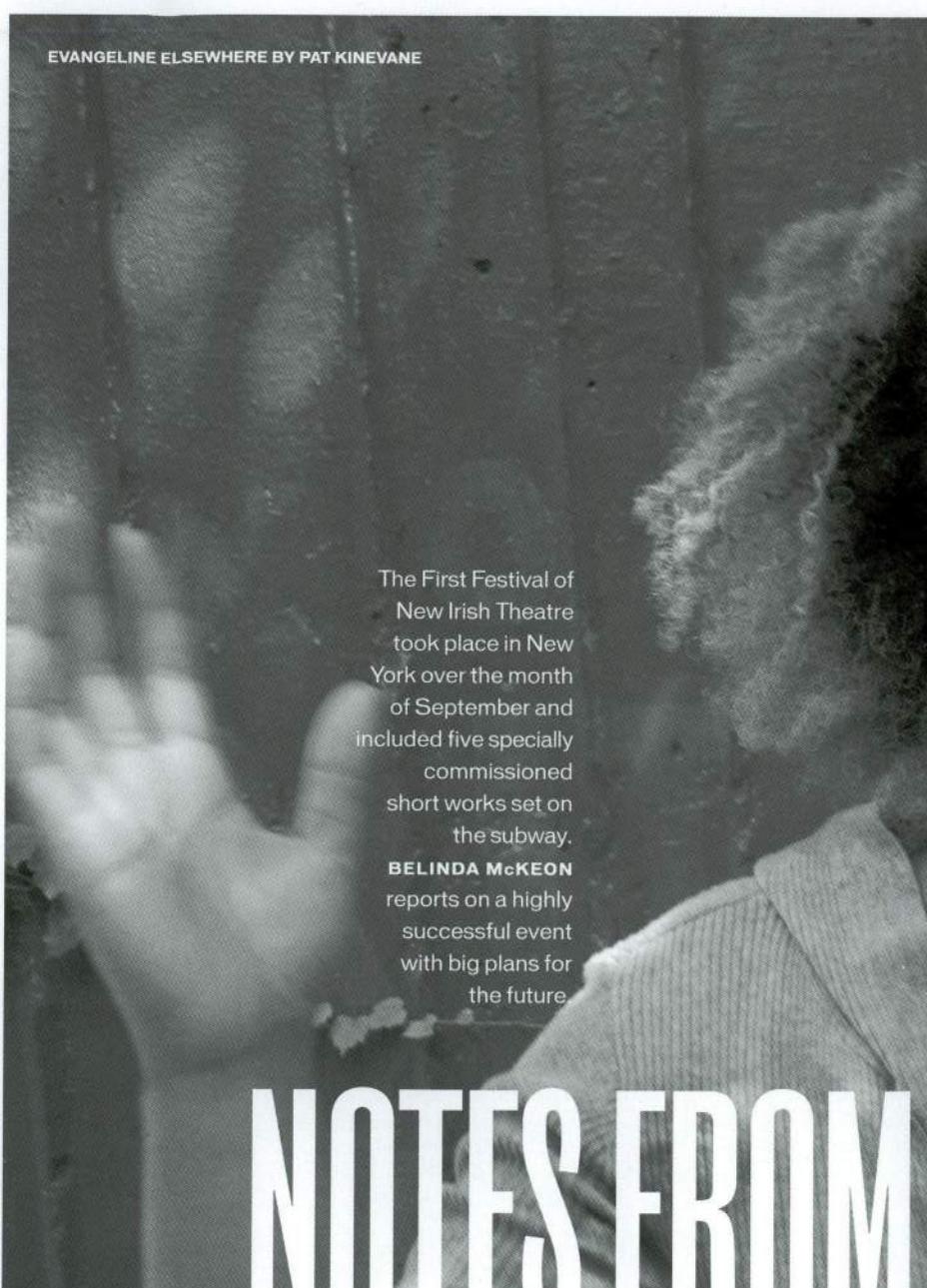
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EVANGELINE ELSEWHERE BY PAT KINEVANE



The First Festival of New Irish Theatre took place in New York over the month of September and included five specially commissioned short works set on the subway.

**BELINDA McKEON** reports on a highly successful event with big plans for the future.

# NOTES FROM

# UNDERGROUND

THE PARTING GLASS BY URSULA RANI SARMA



**I**N 2002, ONE PHONE CALL TO THE NEW YORK TIMES TOLD George Heslin all he needed to know about the realities of giving an Irish playwright a New York premiere. Heslin's new Manhattan-based theatre company, Origin, was gearing up to introduce Enda Walsh to American audiences, with a production of *Misterman* at 59E59, a respected off-Broadway house. But, to put it frankly, the *Times* didn't want to know. Nobody at the newspaper, it seemed, had heard of Walsh. Advance coverage, much less a review, would not be forthcoming.

So Heslin must have relished the irony earlier this year when Gwen Orel, a journalist from the *New York Times*, called to request an interview. No press release had yet been issued by Origin, no publicist had been put on the case. Word of mouth had done its magic. Orel had heard that Heslin was set to produce a festival of new Irish theatre during the month of September. By the time Heslin launched that festival, '1st Irish', at a lavish reception in the Mutual of America building on Park Avenue, he was able to point attendees towards a full-page feature in the newspaper. Over the next three weeks, the coverage of the festival by that paper and by others - from the *Irish Voice* to *Variety* - was almost garishly positive. Not least when it came to a production of a play by Enda Walsh.

*Disco Pigs*, produced as part of the 1st Irish festival by the Washington, DC company Solas Nua, was "tight" and "urgent" in its staging at 59E59, according to Charles Isherwood in the *New York Times*, and within hours of Isherwood's review, the play's two-week run was sold out, and sales of other events in the 1st Irish festival were boosted. Certainly, the raves (and the ads) in the New York Irish newspapers can't have harmed ticket sales, but Heslin is pragmatic enough to know that the Irish-American community is not the community for an event of this kind, no matter how big and green and white the festival branding might have been.

"I would honestly say that in the last six years of Origin, that very few Irish-American people have seen our work," he says. "I never went after that community specifically when I was developing the audience at Origin,

because I just went after people who go to theatre."

That said, a theatre company with such a focus on presenting Irish work would be ill-advised not to foster good relationships with the Irish-American

business and cultural communities, something it does through its board of directors as well as through its links with organisations such as the Irish Repertory Theatre and Glucksman Ireland House at New York University.

Heslin is adept at the kind of networking and good will-building that

are essential for survival in the non-profit world. Witness Tom Moran, the Irish-American CEO of Mutual of America, stepping in to give Heslin a space and a slate for the festival launch party; witness the publisher of the *Irish Emigrant* giving Heslin a gift of a full-page ad in that paper for the duration of the festival.

59E59, the three-stage non-profit space with which Origin has had a close working relationship since 2002, was the site of three other festival productions as well as *Disco Pigs*: Owen McCafferty's *Mojo Mickybo*, staged by Boston's Tir Na Theatre, Liam Heylin's *Love Peace and Robbery*, presented by a Washington, DC company, the Keegan Theatre, and Origin's own *End of Lines*, an evening of five original short plays inspired by week-long New York subway jaunts by the Irish playwrights Gary Duggan, Pat Kinevane, Morna Regan, Ursula Rani Sarma and Abbie Spallen.

Three other productions took place at a downtown venue, Manhattan Theatre Source: Conor McPherson's *Rum and Vodka*, Conal Creedon's *When I Was God*, and *Great White American Teeth*, a comedy memoir written and performed by Fiona Walsh. Elsewhere downtown, there was a children's production from New York's Literally Alive Children's Theatre company of Oscar Wilde's *The Selfish Giant*, while uptown, the American Irish Historical Society hosted a single performance of Daniel Reardon's comic fancy, *Bleeding Poets*.

It was an interesting mix, with the companies fastening with varying degrees of fidelity to the festival's guiding notion of the contemporary in Irish theatre. Heslin intends the festival to be a yearly event, and plans to bring productions to New York from Ireland in 2009, as well as inviting more New York-based companies to produce Irish work during the month of September, and commissioning further new work. He chose September, he says, because of the potential for synergy with the Dublin Fringe and Dublin Theatre festivals – he envisions companies travelling back to those festivals with their glowing New York reviews under their belts – an attractive prospect, though actual dialogue with

**Heslin intends the festival to be a yearly event, and plans to bring productions to New York from Ireland in 2009, as well as inviting New York-based companies to produce Irish work, and commissioning further new work.**

the directors of those festivals has yet to take place.

That Heslin has, at the moment, more ideas than he has arrangements is indicative of how quickly and how unexpectedly the festival came about. At the beginning of 2008, the plan was only to commission and to stage the five *End of Lines* plays. Things changed when the executive producer at 59E59, Peter Tear, suggested that Heslin book not just one of that venue's stages for a September run, but to take all three and stage not just a cross-section of contemporary Irish writing but a whole festival.

Tear had something of a template for such a festival, with the annual Brits Off Broadway festival of British theatre at 59E59, and with his encouragement, Heslin began to think big. Why not invite theatre companies with an Irish emphasis from other American cities to take part? Why not get other venues involved? Why not reach out for the collaboration of other Irish and New York-based cultural organisations?

Why not? Because a festival of that kind, in a city where arts organisations depend for their existence on a complicated, uncertain collage of public, private and corporate sponsorship, translates inevitably into the kind of financial and logistical migraine that is treatable only with colossal funds and a much more generous lead-in time than Heslin was giving himself.

And yet, remarkably, he pulled it off, in less than six months and with a budget of \$300,000. The biggest cheques came from Culture Ireland (\$9,000), the Northern Ireland Bureau (\$5,000), Tourism Ireland (\$5,000) and the Irish Consulate in New York (\$2500), but much of the budget was pieced together, as Origin's operating budget always is, by a series of small private and corporate donations, as well as by sponsorship in kind.

But even as the curtain rose on this year's festival, events on Wall Street were putting paid to the structure of corporate donation and matching grants that ultimately render possible non-profit ventures of this kind, and the Irish Budget in October brought little cheer, either, for a festival openly dependent on funds from Irish bases.

But Heslin is determined. "We never set out to set up a festival," he reiterates. "This festival came to us, and it mushroomed into a huge event. And the response we've gotten this year: that's only given me further confidence, next year, to take bigger risks." 

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*See [origintheatre.org/1stIrish](http://origintheatre.org/1stIrish) for further information on the 1st Irish Festival of Irish Theatre, September 2008.*

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*Belinda McKeon is a journalist and writer based in New York.*



| IN THE DEEP END

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# In the Deep End

The Ulster Bank Dublin Theatre Festival joined forces with Theatre Forum and the Abbey Theatre this year to run The Next Stage, an intensive programme for practitioners, with workshops, masterclasses – and heated discussions of festival productions.

**RAYMOND SCANNELL** took notes.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY PAT REDMOND

STEPHEN REA



THE NEXT STAGE PROGRAMME was an all-consuming, gruelling, but pricelessly rewarding experience for the eighteen practitioners involved. It will take some time for us to realise the extent of its benefits.

**WEDNESDAY 24 SEPTEMBER** *Dodgems*, (Coiscéim Dance Theatre) O'Reilly Theatre. Day One. Post-show, the group ventures to The World's End pub. Nervous introductions. The handful of regulars don't know what's hit them. Reactions to *Dodgems*: some saying best dodged if possible. Others saying outright "dodgy". Others liking aspects of it. A sense that because of the excitement, people are drawing their critical guns quite early. Nobody is short of a valid opinion, with a few reserving themselves through shyness (or anxiety).

**THURSDAY 25 SEPTEMBER** *England* by Tim Crouch (News From Nowhere/Traverse), Hugh Lane Gallery. *England* is getting down to the bare bones of good theatre. A live, communal event, while at the same time, very much an individual one. Your imagination is invited to do a lot of the work. And it does pay off. A play about the value of art, and, somewhere abstracted, politics. Apt themes in the current climate.

THEATRE O WITH DIRECTOR TOM CREED



**FRIDAY 26 SEPTEMBER** Tim Crouch workshop. Dance House. Tim Crouch beams. He looks like he has a secret that he's willing to share. "You'll get there," he seems to say.

"Theatre is caught up in literalism," he chides lightly. Small movements can say so much. Bad theatre is trying too hard. Give the audience the benefit of the doubt. Let them "co-author". Theatre is merely suggestion. If you try to *convince*, that is where it gets difficult. In comparison to the visual art world, Crouch says, "we're forty years behind."

**MIDWAY: FRIDAY 3 OCTOBER** Irish Theatre Institute keynote address. Vanessa Redgrave. Project Arts Centre. For those who attended the post-show discussion of *The Year of Magical Thinking* this talk repeats a lot. But not everyone stayed. Maybe the piece was too cold. Redgrave's performance was accused of sentimentality. The group are getting tired. Long days. (Including shows, sometimes twelve hours.) Six days a week. Cut-off from your routine, from "normal" life. We're becoming a group of critical monsters. Are we seeing too much work?

Redgrave is self-effacing and sometimes downright self-conscious, but she's still got "it". She makes a tentative interviewee of Fintan O'Toole. He's almost shy.



One of the group asks her about the place of politics in theatre. Redgrave says clearly that she sees no place for it. A surprising reaction, given her vocal stance on lots of political questions. Her answer is a striking one. The problem is "whose politics do you present?" In the same breath, she describes herself as "a World War Two child," who will do "anything you can to make sure Fascism doesn't happen again."

**50** *Black Watch* (National Theatre of Scotland) RDS. As if by design our show tonight (our tenth) is *Black Watch*. A bold move on the part of the new National Theatre of Scotland. Very much placing the (albeit questionable) politics to the fore. In contrast to Crouch's *England*, this is quite literal. I don't feel like a co-author. I'm being told what to think here. There is little abstraction, save some dance numbers and a manipulative sound score. Maybe I gave in to the advance hype too much, but I'm disappointed. I can see the wood from the trees with this play and Redgrave's words echo: "whose politics do you present?"

**SATURDAY 4 OCTOBER** Show review, 10 a.m. A bit of antler clashing about *Black Watch*. As a group of practitioners, we have an advantage. We *can* see the woods from the trees.



DEBORAH WARNER

I'm wondering how dangerous, politically (or in any other way) a play can be in persuading us of... anything. Tempers are flaring. And while I had regarded the hyper-critical aspect of the group as a negative thing initially, I see now that it has its place.

Someone who has been fairly quiet up to now comes out with a storming: "well, why can't a show just be an enjoyable night out?" He is countered with: "A play like this has a responsibility with the subject matter." You can see both sides.

Talk with Stephen Rea. Dance House. In contrast to Redgrave, Rea very much sees it as a responsibility of the theatre to react to the political climate. He talks of activism. Of Yeats breaking from the English literary tradition, and about his own work with Field Day. I venture a question about Friel. It comes out all wrong.

What I mean to say is "aren't Friel's more artistically successful plays those that have the politics in the background?" What I *mumble* out, feigning some kind of self-esteem (he's sitting next to me) is something like "mmm ahem... eh... talking about Art and Politics (oh no!)... do you think Friel's less successful plays are those with the politics too pronounced?"

He thinks I'm criticising Friel. He asks me to give him an example. I say "Free-

*dom of the City*" He rejects this. *Freedom* is a "fantastic play". I don't disagree. That's not what I meant. I'm dying slowly inside.

*Happy Days*. (National, London) The Abbey. What can you say? This is electric theatre. Deborah Warner will, in her talk later in the week, call it: "a two-hander between Winnie and the audience." "A radical exploration of the space between the actor and the audience." "You must've come to see *Happy Days* with a heavy heart?" she wonders. But we're all agreed we've never seen a more accessible production.

She talks about the gruelling rehearsal process. That they hadn't "found it". That they rehearsed a very dark version. But something happened on opening night. It came alive. The cave from which Beckett wrote it was not a happy place. But like it or not, when you put it in the theatre it becomes a celebration of life.

