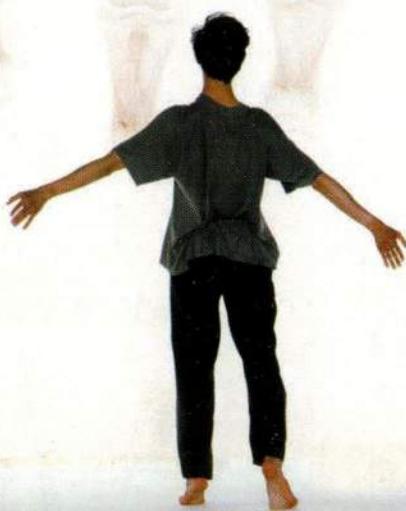


# irishtheatre

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MAGAZINE



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OPINION OF THE AUTHORS AND NOT NECESSARILY OF  
THE EDITORS.**THE DANCE ISSUE****2 WHAT'S NEWS****8 SOUNDING BOARD** Actor/director Mark Lambert offers his vision of the ideal facility for the National Theatre.**9 BRAVE NEW WORLD** Christine Madden, Anja Musiat, and Peter Crawley provide critical views of the first International Dance Festival Ireland.**26 A NEW CROSSROADS** Seona MacReamoinn casts her eye over the current Irish dance scene.**34 DANCING IN THE DARK** What is the relationship between Arts Council policy and the development of dance in Ireland? Paul Johnson offers his view.**40 IN THEIR OWN WORDS** Leading Irish and Ireland-based choreographers discuss their work with Linda Murray.**45 FACTS AND FIGURES** A selective listing of resources for Irish dance.**50 WRITING IN THE AIR** How do choreographers record their work? David Bolger and John Scott discuss their methods.**53 ENTRANCES AND EXITS** Peter Crawley reports on comings and goings behind the scenes of Irish theatre.**55 VOLUME CONTROL** *itm's* critics review two new books on Irish theatre.**59 REVIEWS** Our critics on 36 productions.**ON THE COVER:** Rosemary Butcher in SCAN**ADDRESS:** 44 East Essex Street, Temple Bar,  
Dublin 2. Phone: (01) 474-0154**E-MAIL:** info@irishthemagazine.com  
karenfricker@yahoo.ie

## DANCE IN IRELAND NOW

**T**HIS IS ONLY THE SECOND DEDICATED issue that *itm* has undertaken in our five-year history. Why dance, and why now? Well — dance because we like it, and we wanted to know more about it; and dance because it is something of a sister discipline to theatre, with that relationship continuing to grow closer and more intertwined. The immediate provocation to turn these interests into an issue devoted to the genre was the first International Dance Festival Ireland, which focused the attention of the arts community and the general public on an art form which remains relatively underappreciated here.

In the issue we've attempted to take a snapshot of the Irish dance scene at this point in time. We had many talks with people working in and around dance to determine what the key concerns, personalities, companies, and events are in the field. Certain concerns, as you will see, come up again and again: the lack of proper dance training in Ireland; a two-tier funding system that puts independent choreographers at a disadvantage; limited funding to support what is by definition an expensive art form; and the lack of proper documentation.

On that latter subject: in preparation for this issue we have included reviews of Irish contemporary dance productions in this year's issues of *itm*, and will continue to do so in our Autumn issue. We can't, however, continue this commitment

beyond 2002, simply because we haven't the expertise or the resources to do so. Perhaps in the coming years we might see the birth of another dance journal like the late lamented *Dance News Ireland* to provide a new outlet for quality dance reviewing?

The dance community in Ireland is small, but growing. Though under-resourced, it is wonderfully international, and notably well-organised and well-connected. That it has its own lobbying body

allows its voice to be heard, through events including the recent Dance on the Dáil protest. This only draws attention to the lack of a similar lobby for the theatre community, and for the arts overall. These past months have seen enormous proposed changes to government structures for the arts in Ireland, from a new Arts Bill and Arts Plan to a restructured Arts Department. The arts community has barely been heard from about any of

these changes. If artists don't make noise about these things, the understandable assumption on the behalf of the government could be that all these changes are fine with us. Are they?