#### **FINAL DAYS**

**FRIDAY 10 OCTOBER** *First Love*. (Gare St.Lazare) Project Cube. Conor Lovett was infinitely watchable. He has a preternatural understanding of the text. An interesting companion to *Happy Days* (the two pieces were very much playing for laughs).

Not all of the group share this enthusiasm. Some find the writing in *First Love* bordering on misogyny. As a group we're all comfortable enough now to disagree with each other. Or are we? The cracks are showing. We've reached saturation point maybe. A lot of stuff is being taken up the wrong way. People are craving their normal lives. Speaking to a few, there is a sense that everyone is entirely grateful for what has gone on but they're glad that an end is in sight. Being wrapped up in this bubble for too long wouldn't be healthy, you imagine. How can you draw from life if you're not living it? Some faces seem to say: if I have to hear one more critical analysis, I think I'm going to murder someone.

**52**

**SATURDAY 11TH OCTOBER** It has been such an intense, involved time, it's difficult to give a true reflection of the whole experience. A different account could have included the rebellious, ethereal Olwen Fouéré's mesmerising session, which really threw a curve ball at the group. This was genuinely challenging, asking us to bring out our resistant selves, not what is socially accepted or acceptable.

Final group session. The Ark. The group is joined by Tania Banotti (Theatre Forum), Fíach Mac Conghail (The Abbey) and Loughlin Deegan (Ulster Bank Dublin Theatre Festival) for some feedback on The Next Stage experience. Someone quips it was like a "Lough Derg" for the theatre. The group mention the opportunity for collaboration. New engagements. With the times ahead it's important to rally.



THE NEXT STAGE PARTICIPANTS, 2008

Loughlin Deegan says that the Festival has surpassed expectation with lots of shows sold out before it began. In financially worrying times, this is a great thing. However, in terms of ideas coming into the Festival for next year, he's noticed people's ambitions lessening. The economic pressure is causing people to aim low.

This can't be said for some of The Next Stage group. Many are on a high, and words like "audacity" are being bandied about. We need to be more audacious. How can emerging Irish artists get to Katie Mitchell's calibre?

Deegan mentions a generation of "beautiful monsters" being created. The organisers' hope for The Next Stage was that young artists would engage at a deeper level with the Festival's programme. Christine Madden from the Abbey hoped we had gained "a vision beyond what you can achieve".

The hyper-critical aspect of the group is discussed. Is it healthy? Does it make you more ruthless, more rigorous with your own work? The problem with words like audacity is that surely we have to earn this confidence first. Sometimes we were criticising work that we may not have come close to producing ourselves.

A degree of humility is essential if we are to reach the kind of heights we all seem eager – sometimes prematurely eager – to attain. If we are to reach them, we need to admit to ourselves where we're at. Not act as if we're there already. Maybe the word to use is ambition.

END

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*Raymond Scannell is a playwright and actor. His most recent play, *Mimic*, was staged during the Dublin Fringe Festival, and is reviewed on Page 112.*

Martin Lucey in THERE ARE LITTLE KINGDOMS

| SHORT CUTS TO SUCCESS

# Short Cuts to Success

How do you turn thirteen short stories into a play?

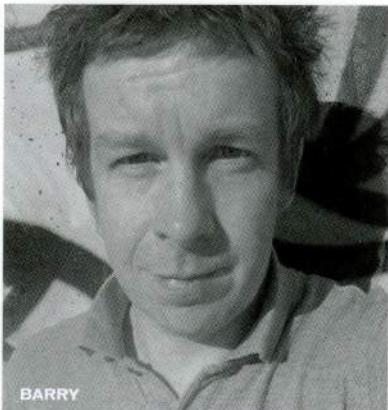
**KEVIN BARRY**, author of *There Are Little Kingdoms*, had no idea, but referred to a Robert Altman film for help. The result was a Meridian Theatre production that impressed Cork audiences last month and is set to tour.

**E**ARLIER THIS SUMMER, AS PART OF THE INTERNATIONAL Conference on the Short Story held in Cork, Kevin Barry read from his début collection, *There are Little Kingdoms*. As he took to the podium he hunched his shoulders and adopted a pose. Then in something resembling the tones of those native to Ireland's midlands, he enacted his story. The audience got it. A mix of mostly Irish and Americans, they laughed at the humorous dialogue and characters, and at Barry's interpretation of both. Barry reads all his work aloud before completing it, listening for its rhythms and any potential flat notes. He had already noticed the way his stories shifted gear in front of an audience, and now found his latent performance gene, treating each reading as a mini-staging.

The stories' inherent theatrical elements of strong characters and long segments of finely-tuned, darkly comic dialogue were also immediately apparent to Johnny Hanrahan, Artistic Director of Meridian Theatre Company in Cork. Hanrahan has adapted works of fiction on several occasions and recognised Barry's work, which depicts small-town, contemporary Ireland, as something that could be transposed to the stage.

"I love the material. He deals with a bunch of characters who really are fresh, and the book is brimming over with images of the world we live in. And apart from the dialogue, there is the idiom he writes in. The stories are there to be spoken," he says.

**When I'm sitting in my little room writing short stories, I'm pulling the strings, so it's massive egomania. But with a play, as soon as the lines are written, you give up the ownership of them.**



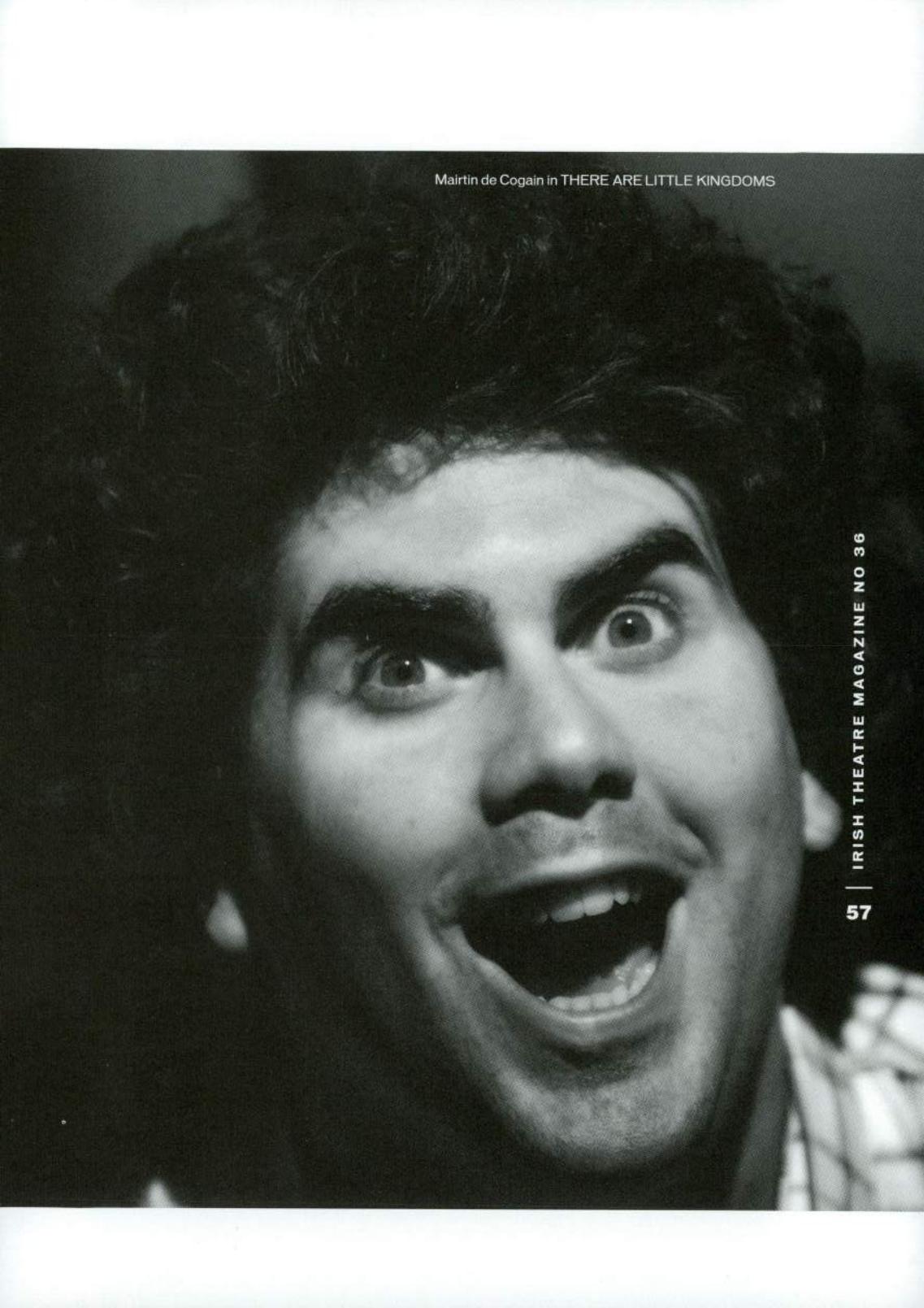
Barry, now a self-acknowledged frustrated performer, discovered he had a natural "sympathy and empathy" for actors. "They're desperately needy, poor creatures, they're constantly racked by self-doubt and they get paid badly, so I'm determined to write good lines for them."

He found auditions hugely enjoyable – "the most rewarding thing of all was watching the actors having fun with the lines" – and is both modest and sure-footed enough not to have been put off by theatre's collaborative nature. "When I'm sitting in my little room writing short stories, I'm pulling the strings, so it's massive egomania. But with a play, as soon as the lines are written, you give up the ownership of them."

Having such a facility for dialogue and for the cadences of speech, meant that the often shaky transition from fiction to drama appears to have been a seamless process for Barry and one he is likely to repeat. His innate confidence in his literary abilities – the short story collection has already won him the Rooney

Barry has been writing fiction on a full-time basis for five or six years but he is a journalist by trade, and sociable by nature. He was tempted by Hanrahan's offer as much for the possibility of working with other people and not becoming "slowly nuts all day looking at the four walls", as he was by theatre itself. "I had never written for theatre. I had never any specific ambition to. But to be given the chance seemed like something I couldn't say no to," he says.

So far, the experience appears to have been a happy one. The play was produced by Meridian as part of the recent 'Blood and Bandage' festival at the Granary Theatre, Cork, and garnered large houses and positive reviews – not always the case with new work. During the production process,



Mairtin de Cogain in THERE ARE LITTLE KINGDOMS

| IRISH THEATRE MAGAZINE NO 36

Prize for Irish Literature and was named ‘book of the year’ by several newspapers - led him to agree to adapt the stories himself, despite his admitted lack of knowledge of theatrical form. – “I’m totally chancing my arm.”

**Compared to the tortuous undertaking of writing fiction, Barry found this to be a straightforward operation. Although he might have found it easier to write a play from scratch, it still took him only three months and two drafts to complete.**

helped him think through strategies for creating one play out of thirteen different narratives.

“I didn’t want to be precious about trying to be true to the stories, so I took characters out of about six stories and set them at each other. I was curious to see what might happen, what sparks might rise when their little worlds collided, which is fun and freed me from having to be true to the text.” The end result, a series of interweaving characters and storylines, has been likened to Dylan Thomas’s *Under Milk Wood*, a play that Barry has never seen or read.

Compared to the tortuous undertaking of writing fiction, with its numerous drafts and restructuring, Barry found putting together the drama to be a happily straightforward operation. Although he believes he might have found it easier to write a play from scratch, it still took him only three months and two drafts to complete. Once he had decided, with Hanrahan, that the play should focus on a day and a night in the life of a small town and that it should place at its heart an ‘idiot savant’ character, the drama’s narrator and moral compass, he was able to spend the initial stages cutting and pasting large chunks of dialogue from the stories, to “get the bones of something down quite quickly”.

He presented his first draft, which, if staged, would have been seven and-a-half hours long – “a funny technical problem” due to having no idea what length a play should be. He managed to bring the play in under ninety minutes, by reciting and timing the work in advance of delivery. He’s been very satisfied with the results: the audience laughed in the right places, appeared to take cognisance of the dark undercurrent to the writing, and there was no public humiliation of the kind he had vaguely been dreading in the run up to the opening night.

Barry notes that he has never had a bad review, but although trying to ignore the impact of any potentially negative reviews, he couldn’t help but sneak a look at them. They, too, were reaffirming, with Mary Leland in the *Irish Times*

Working in hope that “ignorance is an aid to originality”, he eschewed any specific research into how plays are composed, drawing instead from two non-theatrical sources, a collection of 1920s short stories by American writer Sherwood Anderson, and the Robert Altman film, *Short Cuts*, which

noting that the “play is packed with swift, memorable lines delivered in what sounds like the authentic half-language of familiarity”.

In rewriting his text, Barry managed to avoid transferring the more literary and poetic elements of his writing to the stage – “I wanted the play to have a heightened language, because theatre’s all about listening, but my danger signals start going if language gets too theatrical sounding.” Yet the work is not so much a theatrical entity in its own right, as a staged version of Barry’s stories. The *Irish Times* review acknowledges that the play’s only real weakness is an “absence of shape”. And while this lack of a narrative arc allows characters and their dialogue to stand out, it denies the audience a concrete and developing storyline to hold onto.

“We had a very successful first outing. I would say we got a silver medal. But both myself and Kevin think that more work on it would be profitable,” says Johnny Hanrahan. The process of adaptation from page to stage, which involves respecting the source while creating something new, should also incorporate a “massive production element”, he adds, something currently lacking under Brian Desmond’s light directorial touch.

Buoyed by the play’s early success, Meridian plans to take the show on an extensive national tour, but the company intends, before that, to work into its unresolved issues, such as its unexpected and inconclusive ending and the question of the overall movement and narrative of the piece.

“My sense of it is that we have a great opportunity with it. It has great potential. When you have raw material like this, everything else you do is a bonus,” Hanrahan says.

For Barry, his “crash course” in theatre has whetted his appetite. He’s confident that the process, with actors throwing questions at him about the background and motivations of his characters and narratives, has helped his writing of short stories. But he also wants to mix drama with prose.

“I couldn’t work in theatre all the time, really because of too much collaboration, but it’s definitely something that I intend to be a very frequent visitor to. I’m lucky enough to get ideas all the time. And usually I’m thinking, in terms of a short story, ‘will that work?’ But I’ve noticed over the last year or so, since I’ve been involved with this, I’m also thinking, ‘hang on, could it work as a play?’” 

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*There Are Little Kingdoms* is reviewed on Page 101. Kevin Barry’s short story collection, *There Are Little Kingdoms*, is published by The Stinging Fly Press.

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*Rachel Andrews is a journalist and critic based in Cork.*

# Just One More Draft

A writer's first play is lavished with attention and critical interest. Then reality bites. Three recently produced playwrights talk to **JESSE WEAVER** about their experience of the commissioning process and the perils of 'development limbo'.

THE TERM "EMERGING WRITER" IS ONE THAT SOME playwrights dread. If applied to a writer on the outing of their first production, it can suggest an arrival of sorts on the professional scene. But if a writer finds that term is used to label them on the production of their third, fourth, or fifth play, "emerging" can seem more like a curse than a compliment. In a world where success was seemingly instantaneous for playwrights such as Martin McDonagh or Conor McPherson, there's hardly any grey area allowed between being a fringe upstart and an international theatrical phenomenon.

This year the Ulster Bank Dublin Theatre Festival and the Dublin Fringe Festival programmed new plays by Ursula Rani Sarma, Robert Massey, and Ioanna Anderson, three writers who are carving out their niches in Irish theatre. But whatever you do, don't call them "emerging".

Jesse Weaver

**URSULA RANI SARMA** In my third year in university in Cork my play called *Like Sugar on Skin* was selected to go to ISDA (the Irish Student Drama Awards). The play won a lot of awards there and the Granary Theatre decided, on the back of the success of the play, that they would send myself, a producer, three actors, and a lighting designer to the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. I wrote and directed the play ...*touched...* in July, and we opened in late August. Then it was literally a case of all the right people walking in. The next thing I knew I had an agent in London, and it just spiraled: I got a commission from Paines Plough in London, I was commissioned by the Traverse in Edinburgh, and I got a commission from the National Theatre in London, which also came with a residency.



RANI SARMA

With a commission comes a relationship with a company. They'll ask if you have any ideas or if there's anything you want to explore. Then nine times out of ten they say, 'Off you go', and you write a first draft.

I usually ask for eight months for my first draft. Then, depending on how many plays you're writing, you can write a first draft in eight months and then it might take three or four months to return to it. The ideal for me is not to have to go past a third draft before you go into the rehearsal room. Up until the third draft I'm still asking questions, and I'm not sure I have the questions answered

myself. I would prefer to give it to the company when I feel I have most of them resolved. If you have a good relationship with the company, you will usually find out what will help you to write the play you want to write.

Most companies operate on the basis that a commission is an acknowledgement of support for the playwright. Some companies might commission quite a few playwrights and stage only a handful of their plays, but they're still nurturing playwrights, they're offering them a home. I've been quite lucky in that the few instances where companies haven't been able to put forth a commission, another organisation has stepped in.

It's hard to get audiences into new work as a rule, so it's hard for companies to stage it. If you look at companies like Rough Magic and Fishamble, their commitment is unquestionable in the support that they offer. But I'm a little disappointed at the lack of female playwrights being staged by larger companies. There are so many young Irish female playwrights coming up. And actually, they're not just 'emerging' anymore -- they've emerged; they've worked for companies in the UK, in the United States, or in Europe, and they've been translated extensively. There is that sense here that you're either emerging or you're Brian Friel. I would like to see the issue of gender balanced slightly, especially by our more heavily funded companies – it's a little male dominated at the moment. *Ursula Rani Sarma's play The Magic Tree, directed by the author, ran at Cork Mid-summer Festival, Edinburgh Fringe Festival and Dublin Fringe Festival, 2008.*

**ROBERT MASSEY** The first play I wrote was *Deadline*, which was about two competing salesmen. I sent it to the Abbey where Jocelyn Clark was the Literary Manager, and he wrote back and said he liked it. He passed it on to Jim Nolan, who loved it and brought it to Lane Productions; they produced it in Andrews Lane's studio in 2006. Earlier this year I had another play staged, *Over and Out*, again with Lane Productions. I had also written a third play called *Rank*, which I gave to Fishamble. I've been very lucky: I've had three plays professionally produced in two years.



MASSEY

I think that the directors of the three plays I've written would tell you that when they got them, they weren't embryonic in any way. I think that's how I managed to break through when I first sent them out. You can write something that's ninety percent there and think that it'll carry, but that ten percent that you're not addressing will kill your play stone dead. If you can get a few people to bounce your work off, it's invaluable. For some reason, you can write a draft of

RANK (FISHAMBLE)



PAT REDMOND

a play, read it and not see anything wrong with it. But the minute I hit 'send', everything that's wrong with that play filters into my head. Because now you're looking at the play through an audience's eyes.

Each production company that I've worked with, from the time that they've signed up to do the play, has given me a degree of help or had people read the script and give notes. For *Rank*, Fishamble hired five actors (three of whom are now in the play) to come in and read it, and then we'd talk about it. I'd go home and come back in with a few tweaks, and then we read it again. After that first day of the workshop, everyone was on a high. I was in rehearsals for the first week, and then rejoined them in the fourth week. My function in the rehearsal room is to make sure that that script is standing up. You don't stand up in the room and say 'I don't like the way he's saying that', because that's not your job. At the end of the day, what you write is a blueprint for a performance, and the actors and director have the huge job of making it play.

*Rank* was produced by Fishamble Theatre Company for the Ulster Bank Dublin Theatre Festival, 2008. It transferred to the Tricycle Theatre, London, in November.

**IOANNA ANDERSON** I started a small theatre company (Greenlight Productions) about ten years ago, and I avoided the whole submission/rejection cycle by putting my plays on myself. There was nobody else involved, so nobody was going to veto what we wanted to do. Then I participated in the Rough Magic Seeds project in 2001; that was my first formal commission, if you like.

The germ of *You Are Here* (a site-specific work premiered in the Ulster Bank Dublin Theatre Festival) was Living Space Theatre's idea. They wanted to do something set in a real, live space and they looked around to commission a writer who could fulfill that brief. They interviewed a few people and I got the gig.

For *You Are Here* we looked at three or four different sites, and each one would have made a different kind of play. I went off and wrote something and we did a series of three workshops. There wasn't any kind of improvisation or devising, but there was a kind of shorthand that developed once we got to the actual production. We found we had too much material, and I'd say my job was to make sure that there was still some meaning left after all the cutting we did. There were several things happening simultaneously in different rooms, so scenes had to begin and end exactly at the same moment. Those kinds of things are extremely demanding for directors and actors, so your job is to try



ANDERSON



YOU ARE HERE (LIVING SPACE THEATRE COMPANY)

and make it as easy as possible and not cling to your lines.

Endless development can be the enemy of writing. A lot of work being commissioned, particularly in this country, ends up in development limbo where people are work-shopped but not produced. A full production is much more educational because you find out exactly what your mistakes are; you don't find those out in endless meetings talking about people's dramaturgical objectives. If you're starting out, I think that might be okay, but what do you do once you've emerged? Emerging is a great thing – people win prizes and they get attention. But a lot of people can get stuck at that mid point.

I think male and female writers have much the same problems getting their work seen. They might get reviewed differently, though. I produced a show in Scotland where one of the main characters is a woman in her fifties. There was a review by a guy who didn't see why we had a play about a middle-aged woman. Of course, there are quite a few plays about middle-aged men, but it's always said that those plays are about death, or about depression, or national identity; it's very rarely said that they're just plays about middle-aged men.

*Ioanna Anderson's You Are Here was part of the Ulster Bank Dublin Theatre Festival.* 

# Creating a Living History

A new collection of essays marking fifty years of the Dublin Theatre Festival is unified by the act of remembering and creates the sense of a theatre festival as an oral culture, writes **THOMAS CONWAY**.

**I**NTERACTIONS: DUBLIN THEATRE FESTIVAL 1957 – 2007 isn't a history in the usual sense. It is a good deal more subjective. Nor can the myriad perspectives be said to combine into a unified account. It is possibly best enjoyed as a repository of memories, an oral history, if you will. The contributors may be academics, critics, artists and key players, but these distinctions soon dissolve and we are left with a collective witness to under-acknowledged events from those who have been there, in the stalls and behind the scenes.

If anything unifies *Interactions*, it is remembering. And the degree to which a theatre festival is an oral

culture becomes the most stimulating level on which to read the book. The origin of these articles in a conference as part of the fiftieth anniversary celebrations in 2007 is poetically apt. We see each production and each festival become, on completion, an oral account to pass on. Former Director Fergus Linehan's end of festival fantasy of "dousing" festival HQ "with petrol and flicking a match" as he walks out, becomes in this light an impulse to high purpose.

**INTERACTIONS:**  
**DUBLIN THEATRE FESTIVAL**  
**1957 - 2007**  
EDITED BY PATRICK LONERGAN  
AND NICHOLAS GRENE WITH  
LILIAN CHAMBERS  
*Carysfort Press, 2008*

As such, each article holds out the unspoken promise a storyteller holds out to its circle of listeners. The speaker has been branded by an experience – rattling, deeply



FESTIVALS PAST - WOYZECK (2001)

affecting, or simply undocumented as the case may be – and means to pass it on. In this also is an invitation to the reader to bring to bear on each account our own experiences – those experiences of a changing society no less than those of the festival itself. For *Interactions* speaks quietly yet insistently of the changes in Irish society for which the festival has been both harbinger and mirror. It brings light to just how the festival has registered changes in subject matter, aesthetic affiliations and audience expectations in ways that speak uniquely, if not always obviously, to wider changes in Irish society.

We learn that the festival was initially and rather naïvely established with the purpose of providing a window on what was going on here to the rest of the world. It very quickly became a window on what was going on elsewhere and just as importantly became a space, a protected zone, in which to try out some new things for ourselves: a point repeatedly touched on in the volume, and rather brilliantly by Fintan O'Toole. That the festival should from the very beginning go head to head with the official Ireland that engendered and patronised it – that, as Lionel Pilkington reports, the Department of Justice should initiate charges against the Pike Theatre for producing *The Rose Tattoo* at the very moment the Department of Foreign Affairs was advertis-

ing the production in its internal newsletter – reflects a conflicted relationship between the festival and official Ireland that has never been lost.

On the evidence here, if great productions leave anything behind, it is a harmonic that resonates long afterwards in the culture and can be an agent of change. Many of the articles in *Interactions* go out on a limb to relate specifically to this harmonic by doing something different in the writing.

Cathy Leeney takes in the whole of Patrick Mason's body of work for the festival as a single architectural structure, thereby reconfiguring time as space and Mason as an "architect", so that larger patterns and the overall "reflexive", overtly theatrical, quality of his work should come through.

Ros Dixon gives the two sides of the Russian companies' visits, translating from Russian language memoirs of visiting directors as well as quoting reviews and interviews from cast members, and tempering this perceptively with memories and assessments of her own.

Carmen Szabó's style and frame of reference is alert to the games being played with death in Robert Lepages's and Conall Morrison's directorial remakes of *Hamlet*. And since she celebrates what others hold back from, the disentangling of *Hamlet* from any historical or political setting, she draws out a sophisticated



THE MAI (1994)

account of these games to give a startlingly new reading of *Hamlet*.

Alexander Poulain tracks Tom Murphy's *The Sanctuary Lamp* across two festivals and finds a deeply attentive way to relate the very different registers and receptions of two festival productions twenty-six years apart. Poulain's findings are especially illuminating of the festival's ability to mediate between productions and society in ways that bring deep structural changes to the surface.

Peter Kuch tracks a single production, *Cloudstreet*, across several festivals and countries to account for the

exact and especially ecstatic reception given to it in Ireland. This essay is equally illuminating, and yet my own memory offers other reasons for the show's success in Dublin – the childbirths, the deaths, the sex, a character cleaning his brother's soiled rump, these images in which a momentary claim is staked in an impossibly Australian landscape – and this difference of perspective amplifies the success of *Interactions* itself.

Former festival organisers contribute reminiscences characterised by their stylishness (and if prose style reflects personal style as seems likely

here, then the development of a personal style must surely have been their most helpful bulwark against the adversities of the job). Christopher Fitz-Simon's account recalls the first year of the festival with such stylish prose, the impression is that here was the festival where the greater adversities were to be faced down. By the same token, Lewis Clohessy discloses the horrendous financial exigencies of the 1980s with a diplomacy that must have stood him in good stead in those dark times. David Grant meets us eye-to-eye with a recreation of key experiences to reveal something of the pressures and demands on a programmer but to conceal a lot more besides. And while Tony O'Dálaigh skates across the years of his tenure with a mixture of irrepressible optimism and self-deprecation, Fergus Linehan, his successor, remains always level-headed and clear-eyed until he summons a very touching graciousness to acknowledge those who worked with him.

Tom Kilroy provides the artist's point of view to testify, in a haunting and rather haunted way, his indebtedness to the festival. This becomes, by extension, the indebtedness of the wider theatre community, Irish audiences and indeed Irish society. The festival brought him into confrontation with all he had to throw off and held out a promise of the means by which to do so, a promise it upheld

by producing his break-through work, *The Death and Resurrection of Mr Roche*.

*Interactions* succeeds best when attending to what persists of past performances, the critic holding up a tuning fork and gauging the harmonic itself in order to illuminate the full impact of a performance into our own times. As tantalizing, or infuriating, as it is to be alerted in this way to signal performances we will never see, what it gains is authority. The specific impact of the Wroclaw Contemporary Theatre, say, or Maria Knebel's production of *The Cherry Orchard* with the Abbey Company becomes available to us as a vibration, its influence able to act on us today to a degree a recording could not hope to communicate.

The present artistic director, Loughlin Deegan, provides *Interactions* with a preface and makes available something of his vision for the festival. We need go no further to see just how deeply the influence of the festival runs. It is greatly to be welcomed that the custodian of the festival's future should also be so evidently attuned to its past. By making available a living history, *Interactions* enables us to understand just how welcome that is.



---

Thomas Conway is a freelance director and is Literary Manager with Druid Theatre Company.



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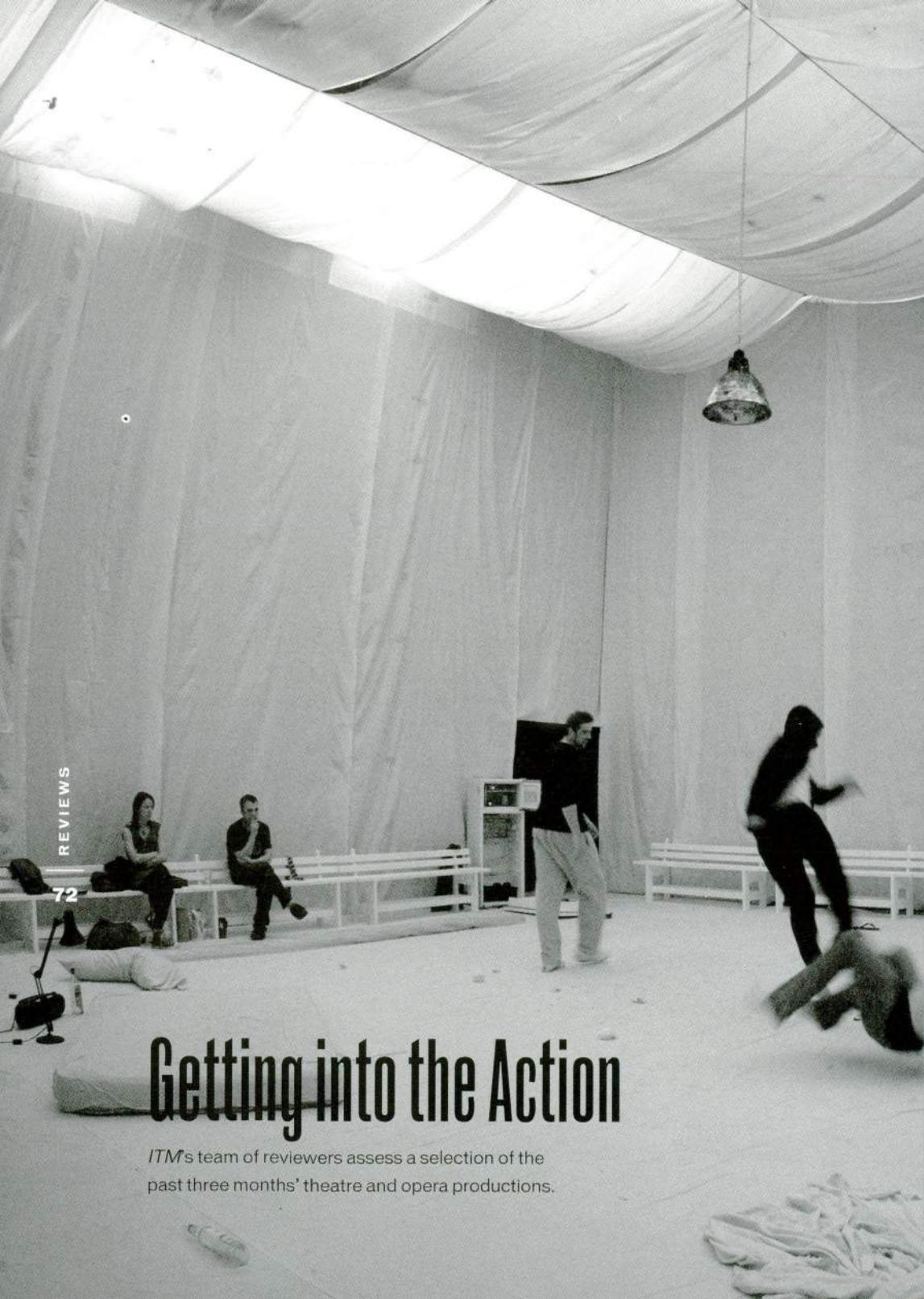
**Deadline for receipt of applications: Friday 9<sup>th</sup> January 2009**

**Restricted to 25 participants**

**Booking deposit of €100 (non-refundable) with application please**

# Getting into the Action

*ITM's* team of reviewers assess a selection of the past three months' theatre and opera productions.