Towards the end of mouthing off about important issues, we introduce in this issue a new column, "Sounding Board," in which a member of the theatre community gets a page to give us a piece of his or her mind. Mark Lambert's inspired inaugural missive on the Abbey building is on page 8.



# WILL THE GOVERNMENT GET A GRIP?

**D**EPARTMENT OF SPORT AND TOURISM," ANSWERS A GOVERNMENT receptionist. Our apologies, *itm* was calling for the Department of Arts, Sport, and Tourism. A moment's hesitation. "Oh yes, that's us." The new government had executed its departmental shuffle two weeks before our call on 20 June, but clearly details about the new department's approach to the arts would not be forthcoming. The Arts staff had yet to

relocate to the building on Kildare Street that already housed Sport and Tourism, explained press officer Therese O'Connor, and, owing to Ireland's participation in the World Cup, Minister John O'Donoghue (pictured, previously Minister for Justice) had not been able to keep all appointments to meet the chief executives of the department he now heads. "He is simply not in a position to voice [his vision for the Arts, Sport, or Tourism] at this stage until he is fully briefed in the area," said O'Connor. The Programme for Government had been released 16 days before *itm*'s call. "That is the only view the minister has at



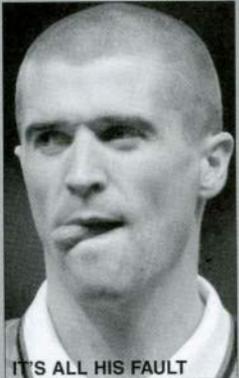
the moment, and I've referred people to it," says O'Connor of the document that she admitted not to have read. In it, the government pledges to support the Third Arts Plan [2002-2006] and to rebuild the Abbey, but no further information was available before going to press. "The Tourism and Sports side is fine," O'Connor reassures *itm*, "the Arts thing is a whole new dimension to it. But we'll get a grip of it."

**THE ARTS COUNCIL HOPES IT WILL**  
Hungry for more details about what the change in government means for the arts, we rang up Nessa O'Mahony, the

# AH, REFEREE!

**F**ollowing almost uniformly positive reviews and an aggressive marketing campaign, Paul Mercier's *Studs* finished its May-June Gaiety Theatre run one week early. What happened? "I suppose everybody only guesses," says Ronan Smith, executive producer with Abhann Productions, which co-produced the show with Mercier's *Passion Machine*. "The broader issue may have been [that]

what we attempted to do was market the show to the soccer audience, in an attempt to convert them to coming to a theatre show... that ambition may have just proved too difficult." Another theory might be that the canny coinciding of *Studs* with the run-up to the World Cup led to problems the producers could not foresee. "Soccer and the World Cup became an extraordinary, bad-news, tensely dramatic story," says Smith, adding that the Saipan Showdown happened in "our intense week of publicity and promo-



IT'S ALL HIS FAULT

tion. And it just died. Nobody could care less about anything except Roy Keane and Mick McCarthy. It couldn't have come at a worse time in our campaign." Paul Mercier's gratitude to the production might of Abhann is well-known. "Without them there would be no *Passion Machine*," he said earlier in the year. Smith admits that, commercially, *Studs* "underperformed very severely." Is the Abhann/*Passion Machine*

partnership in jeopardy? "Not necessarily, no," says Smith. "Of course it's given us pause for thought as to the strategies employed in those kinds of partnerships. But it is not the case that we have said 'never again'." Abhann and *Passion Machine*'s co-production of *Diarmuid and Gráinne* plays in the Edinburgh Fringe Festival this August. And high-profile liaisons continue to come Mercier's way: he was recently named Anglo-Irish Bank writer-in-association with the National Theatre.