The cast of Phaedra's Love (Loose Canon)

# In Search of Nuptial Bliss

Social mores are examined through rituals of weddings and marriage in five recent productions.

## **WEDDING DAY AT THE CRO-MAGNONS\***

**By Wajdi Mouawad,**

**translated by Shelley Tepperman**

Bedrock Productions

Directed by Jason Byrne

Set design: Paul O'Mahony

Lighting design: Sinéad Wallace

With: Caitríona Ní Mhurchú, Conor Madden,

Gerard Kelly, Louise Lewis,

Nyree Yergainharsian and Phil Kingston

Smock Alley Theatre

14 - 25 Oct. Reviewed 21 Oct.

**BY HARVEY O'BRIEN**

"IN CAPITALIST SOCIETY, HYPOCRISY AND cynicism have now lost all sense of proportion and are becoming more outrageous every day. Without making exaggerated sacrifices to humanitarianism, which always involves impossible reconciliations and truces to the advantage of the stronger, I should say that in this atmosphere, thought cannot consider the exterior world without an immediate shudder." André Breton wrote these words in 1924, and how apt they remain. They also perfectly encapsulate the rationale behind Wajdi Mouawad's comic drama which, like the work of Breton and his fellow sur-

realists, takes an askance approach to the subject of untenable reality.

The action probably takes place in 1970s Beirut (approximately when playwright Wajdi Mouawad left his native Lebanon for France, then Canada). Under a sonic blanket of constant rumbling and explosions which may be gunfire or thunder, a family prepares for a wedding. Representing hope for salvation, unity, catharsis and light in the face of literal and figurative darkness, the occasion is nonetheless not quite all it seems. Narcoleptic Nelly (Nyree Yergainharsian), unseen for the entire first act, drifts in and out of a dream state and may have comparatively little grasp on reality. Fragile Nazha (Caitríona Ní Mhurchú), her mother, bedecked in a purple pantsuit and gold jewellery, seems to be ill-prepared for the big day and is helped by overly-eager Souhayla (Louise Lewis) to prepare the food. Brother Neel (Gerard Kelly), meanwhile, veers from articulate and obsessed with word games to a quivering wreck, and father Neyif (Phil Kingston), when he arrives, is abusive, frustrated, and thoroughly disgusted with everything and everyone around him.

Nyree Yergainharsian in *Wedding Day at the Cro-Magnons*



It's all a lie anyway, you see: there is no groom, and the whole thing is a kind of ritual charade - almost literally a symbolic gesture as missiles and machine guns go off around this crumbling family with its absent member, the frequently referenced but presumed dead brother Walter (beloved of Souhayla, and also a poet).

There is terrific rhetorical force in Mouawad's feint into the surreal. As Breton would have it, there is a current of anger underlying the bizarre comedy, an anger not representable by sentimental realism. Like all good surrealism, Mouawad's forays into illogic and dream-logic are also well grounded in observable reality. The play takes the time to create precise, recognisable situations and characters, sometimes almost mundane ones, and then throws wild (frequently obscene, often sexually explicit) dialogue, sudden bursts of irrational emotion, and peculiar narrative twists at them to see what happens. The play concludes with the scene shrouded in mist, as if we have perhaps stepped into Nelly's dreams, or maybe realised that's where we always were, or never could be and only perceive this reality dimly through the fog of theatrical representation.

Director Jason Byrne delights in his playscape. As usual, he pours on the aural stimuli, bombarding the audience first with Lebanese music, then explosions and gunfire, and has his actors speaking in a sometimes almost inaudible stream of quickfire, natural-style vocal delivery. Choreographer Ella Clarke (whose bio claims her most recent project is the building of the Genesis Device for the Federation, I kid you not) works with Byrne to keep the actors busy all the time, from having Kingston wrestle a sheep (Conor Madden) to the constant dance around the set created by the endless preparations for the fake wedding and much throwing about of furniture. Paul O'Mahony's set is suitably dour, suggesting not only symbolic decay, but actual destruction commensurate with life in a war zone, and Sinéad Wallace has the task of using low lighting to suggest periodic blackouts which again serve both practical and metaphoric functions.

There is a casual, almost overly-familiar performance style here that jars at first, but gradually emerges as essential to maintaining the balance of comedy and drama, real and unreal, upon which the play and the production both turn. It's a difficult tone to maintain, but by and large the cast manage to hold it steady enough to generate drama. It would be very easy for them to slip into self-indulgent smirking with it though, and there may have been one or two moments where this happened. The moments of shrieking hysteria that bring characters into direct, dramatic conflict rather than have them communicate in abstract and deliberately disconnected soliloquys help to ground things, performance-wise.

Yergainharsian's sympathetically optimistic presence as Nelly in the final act when she does appear is also important in preventing the insanity from slipping into mere chaos.

This is a play that is working quite hard to be about something important, and one wouldn't want the surrealist aesthetic to mislead either cast or audience into simply laughing it off altogether.

---

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

#### **A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM**

**By William Shakespeare**

National Youth Theatre

Directed by György Vidovszky

Set & costume Design: Diego Pitarch

Lighting design: Eamon Fox

Sound design: Samuel Gryllus

Choreography: Eszter Gyevi-Bíró

With: Lutz Biedinger, Kevin Corcoran,

Alan Dalton, Brian Devaney, Barry Lenihan,

Eoin Lennon, Mary-Louise McCarthy, Christina Matthews, Barry Morgan, Kiefer Moriarty-Short,

Gráinne Moriarty, Katherine Murphy, Luke

Naessens, Roxanna Nic Liam, Jessica O'Driscoll-

Breen, Mary Rose Phipps, Paul Tansey, Roisín

Watson, Barry Whelan, Darren Yorke.

Peacock Theatre, Dublin

25 – 30 August 2008 Reviewed 30 August

**BY VICTORIA WHITE**

IT SHOULDN'T SURPRISE THAT THE National Youth Theatre breathed

fresh life into Shakespeare's great comedy. Romance and sexual longing are specialities of the young, after all. But it did surprise. And that's because of the accretions of culture, history, reverence and endless other productions with which almost any middle-aged theatre-goer will approach the play.

The National Youth Theatre, under György Vidovszky's direction, stripped them all away. We faced Diego Pitarch's bare set, with a chandelier and an old dresser. Eamon Fox's lighting suggested the aftermath of a blitz, or Dublin as she used to look before the Tiger.

Hippolyta is dragged in, bound and gagged. She speaks no English. Ah hold on, thinks middle-aged Mammy, they're over-punking this. Ah hold on, Mammy. Look at the script: "Hippolyta, I wooed thee with my sword / And won thy love doing thee injuries", announces Theseus.

This production hinged on the tension between love as power, and love as longing. No other production I have seen has so firmly sketched in the patriarchal power that constrained love and stabilised society in Shakespeare's time. All productions make hay with the anarchy of sexual longing, the love potion arbitrarily dripped on the sleeping eyes. But this one brilliantly explored the tension between this desire and power, so clearly shown in the opening scenes with Egeus insisting his daughter Hemia must marry

Roxanna Nic Liam and Barry Whelan in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*



Demetrius, although the man she favours is agreed by all to be just as worthy. "As she is mine," he states, "I may dispose of her."

Brian Devaney as Theseus enunciated badly, which was a shame. Overall the lords and lovers were a delight, particularly Barry Whelan's fogey-like Demetrius and Roxanna Nic Liam's amazing Helena, getting off her wedges to trot after Demetrius like a dog. Never before has the shock of the expression of the young woman's longing been so clear – and the social upheaval it would have caused in a society which pretended it did not exist. Shakespeare was obviously and actively exploring the explosive power of liberating women.

Vidovszky bravely took liberties with the "Rude Mechanicals", but his liberties were carefully taken. The Mechanicals speak in prose and in a very real way are not part of the poetry of the play. They can depart from the script with impunity. And they did, to hilarious effect.

Vidovszky gave us a band of amateur actors, with a scarf-and-tantrum-throwing director, played brilliantly by Barry Lenihan. Lutz Biedinger's Bottom, with swinging golden tresses and boiler suit, was incredibly funny; his leaping, swooning, rearing death scene as Pyramus had the audience bent double with laughter. And when you read the text you feel something like Biedinger's performance was what

Shakespeare had in mind when he wrote, "Now die, die, die, die, die."

Luke Naessen's Francis Flute was a perfect creation, the mild camp overcoming the initial unwillingness to play Thisbe. And as for Kiefer Moriarty-Short's Wall, the blank gaze suddenly breaking into a smile when the Wall was moved to wave to someone in the audience – I wasn't the only one who was nearly sick with laughter. And again, the brickwork painted on his face which seems such a funny novelty, is clearly suggested by Bottom in the text: "And let him have some plaster, or some loam, or some rough-cast about him..."

The Budapest-based Vidovszky, who has long experience of working with young people, clearly communicated this text quite brilliantly to these young actors. The precision and daring of their movements – such as Lysander's leap onto Hermia's maid-only woodland bed – was notable. His trademark here were the pauses he forced at times between speeches, which pointed to the tension between words and the sexual longing that the play was all about. However, at times this affected the pace.

Wonderful sound effects, such as the fairy music played on triangles, were provided by sound designer Samuel Gryllus, while Eszter Gyevi-Bíró choreographed the movement.

---

*Victoria White is a freelance writer based in Dublin.*

**A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM****By William Shakespeare, with incidental****music by Felix Mendelssohn**Storytellers Theatre Company  
and the Irish Chamber Orchestra

Directed by Liam Halligan and Lawrence Evans

Conducted by Orlando Jopling

Lighting: Marcus Costello.

Costumes: Sinead Cuthbert

With: Deirdre Moynihan (soprano), Carrie Crowley, Walter van Dyk, Brian Bennett, Liam

Clarke, Mary Kelly, Mark Fitzgerald

On tour, 2 - 5 Oct 2008. Reviewed 5 Oct

at the National Concert Hall, Dublin

**BY JOHN WHITE**

A MARRIAGE OF SHAKESPEARE'S WORDS to Mendelssohn's music might seem a match made in heaven. After all, this combination has many antecedents – the ballets of Frederick Ashton and George Balanchine spring to mind. But in these very successful pairings, Shakespeare supplied the narrative but not the language. The ICO and Storytellers both doing what they do well looks great on paper, but in reality? Well, that's a different matter.

The partners for these nuptials were separately very well prepared. The ICO was in fine form under the baton of Orlando Jopling, who also rescored the piece most effectively from its original two soloists, children's choir and full orchestra to a more viable chamber orchestra and one soprano. There was fine phrasing from

strings and wind sections and meticulous chording from brass and woodwind particularly in the exposed endings of the overture and finale. It was a pleasure to hear Orlando's reading of the Wedding March, full of dramatic crescendos and decrescendos and the full middle section – the part you never hear at a wedding.

By contrast, the Shakespeare side of this partnership (Storytellers) had the more difficult task. Their Mendelssohnian spouse was wrapped in the flounces and frills of 19th century romanticism. So, how do you devise a production for what was bespoke music for a production in 1843, with all the attendant trappings of painted scenery and diaphanous robes? Initial signs looked promising: Marcus Costello's primary colours reflected the warmth of the music and Carrie Crowley's aristocratic Hippolyta and classical goddess-like Titania generally matched the mood, as did the overgrown schoolgirl of Mary Kelly's Helena. The morphing of the Mechanicals into the Fairies was also a neat bit of stagecraft.

But other aspects of the drama jarred with the music. The randomness of the acting styles only amplified these discrepancies, ranging as it did from the high classical enunciation of Walter van Dyk as Theseus/Oberon to the contemporary Dublin of Helena and the Mechanicals. With the exception of Titania, costumes and props didn't help either,





Mark Fitzgerald in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

with the Fairies' cheap and cheerful beach wear and the Mechanicals' touting of Tesco bags, mops, and cleaning gloves totally at odds with the 19th century milieu of Mendelssohn's unashamedly romantic music.

In fact there seemed to be a desperation to make this marriage work. At the beginning of each half, the orchestra drifted on stage, barefoot, in dream-like states (for 'non-actors' they were brilliant) and 'discovered' their instruments, and the conductor as the young Mendelssohn rushed on stage to begin writing the score. But this extra layer of narrative on top of Shakespeare's three other plot-lines served to confuse matters and, cru-

cially, it did not develop in any meaningful way. Even when both music and play were as one, Shakespeare seemed to be waiting on Mendelssohn and vice versa. During the musical interludes, the drama seemed unsure of itself – Puck re-uniting the lovers as they slept was a case in point – it was as if the music was getting in the way of the forward dramatic movement of the play.

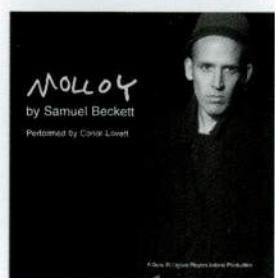
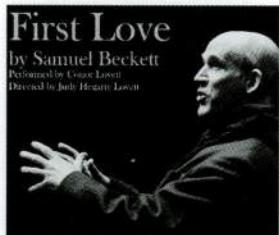
This is not to suggest, of course, that the production should have resorted to a museum-piece recreation of the type of production that inspired Mendelssohn, and there were some glimpses of what might have been when Soprano Deirdre Moynihan ap-

peared and sang 'Come now a roundel' with the three Fairies supplying the chorus. This was wonderful, and felt just right. There was a sweet innocence here that might have developed into a sideways look at the mores and values that informed productions of the Bard's work in the 1800's from a 21st century perspective.

Having said all that, the audience laughed uproariously at the travails of Pyramus and Thisbe and gave the piece a tumultuous standing ovation. It was simply that the whole didn't add up to the sum of its parts.

---

*John White is a theatre director, orchestral and choral conductor.*



#### **AN IDEAL HUSBAND**

**By Oscar Wilde**

Directed by Neil Bartlett

Set & costume design: Rae Smith

Lighting design: Chris Davey

Sound design: Denis Clohessy

With: Derbhle Crotty, Deirdre Donnelly,

Mark O'Halloran, Aoibheann O'Hara,

Natalie Radmall-Quirke and Simon Wilson.

Abbey Theatre

14 August – 27 Sept 2008. Reviewed 14 August

**BY FINTAN WALSH**

WILDE HAS EMERGED AS ONE OF THE MOST urgent commentators of these material times. *An Ideal Husband*, which premiered at the Theatre Royal, Haymarket in 1895, has so much to say

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about the vagaries of politics, social propriety, and public culture that it could almost be mistaken for a new commission. Maintaining the high standard set by the Abbey's recent and projected programming, Bartlett's version goes far to persuade us that this frequently overlooked play might well be Wilde's most earnest of all.

Resisting the temptation that routinely follows Wilde's oeuvre to simply mount a sumptuous period piece or a comic romp, Bartlett's finely-tuned take lets nothing obfuscate the writer's dialogue and carefully crafted social critique. Delivery is precise and not a word is wasted or compromised. While there are moments of hilarity, visual indulgence, and stagey caricature, these modulations are carefully managed so as not to detract from the play's interrogative thrust.

While the set, like the costumes, is beautifully realized, it does not dominate the space. Rather, the rooms occupy a relatively small portion of the stage so that our eyes never rest for too long on the ornate surfaces, but are also drawn to the surrounding spaces from where bodies watch, listen, and calibrate the next move. This arrangement is especially impressive when actors enter by strutting from the wings like models on a catwalk, and it is most effective when servants and stagehands encircle the central action to apprehend, and emphasise,

a key moment. This direction ultimately suggests that for those on pedestals and in public life, the world is always shrinking, while comparatively subordinate folk, like vultures, fly close to the next victim.

On a minor note, while the scaled-down set works well, it seemed odd that the floor was not cleaned up on the night, with the obvious tape and chalk marks appearing more sloppy than deliberately casual. It was also unfortunate that the stylised entrances and exists, often difficult to see clearly, were not accentuated more vividly by lighting.

The cast does an exceptional job. Although playing one of the smaller roles, O'Hara gives us a delightfully fresh and confident Miss Mabel Chiltern, while Donnelly's Lady Markby strikes the highest comic note. But it is O'Halloran as Lord Goring and Crotty as Mrs Cheveley who stand out. Both single, and resistant to idealizing conventions, their roles are crucial to highlighting the corruptions and contradictions that abound.

O'Halloran's Goring is slick, calculating, and generous, and although present for all of the most important scenes, he manages to effect an air of always being elsewhere, most likely above it all. Crotty's Cheveley is a magnificent creation that presents the character's ostensible self-centeredness as survival instinct. She is very much a product of her world, but



Derbhle Crotty and Natalie Radmill Quirke in *An Ideal Husband*

lacking in the blinded hypocrisy of others, and so it is hard to condemn her scheming outright.

Indeed, it is in Cheveley that the contemporaneousness of the piece is most strongly felt. Although all the other characters condemn her, possibly even Wilde who banishes her from the customary happy ending (perhaps as an artistic reaction to his own detractors), Crotty's portrayal of the maligned figure makes it difficult for us not to identify with her. Her embodiment does not resemble the bitter, greedy, pantomime witch who - shame on her - upsets the idyllic marriage of the Chilterns. Rather, along with less abrasive help from Goring, she de-realises all the fantasies that

structure her social milieu. She radically questions all forms of idealisation in human relationships, morality and politics by turning the logic that binds in on itself, ultimately imploding 'respectability' from within.

Bartlett seizes upon this potential too, perhaps most brilliantly in the final scene. While the play text ends with Lady Chiltern's (Radmall-Quirke) rather soppy resolution - "It is love, Robert. Love and only love. For both of us a new life is beginning." - here, Cheveley goose-steps from the wings and through the imaginary walls of the Chiltern's decorative home in a manner that refuses to let easy sentimentality, self-satisfaction, or the convenient distribu-

Volume 1 Number 1 April 2008

# Irish Theatre International

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2009-0870

tion of blame to settle. Clicking her fingers, she decides when it is all over.

Fintan Walsh writes about theatre and teaches at Trinity College Dublin.

**A MASKED BALL**

**By Giuseppe Verdi,**

**libretto by Antonio Somma**

Opera 2005

Conducted by Kevin Mallon

Directed by Tom Hawkes

Set & costume design: Olan Wrynn

Lighting design: Paul Denby

Choreography: Sinead Murphy

With: Cara O'Sullivan, Jeff Stewart, Simon Thorpe, Rebekah Coffey and Ceri Williams

Cork Opera House

23 – 27 Sept 2008; Reviewed 27 Sept

**BY ÁINE SHEIL**

OPERA 2005 IS, AS THE COMPANY strapline goes, "a legacy of Cork 2005". It is Cork's only opera company, and its Arts Council grant for the past year was just €110,000. Verdi's *A Masked Ball* is an ambitious undertaking for a small company, since it involves a cast of ten soloists, a chorus and a sizeable orchestra. In part, Opera 2005 punched above its weight in this production, with fine vocal performances by Cork soprano Cara O'Sullivan, Welsh mezzo-soprano Ceri Williams and Rebekah Coffey, a young soprano from Newtownards. Unfortunately their performances were not matched across the cast and the or-

chestra sounded distinctly under-rehearsed in many passages. These problems were not entirely unexpected, given the modest means and ambitious programming, nor were they alleviated by the period staging, which unfolded as a series of tableaux.

The original work is set in Sweden in the late 18th century and tells the story of the assassination of King Gustav III at a masked ball. Opera 2005 updated the action to the eve of World War I, but this innovation did not introduce any significantly new perspectives. As Gustavus, Jeff Stewart had a difficult time: his voice began to fail early in the evening, and he was not able to embody the liberal and principled monarch suggested in an explanatory programme note. Amelia, the woman with whom he had fallen in love, easily outshone him: Cara O'Sullivan portrayed her character's emotional struggles with an effective mix of modesty and intensity, although she too was somewhat constrained by Tom Hawkes' largely static direction. As Amelia's husband, Simon Thorpe was a vocally reliable Anckarström for the most part, but some strain in his upper register emerged at delicate moments, such as when he sang of his lost love in Act III. Madame Arvidson (Ceri Williams) was every inch the fortune-teller, with histrionic gestures, a flowing purple dress and a lair suggested by one large shiny blue cloth. This 'otherness' was echoed in her servant, invented specially for this production: a long

Jeff Stewart and Cara O'Sullivan in A Masked Ball



CLAUDE FISICARO

curly red wig, a constantly bemused expression and an intermittent limp all set him apart from the crowd that gathered to be entertained by Madame Arvidson.

Another piece of invention seemed to suggest Arvidson's dubious business practice: in Act II, her servant was seen leaving herbs outside the city for Amelia to find (herbs, the fortune-teller had informed Amelia, that grow in the ground and would cure her of her feelings for Gustavus). Perhaps this was a moment of meta-theatricality – the be-wigged servant merely carrying out the job of stage technicians – but in any case Amelia proceeded to ignore the herbs.

This Act, set at midnight, was made suitably gloomy by dry ice and a tomb for Amelia to sit on and spring up

from at moments of particular intensity, but like all other acts it presented an uneasy mix of naturalism and stylisation. Several scenic elements served throughout the evening: grey pillars that ended in silhouetted foliage and grey steps on which the chorus was arranged in various configurations.

This was a production that couldn't quite disguise its low budget, but several performances were strong enough to win an enthusiastic response from the capacity audience at the Cork Opera House. Not surprisingly, the biggest ovation of the evening went to Cara O'Sullivan.

---

*Áine Sheil is a lecturer in Music at University College Cork.*

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# Complicated Desires

In these productions, modern versions of ancient Greek classics offered new slants on love and sexual attraction.

## BIG LOVE

By Charles Mee

Directed by Selina Cartmell

Set & costume design: Jon Bausor

Lighting design: Paul Keogan.

Sound: Denis Clohessy

With: Malcolm Adams, Brian Bennett, Barbara Brennan, Daniel Brocklebank, Martin Brody, Stav Dvorkin, Tim Gahan, Kelly Gough, Jose Miguel Jimenez, Aonghus Óg McAnally, Robert McDermott, Chris McHale, Rory Nolan, Donncha O'Dea, Ciara O'Callaghan, Marion O'Dwyer, Judith Roddy  
Peacock Theatre  
5 July - 2 August 2008. Reviewed 29 July.

BY HARVEY O'BRIEN

"LOVE IS THE HIGHEST LAW," SAYS the wizened 'Mama Italiana' played by Barbara Brennan at the resolution of Charles Mee's adaptation of Aeschylus' *The Suppliant Women*. She is presiding at the ad hoc trial (or is it an extradition hearing?) of the 50 Greek brides who have murdered 49 of their newlywed husbands on their wedding night in Italy, to where the brides-to-be had fled before the nuptials only to be promptly pursued by their suitors. It's not as straightfor-

ward as even that, though. In fact, there's a civil counter-suit to be heard, because one of the brides, Lydia (Ciara O'Callaghan) has reneged on her pact with her sisters to kill all the men because she actually likes her beau, Nikos (Aonghus Og McAnally). Her vengeful sister Thyona (Judith Roddy) points out that their cause was just and the act of execution a legitimate response to what was forced marriage and therefore a constraint of freedom. From that point of view Lydia's breaking of the pact is dishonourable because it was carried out in the name of mere love.

In the end, it's a hung jury, as the old lady, font of all wisdom, and therefore basically the persona of the goddess Athena, says that these women, having no country, should make their own laws, and that there is no justice and no punishment the law can dish out that matters more than human feelings, particularly sympathy. So, in one sense, love is the highest law and Lydia is right; and on the other, lack of sympathy for the women by the laws of their own country means that it would be unjust to punish them for

Judith Roddy, Ciara O'Callaghan and Kelly Gough in *Big Love*



ROS KAVANAGH

pursuing their freedom -both freedom from forced marriage and the freedom to pursue their own choice of feeling.

Heady stuff even at this level and, although clearly knee-deep in gender politics at a level fitting the label 'Greek drama', Mee's adaptation throws a lot more into the mix to add layers of interpretative and contextual scaffolding to the classical edifice. This isn't really ancient Greece and ancient Italy, you see, because these women know all about designer wear and spa breaks, and their husbands-to-be arrive on stage dropped from a military helicopter wearing combat gear and in the shadow of a banner bearing the legend "Mission Accomplished". Indeed.

Added to this mix is the staging, mixing faux-classicism and minimalism with elaborate musical and dance numbers, bright and colourful props wheeled on and off to create new scenes and transform the setting, ranging from a pink parasol that evokes a honeymoon fantasy to a grand piano and disco ball that gives Daniel Brocklebank the opportunity to camp it up as the Barbie-loving grandson of Brennan's matriarch (whose son, played by Chris McHallem is a kind of ineffectual Italian billionaire).

Director Selina Cartmell, quickly becoming a label for bold and gripping stagecraft, keeps all of this moving and never lets it degenerate into chaos. The blocking is precise and stylish and the movement is carefully choreographed,

including some variants on classic choral style delivery as the three brides repeat the same lines of dialogue in sequence and follow a series of repeated movements as they do. There is also stage combat played as a broad and bloody dance scene, and some nudity and miscellaneous sexual coupling, none of it not controlled and clearly directed.

The performances are evidently attuned to this sense of focus, with Roddy's intense and frightening Thyona putting every man in his place (ironically, of course, Thyona is ideally matched to her proposed beau, a domineering traditionalist, as is romantic Lydia to her egalitarian suitor and shallow Olympia to her big, dumb lover). The constructedness of each character lends itself to such focused interpretation, and it all adds up to a sense of a master-plan being executed with great skill.

And yet this is where the real nagging questions come up. There are so many things going on here and all of them seem to be handled so well, why, at the end of it all, do we feel more like we've been to a variety show than to a gripping piece of theatre? Perhaps the show is so expressive about so many things on so many levels, that there's actually a dearth of sympathy on the part of the audience for the plight of these characters, and in moving from classical archetypes to postmodern constructs, they have not gained the capacity to actually generate the feelings that they present as a problematic.

**PHAEDRA'S LOVE****By Sarah Kane**

Loose Canon

Directed by Jason Byrne

Design: Ciaran O'Melia. Sound: Carl Kennedy

Choreography: Ella Clarke

With: Phil Kingston, Conor Cillian Madden, Deirdre Roycroft, Nyree Yergainharsian, Kate Nic Chonaonaigh, Ruth Toland, Gerard Kelly,

Barry O'Conner, Keith Ward

Project Arts Centre, Dublin

3 - 19 July 2008. Reviewed 3 July

**BY SUSAN CONLEY**

WHAT'S THE POINT IN STAGING A SARAH Kane play? Is her work really all that important? We've been told it is, vociferously, by her defenders, from the moment *Blasted* hit the stage in 1995. Critics who dared refute her genius were vilified as crotchety fuddy dudies who wouldn't know genius if it bit them in the bifocals. Kane's work was distinctly challenging, deliberately provoking, and one has to imagine that she was intending to piss people off.

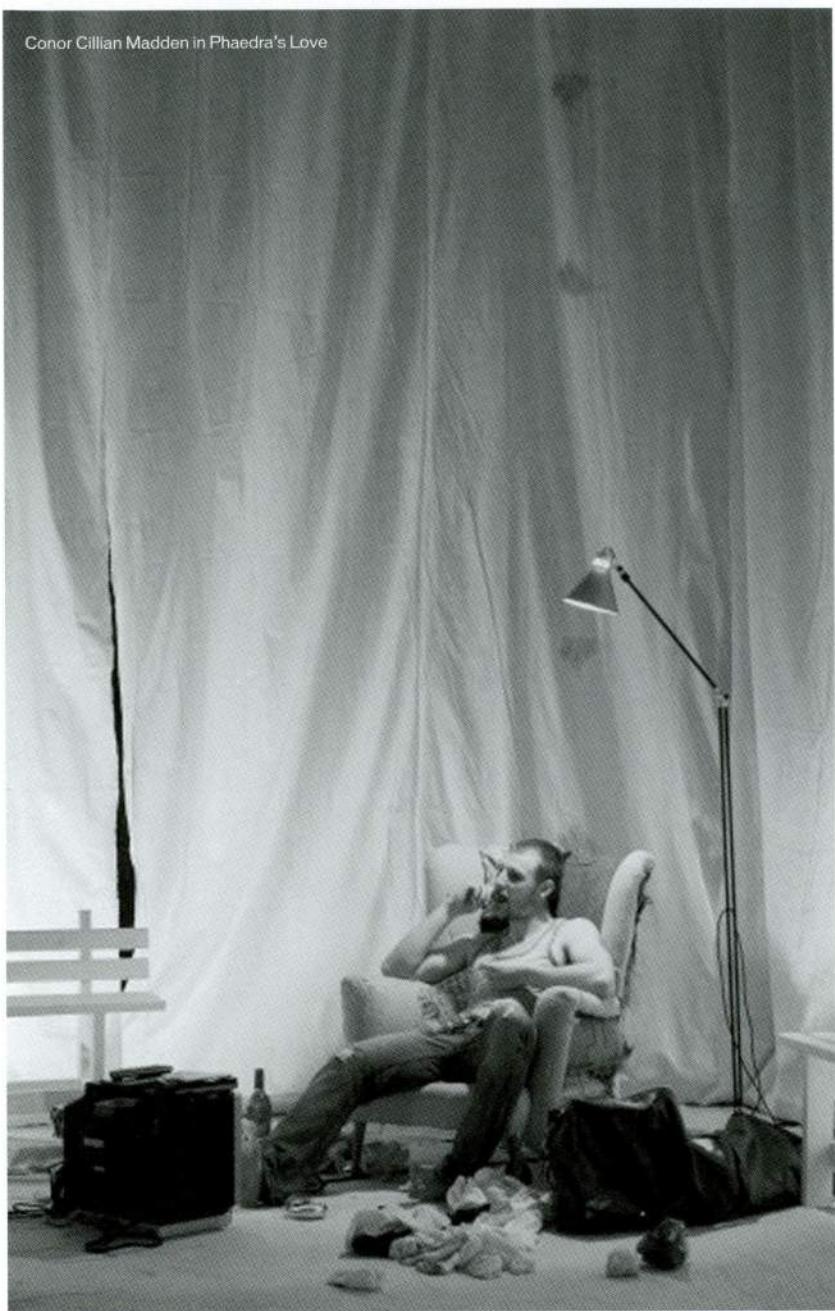
That's the trouble with a Sarah Kane play. Her suicide prevented a development of a mature artistry, and we can only wonder 'What if?' Her ghost looms larger than the elder Hamlet's and even if a production manages to be as mad and limitless as the words on the page, Kane and her life and her death are never far away. Loose Canon, despite a strong design and several accomplished

performances, do not exorcise her shade from the work, and in fact, in not satisfying one of the primary demands of the script, leaves the audience confused as to what the larger ambition of the project was.

*Phaedra's Love* is loosely based on Seneca's *Phaedra*, in which the usual Greek cast of characters interfere with each other sexually regardless of alliances and bloodlines, and all die. This applies in Kane's version as well, although it is not Phaedra (a sublimely needy and jittery Deirdre Roycroft) who is the centre of our attention but Hippolytus (Conor Cillian Madden). In Kane's vision, Hippolytus is an overweight, unlovely, unloving bastard, and everyone's desire for him is their downfall. He is the big, fat, smelly crucible in which the royal family burns. Kane sets it amongst refrigerators and television sets, yet effortlessly draws on motives as ancient as the Greeks themselves, exploring betrayal, jealousy and hopeless love colloquially and with brutal insight.