Arts Council/An Chomhairle Ealaíon's head of communications. She informed us that the new Arts Bill is now being considered by the House; this procedure will last well into the year. As far as the Arts Plan 2002-2006 is concerned, its approval by Cabinet was announced by the then-Minister for the Arts, Heritage, Gaeltacht, and the Islands, Síle De Valera, on 10 April. The total budget for the new Plan is 314 million, but the Arts Council is still required to request funding from the Department of Finance

on a year-by-year basis. And according to O'Mahony, "we have to take into account the general atmosphere of belt-tightening that exists at the moment... the signals are out there that we may not receive the total amount we request for 2003." The good news, says O'Mahony, is that Arts Council director Patricia Quinn has met Minister O'Donoghue, and that "he seems an open, ready-to-do business person. We are as optimistic as we can be, knowing that the public purse strings are to be tightened."

## GETTING DANCE ON PAPER

Michael Seaver has founded a new publishing house, the Kildare-based Kinetic Reflex, devoted to dance writing. The lack of critical and historical records — a "personal bugbear" of the dance critic for *The Irish Times* — means that dances from as recently as 15 years ago have disappeared without trace. Within the next 12 months Kinetic Reflex will publish *The Word Life of Dances*, a collection of Diana Theodoress' critical writings on dance for *The Sunday Tribune* in the late '80s and early '90s. Meanwhile *Territorial Claims* will be the first in a proposed series of books exploring particular dances, in this case the eponymous work staged by Daghdha. Seaver, who hopes Kinetic Reflex will become an international publishing house, recognises an "upsurge in writing on dance" and asserts, "it is something that the Arts Council have identified as something that they want to see more of." Commenting on the small audience for dance and dance writing, he claims, "The problem in Ireland with dance in general is that there isn't a critical mass. There aren't enough people out there who care enough about it and make it important in the eyes of the policy-makers or the publishers."

## Equity's Jubilee

**The Queen's not the only one celebrating half a century in 2002: Irish Actors' Equity is sponsoring an International Conference Weekend during Dublin Festivals season on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of its founding. Based in the new cultural centre in Liberty Hall, Dublin, the celebration will include master classes, workshops, and an international conference on "The status of performing artists, and their role in the life of a nation." Speakers will include Giles Havergal (Citizen's Theatre, Glasgow), Christian Schiaretti (TNP, France), and Mabutho Sithole (South African Performing Artists' Union). The International Federation of Actors is holding its European Meeting in Dublin during this time as well. For more information ring Michael Lee on 01-679 0489 or e-mail: equity50th@eircom.net**

## BIG IN THE USA

Crazy Dog Audio Theatre has won a Gold Mark Time Award for best production from the American Society for Audio Science Fiction. Roger Gregg's winning entry, *Who's Afraid of Rotwang Krell?*, was produced for RTÉ Radio 1 and has since been broadcast across US airwaves... The Gate Theatre's production of Brian Friel's *Two Plays After* garnered critical acclaim at the Spoleto Festival USA. It was the fourth time the theatre was represented at the prestigious Festival.

## SPEAKING OF FESTIVITIES...

The Galway Arts Festival runs from 15-28 Jul.; Irish theatrical entries include Macnas' *Grainne Mhaol* at the Festival Big Top (15-20 Jul.); a Druid premiere, Christian O'Reilly's *The Good Father* (19-28 Jul.), at Druid Lane; and the European premiere of *The Drawer Boy* by Michael Healy, a GAF/Peacock Theatre co-production. It plays at the Town Hall from 18-24 Jul. and then at the Peacock from 27 Jul-10 Aug.

The Kilkenny Arts Festival runs from 9-18 Aug.; its theatre attractions include *The Book of Evidence*, adapted from the John Banville novel and directed by Alan Gilsemen; and an adaptation of Samuel Beckett's prose work *Lessness* by Gare St. Lazare Players,



44 SYCAMORE

performed by Olwen Fouéré. *Lessness* plays in the Royal National Theatre's Cottesloe space from 24 Sep.-4 Oct. Also at Kilkenny, Finola Cronin directs *The Murder Ballads: A Tanztheatre Cabaret* (9-11 Aug.).