Directed by Jason Byrne in the round, Ciaran O'Melia's design draped Project's Space Upstairs with yellowed muslin, behind which glowed the light of lamps; the heat against the muslin created a sulphurous, hellish smell, not inappropriate to the proceedings. It was like sitting inside a rotting egg, watching a family enact its basest desires with-

Conor Cillian Madden in *Phaedra's Love*



out compunction. And we were forced to dodge dry cereal, cringe away from fake blood, and perhaps, be unlucky enough to be sitting near to Madden whilst he 'ejaculated' into a sports sock or whilst he received a 'blow job' from Roycroft.

It's the inverted commas that are essentially one of the problems. Whilst total veracity is probably not desirable, and once one gets over that bump of discomfort, it's just about faking it. Theatre is arguably about faking it. But whatever it is that must be faked, must be faked so that we are at least a little fooled.

Most of all, we cannot be fooled in to thinking that Hippolytus is the disgusting, obese, revolting creature that he is, on the page, if the actor playing him is fit, young and handsome on the stage. And subtextually, despite the fact that everyone seems to want to shag him, his inner man is not fit and handsome. And if the argument is that his lovers project their own qualities onto Hippolytus, then that's not much of an argument either, as none of the protagonists in Kane's play, or in Seneca's for that matter, are in the least bit fit and healthy. The central shock of Kane's text is lessened through not casting a sexually unappealing body in that role. If her work is important enough to do, then it really should be done exactly as she ordered it.

So the problem with Kane's work

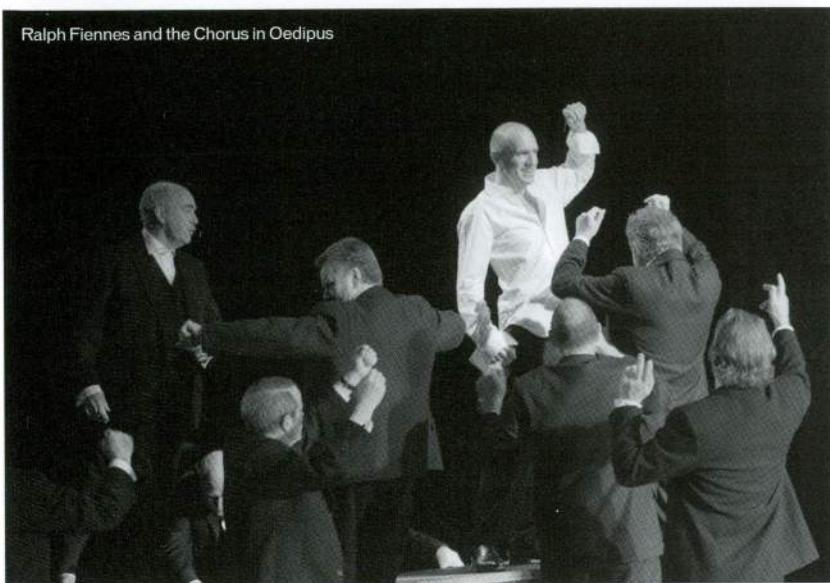
may be glaringly obvious after all: it's not that her work isn't important enough – a truly electrifying and creative and thematically precise production of 4.48 *Psychosis* is something I'd very much like to see in my lifetime – it is that her work isn't stageable under less than stringent yet experimental circumstances. Byrne's demand that we, as the audience, become witnesses that can't hide behind other witnesses, is a step in a potent direction, aided by the glare of the lighting design, and by actors who prowled the playing area like the wounded beasts that their characters are. By not satisfying the significant remit of the characterisation, however, it was not as daring, or as repulsive, as it might have been.

It is not enough that the work be daring in theory if, in practice, it is not let retain its power. Kane's work is unquestionably powerful – on the page. Her work attacks and bares and laughs at taboos – on the page. Her voice is as fresh and vulnerable now as it was then – on the page. Her work is important, in that it challenges practitioners to cope with a vision that is eminently difficult to stage, and one can only admire those who continue the hard graft of getting there.

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Susan Conley is a writer and critic and is Art Director of this magazine.

Ralph Fiennes and the Chorus in *Oedipus*



### **OEDIPUS**

**By Sophocles, in a new version  
by Frank McGuinness from a literal  
translation by Ciaran McGroarty**

The Royal National Theatre

Directed by Jonathan Kent

Set & costume design: Paul Brown

Lighting design: Neil Austin

Music: Jonathan Dove; sound, Paul Grootuis

With: Ralph Fiennes, Alan Howard,

Claire Higgins

Olivier Theatre

8 October – 4 January 2009.

Reviewed 16 October

**BY KAREN FRICKER**

CATHERINE ASHMORE

THE HEADLINE NEWS ABOUT THIS NEW production of *Oedipus* is Ralph Fiennes in the title role: it's surely his presence that has the production sold

out in the RNT's rep through January - not bad for a 2,500-year-old play in a 1,000-seat theatre. The production initially tries too hard to be monumental, and this extends to Fiennes' performance. While talented and charismatic, he has a tendency towards the studied and actorly, which is not always contained here by director Jonathan Kent (with whom Fiennes has worked in several high-profile contexts before, including the magnificent Gate Theatre/Broadway *Faith Healer* in 2006). This production is at its considerable best when it, and Fiennes, show their trust in material and audience by playing things simply. Though its Irish-inflected colloquialism has not been appreciated by several London critics, Frank McGuinness' version is a

key component in the production's success: its unpretentious feel helps the conventions of Greek drama make sense in the present day.

The production's aggressive attempts to establish its import start with Paul Brown's set – a massive door sitting on the centre of a copper-and-green-mottled dome. Just in case audiences hadn't yet grasped the *totus mundus* theme, the earth-shaped set revolves slowly at various points during the production. Fiennes' direct address of the play's first line ("My people, my friends, you have come before me – why?") and the chorus' initial placement in the front rows of the audience emphatically underlines our implication in the action.

Rather like (but in greater number than) the chorus in Patrick Mason's recent, excellent production of Seamus Heaney's *Burial at Thebes* at Dublin's Peacock, the 15 men who filter onto the stage responding to Oedipus' queries are besuited elders, representing the stability and respectability of the city. It is genuinely surprising when their overlapping choral speaking segues into close-harmony singing, but once adjusted to, this is a powerful choice, adding visual/aural interest and gravitas to the proceedings.

Fiennes is a very physical actor, and at first tends to strike a slightly stagey pose and use a lot of arm movements as he speaks his lines. Af-

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**Electric Dreams**  
Enda Walsh returns to Druid while the current issue of Irish Theatre Magazine has arrived.

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ter about 15 minutes, however, once Oedipus – and we – are hooked into solving the mystery of his origins, Fiennes relaxes his physicality and becomes emotionally consumed by the task he has given himself. Claire Higgins, playing Oedipus' wife/mother Jocasta, is appropriately and visibly a generation older than Fiennes, lending a frisson to the open sensuality between them. Her silent realisation of the truth of her relationship to Oedipus is horribly believable. As for Fiennes, he plays his penny-dropping moment as a slow, high pitched, never-quite articulated scream, holding his hands in front of his face and then trying to put his fists in his mouth. His conviction carries what could otherwise be a moment of excessive staginess.

McGuinness' version combines pared-back poetry with short blasts of colloquialism. What some London reviewers have criticised as "banal" and "low-rent" comes across to an Irish-sympathetic ear as easy, unaffected Hibernicisation: "He's dead and gone, done and dusted". McGuinness' take on the language may explain Kent's choice to have certain roles spoken in Irish accents, in particular Alan Howard's Tiresias, but it's hard to credit what Kent was after in transforming Howard's single scene into an extended riff on *Waiting for Godot*. Howard, standing in front of a barren tree, speaks his

prophecies in a mild lilt, and is led offstage on a string held by a young boy. There is surely an important line to be drawn between the Greeks' vision of predetermination and Beckett's fatalistic worldview, but this isolated blast of reference feels incongruous. More effective, because of its simplicity (even if it does extend the unwelcome equation of Irish with rural), is Alfred Burke's Irish-accented turn as the Shepherd who finally confirms Oedipus' identity.

This confirmation of Oedipus' parentage is, to contemporary sensibilities, the play's emotional peak, but the play continues on for another fifteen minutes with the reporting of Jocasta's suicide, Oedipus' self blinding, and then his bloodied appearance on stage. It feels like a misstep to play this final entrance as the evening's most dramatic 'reveal': his performance of the following scene can't help but feel over-played. This is recovered somewhat by the appearance of Oedipus' children, costumed in school uniforms. The simplicity of the moment as Oedipus and his girls clutch each other and he implores them to "lead a good life – better than your father's" represents this production at its powerful, moving best.

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*Karen Fricker lectures in contemporary theatre at Royal Holloway, University of London and is deputy London theatre critic for Variety (US).*

# Words of Distinction

Playwrights used language to define difference and a sense of place in recent new productions.

## FURTHER THAN THE FURTHEST THING

By Zinnie Harris

Hatch Theatre Company

Directed by Annabelle Comyn

Set design: Paul O'Mahony

Costumes: Joan O'Clery. Lighting: Paul Keogan

Music & Sound: Philip Stewart

With: Enda Oates, Fiona Bell, Michael

Fitzgerald, Peter Gaynor and Judith Roddy

Project Arts Centre, Dublin

20 August – 6 September.

Reviewed 5 September

BY DEREK WEST

WITH *FURTHER THAN THE FURTHEST THING*, first seen at Edinburgh in 2000, Scottish playwright Zinnie Harris has placed major technical and theatrical challenges before director Annabelle Comyn: how to evoke the sense of an island (based on the real Tristan da Cunha, a dot in the ocean between continents); how to re-create a volcano, how to detonate the boiler-room; above all, how to evoke a sense of a tight community of people, in acute isolation and yet under threat from the "h'outside wORLD". Harris achieves this latter challenge particularly well by weaving a distinct lan-

guage that is rough-hewn, direct and innocent.

This fascinating language affirms the identity of Bill (Enda Oates), Rebecca (Judith Roddy) and Mill (Fiona Bell), who represent the indigenous inhabitants of the island. Their forebodings, their management of trauma, their 'otherness' comes through the cadences of their speech - "You was needin'" ... "Be lettin' me, be lettin' me think" - and the actors, with support of accent coach Cathal Quinn, carry this off superbly.

Francis (Michael Fitzgerald), sounds the dissenting note, as the young man who breaks the ties with home and is drawn to the opportunism of the mainland. He assumes standard pronunciation, corrects Mill's grammatical errors, turns from the "stupid island way of talkin'" and aligns himself with Hansen, the enigmatic outsider – whose sinister entry is very well accentuated by Paul Keogan's shadowy, atmospheric lighting. Joan O'Clery's costumes serve to underline, in an understated way, the differences between the two worlds – the island (homespun,



Fiona Bell, Judith Roddy and Michael Fitzgerald in *Further Than the Furthest Thing*



worn, improvised garb) and the "h'outside" (well-tailored, smart, urbane suits).

The linguistic texture binds the play and serves the central theme: an identification of the forces that seek to subvert and suborn the integrity of a primitive society, with its interdependency, self sufficiency (crayfish, potatoes from "the patches"), shared resources (the wedding suit be-

queathed to succeeding generations of bridegrooms), and commitment to self-sacrifice when it is called for. While the islanders must rely on the supply ship from the "h'outside world" it carries with it too many unwanted energies: predatory sex ("Let's play a game," the sailor said"), material temptation (Hansen's magic illusions and glass jars to convert cray fish to consumer

product) and ultimately the exploitation of the island as a potential site for nuclear testing.

The work is literary, full of symbol. In a sparsely-furnished world, echoing Synge's Aran Islands, simple objects (the kettle, the "pinahuin's eggs", the briefcase and the coin) are all loaded with significance. But in the second half, when the action moves off the island, the structure falters into a succession of short scenes, not enhanced at the Project by restless shifting of props and furniture, endless scurrying in the gloom, in conflict with some of the hauntingly-lit closing moments of these scenes, when the mood is snapped prematurely by stage business.

Comyn's direction is at its most confident in the more fluid first part. She allows the poetry of the piece to breathe and the production features some stunning sound-and-light moments. Paul Keogan affords us a chilling glimpse of Bill's torso as he plunges into the depths, disturbed by volcanic rumblings (this effect augmented superbly by Philip Stewart's sense-surround sound.) There is an engulfing, blinding sense of the boiler-room explosion, with light blazing into the faces of the audience. But Comyn tends to direct each of the scenes in the second half in a uniformly respectful manner, treating

each one as a distinct unit, with a repeated pattern of rise and fall, in dialogue and action, inducing a level of monotony.

Despite high-quality theatrical craft, Comyn's production is hampered because Harris has too much to say, committed, it appears, to doing justice to the known history of Tristan at all costs, as if the real island obtrudes and eclipses the metaphorical island. The narrative keeps groping for an ending and consequently suffers dilution.

There is a problem, too, of scale: Tristan da Cunha struggled as a single entity for survival. This is not adequately clear from the play - four individuals are not enough to convey that sense of an island community. At the end of *Riders to the Sea* Synge introduces the procession of men and women that invests the play with a sense of that wider human grouping. In this play, the islanders remain too indistinct.

The care both in the writing and the production makes this an absorbing piece of theatre. Fiona Bell gives an outstanding performance, while remaining part of a strong ensemble – but what remains strongest is the strange lilting quality of the language of the play.

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Derek West edits the educational journal, NAPD Le Chéile, and has been writing about theatre for over two decades.

## **CARNIVAL**

**By Lucy Caldwell**

Kabosh Theatre Company

Directed by Paula McFetridge

Set design: Sabine Dargent.

Lighting: Russell Aldardice

Costumes: Rosie Moore.

Choreographer: Andrea da Silva

Musical direction: Oleg Ponomarev

With: Maggie Cronin, Vincent Higgins, Paul Kennedy, Claire Lamont, Liam McMahon,

Patrick O'Reilly, Tanya Wilson

Spiegeltent, as part of Belfast Festival at

Queen's 2008

23 October – 1 November 2008.

Reviewed 25 October

**BY LISA FITZPATRICK**

THE SPIEGELTENT IS POTENTIALLY A magical setting for Kabosh Theatre Company's latest site-specific production, which tells the story of a Roma family's travelling circus whose members find themselves in Ireland after fleeing war and persecution at home.

The striped canvas roof of the Spiegeltent, and its central playing area ringed with mirrored wooden pillars, testifies to its history as a venue for cabaret while hinting at the magic of the circus. The audience sit in concentric rows around the playing area, on chairs and leather pouffes, suggesting a romanticized gypsy camp or a fortune teller's nook. The colours and textures suggested a romantic, magical, 'Other' space, reinforced by the live violin

and guitar music provided by Oleg Ponomarev and Drazen Djerek. At one end of the circle a raised platform covered with rugs, with an animal-print backdrop and a rail of costumes, provides an entrance for the actors, while at the other end are blue shelves, a place for the grandmother to sit, and a large wooden wheel that evokes both a caravan and the wheel of fortune. Attached to the striped dome of the tent is a red drape that hangs across the set and pools on the floor; this is used by aerial artist Kelsey Long whose performance at key moments comments on the characters' emotional states.

The performance begins with an acrobatic routine by the three young men of the troupe, Dordji, Ferka and Milosava, and the Master of Ceremony's ceremonial welcoming speech to the audience. The characters are introduced: the grandmother, who sees evil spirits all around; the sisters Katya and Ilena who were adopted by the troupe as war-orphaned children, and who perform the only profitable routine in which Katya swims with piranhas; the leader or Fuhro, Phineaus, who tries to keep the family together, and the young men whose experiences of racism and violent intolerance are leading them to despair. As the plot unfolds, the sisters' precarious position – inside the family yet outside the tribe – and the uncertainty of the bonds that tie them to the others are

Patrick J. O'Reilly in *Carnival*

exposed when the financial situation becomes so desperate that the family considers selling them to the Mafia.