The Dublin Theatre Festival (which runs 30 Sep.-12 Oct.) has announced programme highlights, including Marina Carr's new play *Ariel* at the Abbey; Donal O'Kelly's new play *The Hand* at Liberty Hall; *Giselle* from Kilmactamas, a co-production with Fabulous Beast Dance Company at the O'Reilly Theatre, and Steppenwolf's production of *Glengarry Glen Ross* at the Olympia. The Dublin Fringe Festival runs from 23 Sep.-12 Oct. this year, and while programming details were not available at press time, Fringe spokespeople say that new Fringe director (and Melbourne native) Vallejo Gantner has some exciting work from Down Under and the Far East up his sleeve.

#### PAT AND BREDA'S (AND LIAM AND JIM'S) EXCELLENT ADVENTURE

Liam Rellis and Jim Nolan, late of Waterford's Red Kettle, have set up a new com-

mercial theatre company, Quay River Productions. Their premiere co-production is Bernard Farrell's *44 Sycamore*, which runs at Andrew's Lane until 24 Aug. (Nolan is the director). They are co-producing with Lane Productions, Pat Moylan and Breda Cashe's company, whose other efforts include *12 Angry Men* and *Alone it Stands*. Impressively, Andrew's Lane, owned by Moylan, hasn't had a dark week in the last 52 — Moylan has kept it programmed consistently from 1 Aug. 2001-31 Jul. 2002. *44 Sycamore*, for its part, will embark on a national tour following its Andrew's Lane run.

#### UPCOMING PRODUCTIONS

Garry Hynes is directing John B. Keane's *Sive* for Druid, playing the Town Hall, Galway from 6-21 Sept. This production was planned before Keane's death this May at the age of 73 — but will surely be appreciated as a commemoration of the Kerry playwright's work and life. Other current Keane productions include a revival of *The Chastitute*, produced by Edward Farrell, which plays the Gaiety from 17 Jul.-12 Aug.



JASMINE RUSSELL AND ALAN LEECH IN DA

Blue Raincoat's summer lunchtime series begins at the Factory, Sligo with Krapp's *Last Tape* from 3-13 Jul., followed by Malcolm Hamilton's new play *Sanctuary* (17-27 Jul.), and concluding with Beckett's *Rough for Theatre II* from 31 Jul.-10 Aug... New company B'Spoke perform Frank McGuinness' adaptation of *Electra*, at Project (14-31 Aug.). McGuinness also directs...

Coming up at the Crypt: *The Call*, a new play by Tara Maria Lovett, directed by David Horan for Peri-Talking, runs 15-27 Jul. Cheeky Goblin presents *A Club for Losers* by George Rath (29 Jul.-3 Aug.); Inis Theatre present revivals of *Lady Susan* and *The World's Wife* (2-17 Aug.); and Travelling Buddha presents *Macbeth* from 19-31 Aug.; and Storm! Theatre presents *A Country Song* by American playwright Randall B. Wilson, playing 10-21 Sept. and directed by Alan Sharp.

New commercial company Openings' debut effort is Ray Cooney's *Run for Your Wife*, directed by Jimmy Fay: the 6-week, 7-venue national tour finishes at the Cork Opera House on 17 Aug., with possible Dublin dates still under discussion at press time. Fay's own company, Bedrock, has moved offices to 18 Eustace Street, Dublin 2; phone lines are in flux but the company's e-mail address remains bedrock@clubi.ie. Fay is running the company *sans* administrator at the moment to conserve funds for its upcoming production, *The Massacre @ Paris*, a new adaptation by Alex Johnston of the Christopher Marlowe classic. The production features a "cast of millions," according to director Fay, and plays Project from 5-21 Sept.

In addition to *The Drawer Boy*, Ali Curran's star-studded new programme for the Peacock also includes Anne Nelson's

*The Guys* (20-24 Aug.), a play based on "the real life events of September 11th" featuring Tim Robbins and Susan Sarandon. The Peacock will host a series of readings of National Theatre-commissioned plays from 12-17 Aug., before Peacock Partners the Corn Exchange stage Michael West's new adaptation of Nabokov's *Lolita* from 29 Aug.-28 Sep. Ken Harmon's new play *Done Up Like a Kipper* will take the Festival slot at the Peacock, running 3 Oct.-16 Nov... Hugh Leonard's *Da* remains in the Abbey until 21 Sep... The Laguna Playhouse in Southern California stages the U.S. premiere of Bernard Farrell's *Lovers at Versailles* from 18 Feb.-23 Mar. 2003.

Island Theatre Company's production of *Faith Healer* continues at the Belltable until 27 Jul. and then embarks on a short national tour including dates at the Samuel Beckett Theatre (19-24 Aug.) and The Civic, Tallaght (26-31 Aug.). Other summer Civic attractions include *Attaboy, Mr. Synge* by Deirdre Kinahan (7-24 Aug)... Bewley's Café Theatre's production of *I Can't Remember Anything* by Arthur Miller plays until 27 Jul... *Pride and Prejudice* continues at the Gate Theatre to the end of August... *Come Up and See Me Sometime: The Songs of Mae West* continues in the Pavilion until 27 Jul... Town Hall Productions brings Sebastian Barry's *Our Lady of Sligo* to the venue from 27-31 Aug... Andrew's Lane hosts Calypso's new production, *Stolen Child*, from 2-21 Sep.

Irish Modern Dance Theatre presents *Mis-Fit*, a double bill of new works by John Jasperse and co-choreographers Veronique Defranoux and John Scott; the programme plays Project from 31 Oct.-2 Nov. before touring nationally. In Jan.

2003, Scott's *Macalla* will perform at the SFX before transferring to Siamsa Tíre in Feb... Ballet Ireland's next is *Ballet Fireworks*, opening at Cork Opera House on 1 Oct., before touring the country and also the UK... Returning from the SDT Festival in Poland, Daghda Dance Company will produce a free summer

INIS THEATRE'S LADY SUSAN



performance of a section from Yoshiko Chuma's *10,000 Steps* at the Killaloe Music Festival on 21 Jul... Rex Levitates Dance Company takes a week-long residency at the Institute for Choreography and Dance in Cork from 4 Sept. They will present a number of new works on 10 Sept.

*What does the theatre profession itself think about what's going on in Irish theatre? This new column is your opportunity to speak out. Our inaugural columnist is actor and director MARK LAMBERT, who offers his views on the building crisis at the National Theatre (of which he is an associate director).*

**T**HE MEMBERS OF THE THEATRE PROFESSION have said little to nothing, publicly, about their feelings concerning the future of the Abbey building. This is a critical time in the history of the Abbey Theatre, where we could have an exciting and progressive new national theatre, or a monument to missed opportunity. So it behoves us to say what we want for the new theatre and where we want it.

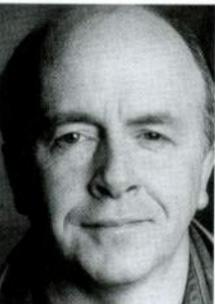
I personally want everything. I want a building that is not only a national reflection of the esteem in which we hold the arts and the theatre itself, but a building that is every bit as exciting as the Sydney Opera House — a building that we can be proud of. Let's not be niggardly in our hopes and desires for the new Abbey, and please let us not be humble and reactionary.