The production seems to have all the elements for success, yet the site and the play do not work productively together. The Spiegeltent has the potential to shape the style and texture of a performance, to allow a process of haunting where the history of the site seeps into the text, but this opportunity is missed. The literary text and naturalistic performance style do not sit well within the space, particularly since poor acoustics makes it difficult to hear. The text

forces the actors into a style of performance that flattens the nuances of interpretation, when a more physical approach would reduce the reliance on the spoken word. Since the actors must shout to be heard, the resulting lack of variation in emotional states means that the impact of the most moving and harrowing scenes – as when the troupe expel and disown Ferka – is largely lost. The sound of traffic outside the tent adds to the difficulty, yet no apparent attempt has been made to incorporate the city soundscape into the production.

The playtext draws upon a range

of clichés about the Roma, including stories of persecution and murder in Eastern Europe and harassment in Western Europe, and the trafficking of women. Finally, the use of the Roma language seemed awkward and unnecessary, particularly given the clear resonances with the Northern Irish situation. The simpler technique which was also used – of having the actors perform in their own accents, using an accent only when speaking ‘English’ – was more effective than the bilingualism of the later scenes.

There is opportunity here: in the beauty of the music and the evocative space; in the unexpected resonances of ‘No Surrender’ Loyalism in the characters’ dialogue; in the sense of loss, and the moments in which the siege described by the characters is haunted by Belfast’s own recent history, and in which the tangled relationship of the Roma characters to the sisters mirrors the ambivalent relationship of old and new communities across Northern Ireland. At one point in the performance Ilena declares “We come from your dreams”, an intriguing image; it would be interesting to see a radically revised version of this production with a skeleton text, a greater reliance on movement and physicality, and that statement at its core.

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*Lisa Fitzpatrick lectures in Drama at the University of Ulster.*

#### **THERE ARE LITTLE KINGDOMS**

**Adapted from his collection of  
short stories by Kevin Barry**

Meridian Theatre Company

Directed by Brian Desmond

Set and costume design: Medb Lambert

Lighting design: Tony McCleane-Fay

With: Paul Connaughton, Máirtín de Cogáin, John Desmond, Martin Lucey, Julie Sharkey,

Maeve Fitzgerald and Jill Murphy

Granary Theatre, Cork

24 Sept – 4 Oct 2008. Reviewed 2 October

**BY DEREK WEST**

IN THE COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES OF the same title, Kevin Barry articulates, with savage and satirical eloquence, a series of tortured lives in small-town contemporary Ireland. There are echoes of Eugene O’Brien’s *Eden*, Pat McCabe’s *Butcher Boy*, Mark O’Halloran’s film *Garage* and the form of *Under Milk Wood*. The inhabitants are sour, seething with anger and frustration, given to excess alcohol, prone to domestic violence. Their sexual urges fail to translate into sustainable relationships. They live lives of noisy desperation and raised expectations, dashed by bitter, constricting realities.

The landscape that they occupy has been devastated by the developers: there are garden centres, DIY warehouses, new roundabouts on the outskirts; a runaway JCB thunders through the town; chickens are expected to be organic. It’s a changed

world: new Ireland at its greediest and tackiest, wallowing in the detritus of the consumer society. Wife-swapping is a catastrophic option. Every failed farming enterprise can be given over to a building site. Barry has zealously and vividly captured all these minutiae in his writing.

Now he has adapted this work for the stage, as part of the Blood+Bandage Festival (new theatre created in Cork), and he immediately faces a limitation: fragmenting stories and allowing sections to appear intermittently through the action does not necessarily make a play. The audience is treated to a succession of

sharp and engaging vignettes – Barry has been quite successful in stitching the strands together, interweaving narratives, repeating key passages – but in an author's note he admits how hard he found it to "corral the characters" and to "set them to specific dramatic tasks". By his own admission he had to abandon the thought of incorporating "specific themes" and let the characters "go their own way." In doing so, he has suffered some loss of coherence.

However, he does retain command of the language. The dialogue comes straight from the stories, where much is conveyed by exchanges and con-

Jill Murphy and Maeve Fitzgerald in *There Are Elephants in the Kingdoms*



frontations. It crackles with authenticity. It has the syntax of the street, the vocabulary of the gutter. There is a vibrancy in the writing; similes dropping with the pungency of fresh dung, most of them vivid and painfully familiar. The transformation of dialogue on the page into a dramatic frame is frequently impressive: the addition of the actor, rhythm, emphasis, use of pauses invests it with an additional vitality. The ear rapidly anticipates his honed phrases, savouring their loaded detail – listening to this writer is unalloyed pleasure – the Texaco (“just two pumps beside a dirty little kiosk for the till”) transmogrified into a Statoil palace (“Then they started fucking about with croissants”).

What falls out in the transition is the beautifully-crafted objective prose, the authorial intrusion which makes the reader aware of Barry’s craft and control. It works well between the covers of the book, but he has perhaps wisely omitted most of this in the play, substituting a unifying device, a narrator (cf the First Voice in *Under Milk Wood*) but here Foley, played by Martin Lucey, is also a character in the action: a loner, an oddity who paces the streets, observes and interprets.

His characters are deeply visualised in the writing, if not always fully realised in the acting by Meridian’s hard-working cast. The cost of the intimate Granary space is that

one can observe the mechanics of the acting at close quarters. A tension lies between the manic energy of the writing and a sense of reserve in the actors. There is a uniform earnestness that falls short of the required level of derangement. Martin Lucey, Paul Connaughton, Máirtín de Cogáin, Julie Sharkey and John Desmond don’t quite capture the sizzling energy of Barry’s prose. The notable exceptions are Maeve Fitzgerald and Jill Murphy, as Donna and Dee, the hormonal twins with “neck and brass and tongues like lizards”.

The production values are restrained: design (by Medb Lambert) goes for the minimum, drawing inspiration from a line in one of the stories - “tarpaulin piles, dead Fiestas, tyres and wrenches” (we only get the tyres); and with some doubling-up of roles in mind, the costuming is barely suggestive of character. The atmosphere is partially salvaged by Tony McLeane-Fay’s sombre and focused lighting, but Barry’s frenetic imaginings could have borne a more uninhibited presentation.

Director Brian Desmond’s theatrical realisation falls short of the savage vision of the original work. The absence of a narrative curve is evident here, particularly in the abrupt ending. It’s the sum of the parts that conveys the pleasure, rather than the possibly deeper satisfaction of a more organically-grown piece.

# Blurring the Lines

New writing dispensed with linear narrative to experiment with themes of memory, identity and violence

## BRUISED

**By Maria Connolly, Stacey Gregg,  
Rosemary Jenkinson and Maria McManus**

Tinderbox Theatre Company

Directed by Anna Newell.

Set Design: Ciaran Bagnall.

Composer: Ruby Colley

With: Richard Clements, Maggie Cronin,

Susan Crothers, Ruth Lehane, Jack Quinn

Old Museum Arts Centre, Belfast

30 Sept–11 Oct; on tour until 18 Oct.

Reviewed 16 Oct at the

Riverside Theatre, Coleraine

**BY TOM MAGUIRE**

TINDERBOX'S LATEST TOURING production imagines what life might be like in Northern Ireland in 2068, a continuation of their long-standing engagement with the public role for the theatre. However, as the result of a collaboration between four writers, a dramaturg, a composer and designer, *Bruised* also represents a departure for the company in its conception of the development of new stage works. The result focuses on the interpenetration of identity, biology and memory. Scenes from four distinct narratives unfold across two acts, with ac-

tors switching between roles. Such fluidity was aided by Ciaran Bagnall's composite set, consisting of swathes of silvery voile along the back and side walls, with two metal-framed perspex chairs the only furnishings.

The floor was littered with indistinct monochrome photographs. Visible to the audience, the actors changed from basic muted greys and blacks by adding coloured elements in teal, mustard and brown hung on two clothing rails at the sides of the stage. Ruby Colley had worked alongside the rehearsal process to compose a score which she then played live on electro-violin alongside the action.

A childless elderly couple, Ina (Ruth Lehane) and Harry (Jack Quinn), have been unable to overcome the hurt inflicted by Harry during an affair years before, which produced a son. It is possible for them to undergo a medical procedure by which the hurtful parts of their memories are erased. Harry must choose then between losing a toxic memory and alongside it a future relationship

Richard Clements and Susan Crothers in *Bruised*

with his son's daughter, Sarah (Susan Crothers), or a sanitised future with his wife based on a selectively edited shared history.

In a separate narrative strand, Waclav (Richard Clements) explores the contours of a surrogate body into which his brain has been transplanted. His sense of self and, just as cru-

cially, the biological bond to him felt by his mother (Ruth Lehane) both break down as the memories held in the new body insert themselves into Waclav's mind.

In a third pairing, Kerry (Susan Crothers) and Daniel (Richard Clements) are planning a party. Even as they start to list possible invitees,

however, they exclude anyone who does not fit with their unspoken set of mores. Ultimately, they find themselves alone, while all those they have excluded enjoy a raucous time at the party next door. Roused to bawling at each other in recrimination, they end up face-to-face, stripped to their underwear, coming to a shared sense of how their bodies have been bruised by their life choices. A last pairing involves two soldiers, alone on a bleak landscape, guarding they know not what against an unidentified enemy. Only habit and routine provide them with a rationale for carrying on.

Scenes from these four narratives are interspersed with a further section of mini-lectures on the science of memory, delivered by Maggie Cronin as Dr Norah Ryan. Neither the lectures nor the individual strands are credited to a particular writer, though there is a clear sense of distinct hands at work.

This device argued for a weightiness and insight into the issues of memory and identity that were not justified by the treatment within the separate narratives. The production as a whole struggled in its search for metaphors to describe the current issues of coming to terms with the legacies of the Troubles, reverting to the long established idea of Northern Ireland as a house.

As a whole, the production too of-

ten left unexplored really interesting questions arising from the narratives themselves and their juxtaposition. While Ina and Harry's story had the possibilities of pathos, shoe-horning it in to this format inhibited the development of the action. The crises faced by Waclav and his mother likewise could have been the subject for a whole play. By contrast, Daniel and Kerry's story offered little more than an overgrown sketch, while the two guards could likewise have been spawned by Monty Python. The humour of these strands was also overpowered by the musical accompaniment by Colley which frequently worked against the rhythm of the scenes in the insistence of its joyless minimalism.

The sense of a derivative and dated aesthetic at work in the music hung over the entire production which sought to give all of its elements a ponderous significance. There was little sense of play at work in the direction and at times the actors seemed unsure of what was being asked of them.

If the theatre is to have a role in exploring what constitutes our sense of a collective self, then it will require a greater exercise of the imagination and rigour in its deployment than was demonstrated by this production.

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*Tom Maguire lectures in Drama at the University of Ulster.*

### **THE MAGIC TREE**

**Written and directed by Ursula Rani Sarma**

Djinn Theatre Company

Design: Becs Andrews.

Lighting design: Sinead Wallace

With: John Cronin, Laura O'Toole, Ciaran

O'Brien, Frank Bourke

The Granary Theatre, Cork as

part of Cork Midsummer Festival

30 June – 4 July 2008. Reviewed 28 June

**BY RACHEL ANDREWS**

*THE MAGIC TREE* IS URSULA RANI Sarma's first play written out of commission for seven years. It was also devised after a period of travel and voluntary absence from the theatre world. Thus, one assumes that this is a piece of work that Rani Sarma really wanted to write.

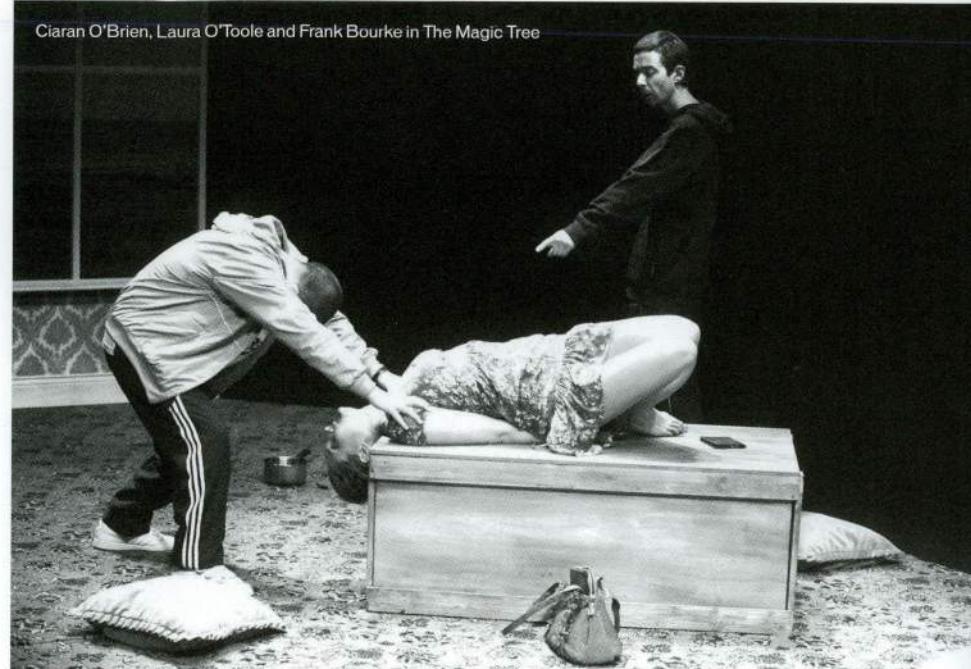
As a result, it is interesting to note how the drama echoes her very earliest themes and fascinations, suggesting Rani Sarma is one of those writers who, like Brian Friel, treads over familiar ground in order to make sense of the world. Here, she returns once again to her interrogation of relationships between young people, and the pressures, tensions and misunderstandings that can accrue as friends, couples and people from different sides of the tracks interrelate.

There is a wider theme - the play moves between Ireland and Asia as Rani Sarma attempts to draw parallels between public and private guilt - but to the mind of this writer, it is

the characterisation and dialogue rather than the strands of the plot that work best in this absorbing, if uneven, piece of work.

In fact the plot is, from the beginning, somewhat incongruous. A young woman, Lamb, creeps into a deserted house during a thunderstorm, pulls off her wet trousers, only to find she has been followed in the dark by a young stalker, Gordy. They talk, they drink – miraculously, wine is discovered – and warm to each other. She flirts; he is clearly entranced. Inevitably, there is a dark side, and two other members of Gordy's gang appear, intent on carrying out a crime. After a violent incident, Lamb heads for the airport to begin a new life in Thailand, challenging Gordy to follow her.

Throughout, little inconsistencies cause problems. Apart from the issue of the wine, Lamb manages to pull a tremendous amount of clothes - dress, swimsuit, towel - out of an average-sized handbag. Meantime, if Gordy does indeed follow her directly to the airport, he neatly circumvents the issue of a passport. None of this would matter so much if the play was largely a magic realist drama, as it so evolves during the unfolding of the second act. However, the work is strongest when we are invited – as we are at the outset – to view it as a three-dimensional piece of writing, with recognisable characters and a linear narrative.



Rani Sarma has always put together well-drawn characters and in Lamb and particularly Gordy, she once again shows her capacity for insight. Gordy is from a rough background, and has become involved in a gang structure, following Lamb in an effort to prove himself to his peers. However, the character - sweetly-played by John Cronin - is too much of a dreamer to harbour unprovoked anger against strangers and has most likely fallen for Lamb (Laura O'Toole) from afar, instinctively viewing her as a pure, flawless being,

worshipping at her feet if only she will throw tidbits his way.

All this might sound like something of a cliché but the drama, and particularly the dialogue - alternately funny and beautiful - make for a first act that is tense and intriguing. Halfway through, the tempo is upped when Gordy's gangmates appear, angry and wet. In particular Frank Bourke as gang leader Doc introduces an extra dynamic to the piece. Bourke is the most experienced actor of the cast and it shows: in a focused, snarling performance, he is genuinely

frightening, and clearly the only one capable of planning the gang-rape. Ciaran O'Brien, playing the young, vulnerable Lenny, brings up the rear.