The new theatre should contain three well-equipped auditoriums, ranging from a 600-seater to a 350-seater to a smaller experimental studio space with 100 seats. There should be at least two rehearsal rooms and one that can reflect the playing space of the main auditorium. There should be an actors' café/green room; a library/script room; and a sound studio to record everything from plays to music to sound effects, and which could be rented out to pay for itself. The new large foyer could contain a bookshop, an open-all-day café/bar,

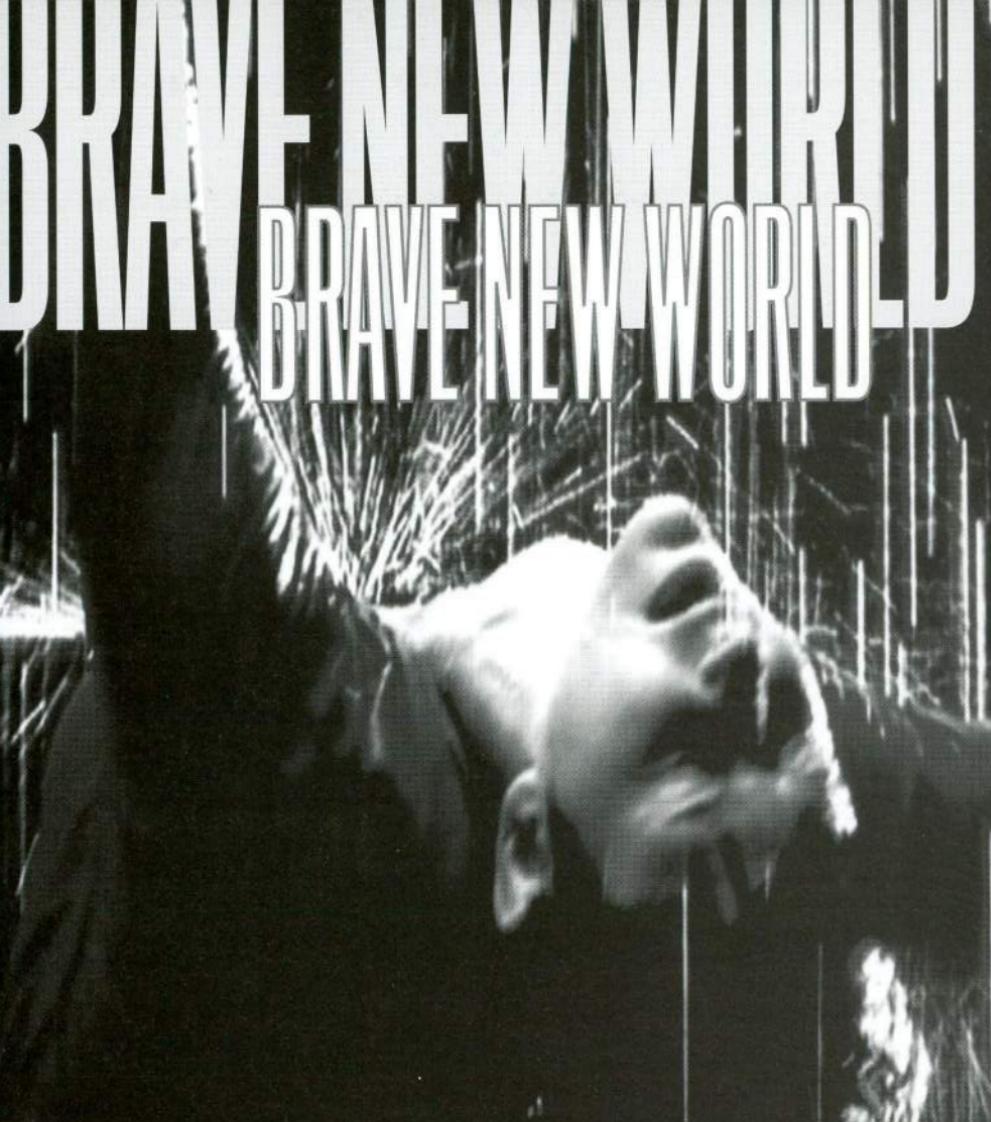
and even a restaurant, and should be large enough to allow live music for patrons and platform performances and exhibitions. Above all, it should be welcoming and exciting and active.