This tension collapses in the second act, however. Although a dark presence, a kind of ominous shadow, hangs over the atmosphere (we are now in Cambodia), a feeling enhanced by lighting designer Sinead Wallace who bathes the action in a sombre, orange light, the main difficulty is that it is as if we have leapt into a different play. As Lamb and Gordy sit about a tree where horrors were carried out during the Pol Pot years, the drama turns into a meditation on the connections between individual acts of violence and collective acts of torture and genocide, and the action is imbued with a surrealist, dreamlike quality which jars with what has come before.

Rani Sarma, who also directed the play – and one wonders would she have been wiser to have stepped back from the work – has to be commended for challenging herself, and us, to consider the consistency of human behaviour over time and distance. Had she done so by confining herself to a smaller palette and a rooted, realistic drama, perhaps this play's message may have had a greater impact.

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*Rachel Andrews is an arts journalist and critic based in Cork.*

#### THE NEW ELECTRIC BALLROOM

**Written and directed by Enda Walsh**

Druid Theatre Company

Designer: Sabine Dargent

Lighting design: Sinead McKenna

With: Rosaleen Linehan, Val Lilley, Mikel Murfi,

and Catherine Walsh.

Druid Theatre, Galway,

as part of Galway Arts Festival

14 - 26 July 2008. Reviewed 14 July

**BY PATRICK LONERGAN**

I RECENTLY SPENT A FEW WEEKS READING through Irish play reviews from the 1950s and 1960s – not everyone's idea of a good time, perhaps, but interesting in its own way. One of the things that most impressed me about the theatre critics of that period was their response to the early work of Beckett. They were frank in admitting that they didn't understand everything that Beckett was doing, but they consistently expressed a profound respect for his originality, the beauty of his language, and the integrity of his worldview. There was also a growing sense of excitement as each new play premiered: each one was judged not just in its own right, but as part of a developing body of work.

Like many Irish writers, Enda Walsh is often compared to Beckett – but for superficial reasons, such as his use of language or monologue. Reading those old reviews, I became aware of how deep the affinity between the two writers runs.

Catherine Walsh in *The New Electric Ballroom*

Walsh's plays, like Beckett's, are difficult but rewarding: repeated viewing and re-reading is not just beneficial but essential. Both bodies of work are intensely literary, built on a dizzying array of allusions and extended metaphors. With both writers, audiences need time to understand what's happening, which means (among other things) that it's almost impossible to write an overnight review of either writer's works without doing them a disservice. Finally, Walsh is not so much writing a series

of plays as developing a body of work, with each new drama helping us to understand everything he has written before.

Walsh doesn't have the international reach and significance of Beckett – not yet, anyway. But while plenty of Irish writers can riff happily on well-worn Beckettian themes, Walsh actually tries to meet the technical, formal, and thematic challenges set by the earlier writer. This makes him one of the very few dramatists in Irish theatre who can set the critical terms against



which his work must be judged.

So it comes as no surprise that *The New Electric Ballroom* revisits themes that dominate Walsh's plays. Again, we encounter people who tell stories obsessively, perhaps from a fear that their silence will lead inevitably to catastrophe. And, again, those characters imagine themselves as actors in outrageous stories that contrast precisely with their real lives: the livelier the story, the more mundane the existence of the story's teller.

Where *Ballroom* differs from

Walsh's other works is in its exploration of the themes of watching and being watched – especially as those themes relate to gender. The action takes place in the home of three sisters, Ada, Breda, and Clara (played by Walsh, Linehan, and Lilley respectively) where, like the demented director in Beckett's *Catastrophe*, Ada forces her sisters to repeatedly narrate and perform a story about tragic events that occurred shortly before her own birth. The two older women are thus forced to imagine themselves as others see them: there are recurrent references to clothing, make-up, photographs, and other visual images – all of which are used to frame (and thus to limit) the pair.

These performances are interrupted occasionally by a fishmonger called Patsy (Murfi), who arrives with the turning of each tide to bring local gossip and, well, lots of fish. The play's pivotal moment arises when Breda and Clare, acting like the biblical double act of Martha and Mary, decide to break this routine: they strip Patsy down to his underwear and wash him, freeing him from his own cycle of repetition and allowing him (like Christ) to accept his father's legacy, if only briefly. As in Walsh's last play *The Walworth Farce*, the characters must then face a choice between a frighteningly unfamiliar freedom and the deadening but safe status quo. That choice is

first imagined in terms of the bodies of women, only to be enacted through the body of a man.

As we'd expect, Walsh's direction allows the play's rhythm to emerge clearly: he uses repetition to underline key ideas and to lull the audience into a false sense of security. This means that we're completely disarmed when the play's finale arrives, bringing us a moment when the spoken word is finally abandoned – replaced first by song, and then by the hauntingly meaningless noise of a boiling kettle. It's a stunning conclusion to a play that adds brilliantly to Walsh's oeuvre.

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*Patrick Lonergan lectures in Drama at NUI Galway. His book Theatre and Globalization: Irish Drama in the Celtic Tiger Era, will be published in December.*

#### MIMIC

**Written, composed and performed**

**by Raymond Scannell**

Tobacco Factory Theatre

Directed and designed by Tom Creed

Bank of Ireland Theatre, NUI Galway; also

Samuel Beckett Theatre, Dublin, during Dublin

Fringe Festival, Sept 2008

19–24 July 2008. Reviewed 19 July

**BY CLAIRE-LOUISE BENNETT**

**WRITER, DIRECTOR AND PERFORMER**  
Raymond Scannell describes *Mimic* as "an experiment" in the show's

programme notes. Seated at a piano, Scannell's performance, necessarily limited, is accompanied by a live score which often functions as a compensatory conduit of gesture and punctuation, and operates as a counterpoint to the narrative. The diminution of the performer in a theatrical production is a commendable risk to take, and is especially welcome in a monologue piece since it allows the narrative to exist independently of the actor; it's as if Scannell and his piano are generating a collage of experiences which he doesn't quite 'own', thereby enabling the audience to decide what to connect with and what to disregard.

Putting the actor on an equal footing with another theatrical element, in this case music, means that despite being comprised of disjointed anecdotes, whimsical musings, and shy conjecture, *Mimic* is a compelling constellation, a network of subjective detail which almost transcends the self-affirming partiality of individualism.

Scannell portrays the character Julian Neary, an impersonator who returns from overseas where his somewhat dubious skill earned him relative success, albeit for a limited period. The play is most convincing when Neary describes his childhood. His depiction of the labyrinthine family home, its orbiting inhabitants, and the comet-like arrival of peculiar

Raymond Scannell in *Mimic*

Aunts, is vertiginous, playful, and poignant, qualities that reminded me of Flann O'Brien's work. As in O'Brien, this dizzying constellation of half-imagined, half-remembered, events demonstrates a dislocated soul, out of kilter with the rest of the world.

Scannell prophesizes an Ireland crushed and strewn by the paws of a

merciless and concluded Celtic Tiger. However, *Mimic*'s imagistic verve, pulsating throughout Neary's childhood recollections, significantly loses its idiosyncratic feverishness when it surveys post-Tiger detritus. It is regrettable that Scannell felt it necessary to pair up with the Tiger, it obscures *Mimic*'s weightier, albeit more abstract, concerns: Neary's struggle

to find relevance or even a place in the world. His dislocated state is ambivalently attested to by a curious caesura halfway, perhaps more, into the performance. Quite suddenly Neary, repelled by his piano it seems, gets up and says "I want to stop now". A line of suspended red bulbs languidly throb behind the abandoned instrument. Then, briefly, there's a flood of light. This performance rupture is, initially, provocative. It is also insular and without influence, and thus becomes merely perplexing. Moreover, it is an intriguing moment, it hints at other performance possibilities and one feels, and hopes, that *Mimic* is not yet at a resting place.

Certainly, Neary's existential difficulty is the most persuasive element of *Mimic*. Unable to distinguish an ambition or secure a vocation, Neary's identity remains indistinct and undeveloped, and he resorts to imitating others. The revelation one experiences as an adolescent regarding the extent to which occupation contributes to the formation of one's enduring identity is a hard one to take. The languid panic Neary feels is palpable. His father's frustration and anger is a legacy of the challenges and concerns his generation endured and confronted. The conflict between the two is suitably understated and absolutely moving. It is at these moments that Scannell's distinct writing

expertise is fully realised. His sensibility and imagination work in league to recreate the interior landscape of a growing boy's stultified psyche. The fragments, the shards, the tics, the hesitations, the slightly precocious humour, testify to a distrust and rejection of the cohesive structure of identity. This eschewal of a unified character uttering a cogent narrative is further evinced by Scannell according the piano score equal status to the spoken word.

Indeed, *Mimic* displays several postmodern traits, including a critique of identity construction and the impossibility of uttering anything original. It is regrettable that Scannell didn't extend his healthy scepticism to another enduring narrative, the almost canonised version of Ireland's recent history which has accorded the Celtic Tiger unmerited authorial significance.

Perhaps it's time to resist reifying the Tiger. This might help diminish its dull influence on writers who have the capacity to engage compassionately with existential themes and who can write. Scannell undoubtedly has that ability. His next experiment should be to sit down to write a play with a mind containing not one single idea. Tiger beware, feeding time's over.



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*Claire-Louise Bennett is a Research Fellow at NUI Galway.*

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# Opening Nights

IAN R. WALSH marks your diaries for the winter months ahead.

Axis Arts Centre, Ballymun, Dublin, presents **THE CONSEQUENCES OF LIGHTNING** by Dermot Bolger, the final part of his Ballymun Trilogy, from 25 November - 6 December.

Randolph SD the Company presents **EVERYBODY LOVES SYLVIA** by Pierre Marivaux at Project Cube, Dublin, from 24 November - 6 December.

Pan Pan Theatre presents **OEDIPUS LOVES YOU** by Simon Doyle and Gavin Quinn at Project Arts Centre, Dublin, from 27 November - 6 December.

The Gaiety Theatre, Dublin, presents **CINDERELLA** until 1 February.

The Grand Opera House, Belfast, presents **MOTHER GOOSE** until 17 January.

City Theatre Dublin presents **SANTA AND THE PEN-GUINS** by Shay Healy and

Michael Scott at Greystones Theatre, Wicklow, 23 - 25 November, then on tour, ending at The Mill Theatre, Dundrum, 15 - 22 December

City Theatre Dublin presents **SANTA AND THE MAGICAL CHRISTMAS TREE** by Shay Healy and Michael Scott, Mullingar Arts Centre, 25 November, then on tour, ending at Millennium Theatre, Limerick, 22 December.

Druid Theatre Company presents **THE WALWORTH FARCE** by Enda Walsh at Project Arts Centre, from 8 - 20 December, matinee 13 and 20 December.

Priscilla Robinson presents **THE SHOW ABOUT THE SHOW** by Priscilla Robinson at Project Cube, 8 - 20 December.

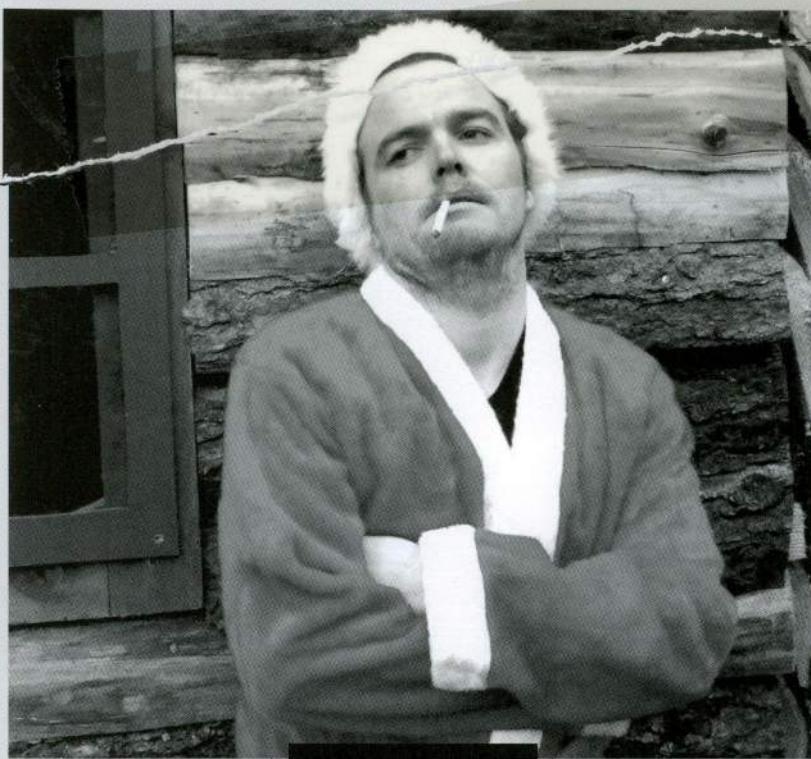
Cahoots Northern Ireland presents **THE MUSICIAN** by Conor Mitchell at The Old

Museum Arts Centre (OMAC), Belfast, from 8 - 20 December.

City Theatre Dublin presents **A CHRISTMAS CAROL** by Charles Dickens adapted by Michael McCaffery at Roscommon Arts Centre, 2 - 3 December, then on tour, ending at The Source Arts Centre, Thurles, 4 January.

The Gate Theatre presents **THE OLD CURIOSITY SHOP** by Charles Dickens in a new version by Alan Stanford, from 3 December - 10 January.

Tall Tales Theatre Company presents **MAISY DALY'S RAINBOW** by Deirdre Kinahan and Muirne Bloomer, at Solstice Arts Centre, Navan, 5 - 13 December, then on tour, ending at Mermaid Arts Centre, Bray, 29 - 31 December.



Everyman Palace Theatre in association with CADA presents **LITTLE RED RIDING HOOD** from 6 December - 11 January.

Second Age Theatre Company presents **KING LEAR** by William Shakespeare at Wexford Opera House 29 -30 January, then to Townhall Theatre, Galway 3 -6 February, and The Helix Theatre, 24 February - 20 March.

Purpleheart Theatre presents the Irish premiere of **THE SANTALAND DIARIES** by David Sedaris at Bewleys Café Theatre from 3 - 24 December.

Big Telly Theatre Company presents **PUCKOON** based on the book by Spike Milligan on national tour from 30 January - 14

March.

The Abbey Theatre presents **THE PLAYBOY OF THE WESTERN WORLD** by J. M. Synge adapted by Roddy Doyle and Bisi Adigun, 12 December - 31 January.

The Royal Shakespeare Company presents **THE CORDELIA DREAM** by Marina Carr at Wilton's Music Hall, London, 11 December - 10 January.



Ulster Theatre Company in association with the Civic Theatre, Tallaght presents **SLEEPING BEAUTY** by Michael Pynor, music by Mark Dougherty, at the Civic Theatre, from 20 December - 4 January.

Fairbank Productions in association with Play on Words present **TOM CREAN - ANTARCTIC EXPLORER** by Aidan Dooley at the Everyman Palace Theatre, Cork, from 19 - 24 January.

The Abbey Theatre presents **LA**

**Blue Raincoat Theatre Company presents THE THIRD POLICEMAN** by Flann O'Brien adapted by Jocelyn Clarke, at Project Arts Centre, 16 - 28 February.

**DISPUTE** by Pierre Marivaux translated by Neil Bartlett, at the Peacock, from 14 January - 7 February.

London Classic Theatre presents **HUMBLE BOY** by Charlotte Jones at Everyman Palace Theatre, Cork, 2 - 7 February.

Colin Dunne in association with Project Arts Centre, presents **OUT OF TIME**, Solo dance show created, choreographed and performed by Colin Dunne at Project Arts Centre, from 4 - 7 February.

The Lyric Theatre and An Grianán Theatre present **THE HOME PLACE** by Brian Friel, at the Grand Opera House, Belfast, 9 - 21 February.

The Ark, Dublin, presents **THE GIANT BLUE HAND** by Marina Carr, 10 February - 22 March.

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### MARBLE

By Marina Carr  
Directed by Jeremy Herrin

10 February – 14 March  
AT THE ABBEY  
World Premiere



### AGES OF THE MOON

By Sam Shepard  
Directed by Jimmy Fay  
With Sean McGinley, Stephen Rea

24 February – 4 April  
AT THE PEACOCK  
World Premiere



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