Unless the present site can be extensively enlarged, with access to the Liffey, I see no point in a horrible compromise of building up. I was in favour of the greenfield site on the docks, but that is gone now, having become an unfortunate political football. Apart from Síle De Valera's surprisingly definite statement that the Abbey will be rebuilt on its present site, the current favoured option of the public appears to be — if the many letters to *The Irish Times* and an ongoing petition are anything to go by — the Carleton Cinema site on O'Connell Street. That would be grand also, and would have exciting potential, but my own favourite is to expand onto the river.

These are the scattergun meanderings of a demented thespian who longs for a government to create a visionary building, and who of course believes that the work inside it can reflect such a vision. What does anyone else want or not want, and can we discuss please? It seems criminal that the workers and professionals aren't being heard.



*Submissions to Sounding Board can be sent to info@irishtheatremagazine.com.*



## **THE FIRST INTERNATIONAL DANCE FESTIVAL IRELAND**

held 8-26 May, brought several major international dance companies to our shores for the first time, as well as providing a showcase for the work of Irish companies and practitioners. In the pages that follow, Ireland-based dance writer **CHRISTINE MADDEN** gives a critical overview of the festival; Danish dance critic **ANJA MUSIAT** offers her view on three of the Irish dances on show; and theatre critic **PETER CRAWLEY** dips his toe into the unexpectedly treacherous waters of dance reviewing with a look at the Michael Clark Dance Company.

# A FESTIVAL FOR IRELAND

BY CHRISTINE MADDEN

THE INTERNATIONAL DANCE FESTIVAL'S director Catherine Nunes assembled, as she describes, a dance festival *for* Ireland — for an audience unused to dance, perhaps even intimidated by it. She presented a cross-section of contemporary dance, a sushi bar of diverse offerings — a bit of which proved somewhat raw and unpalatable for Joe Public At Large. But something in every festival has to be a bit hard to swallow, and currently in Ireland, dance — beyond physical exposure, as psychologically and spiritually baring as any other art form — needs that bit of controversy to call attention to itself, and its vulnerability.

In choosing the Merce Cunningham Dance Company as flagship event for the festival, Nunes established her central theme, an exploration of the correlation between dance and the visual arts. Much of the festival pursued this spin. Of course, all dance is absorbed by the eyes and interpreted as visual phenomena. The programming extended this to focus on playing with what we see as opposed to what we think or expect to see. Rosemary Butcher as associate artist and Liz Roche as artist-in-residence; an exhibition/installation by artist Austin McQuinn, augmented by daily performance accompanied by dancer Louise McDonald; and the inclusion of works by Daghda, Michael Clark, and Jérôme Bel hammered home the optical opulence as well as the childlike mischief of dance.

Now 83, Cunningham in his increasing immobility reminds one of Beethoven blighted by deafness. One of

the great creators and guiding lights of dance in the 20th century, he continues to work choreographically through his close rapport with the dancers in his company and his ingenious use of computer technology in the form of "motion capture." Hooking up various parts of dancers' bodies with sensors, phrases danced out were fed into and recorded into a database, which then replicated their movement on screen — and could of course be altered and manipulated.

*Biped*, one of the four pieces performed during the festival on the Abbey Theatre stage, exploited this technique to riveting effect. Blue and deep, the stage filled with dancers in costumes of techno silver, light undulating across them in rainbow colours like swirls of petrol in a puddle. Moving "geometrically," with well-oiled joints like those of anatomy dolls used in art class, the dancers were joined by shapes and markings flashing across the scrim like bacilli, eventually then by the faceless cyber-dancers themselves — who curiously swung themselves across our vision in a far more "human" manner than the real thing on stage.

In taking in Cunningham's pieces, one gets an expanding sense of his love of the beauty of human form, his exhilaration in coaxing it into continually new, more extreme, yet always elegant movement. In *Rainforest*, the dancers shuffled through blindingly silver pillows and kicked them into the air as "jungle noises" punctuated their fluid motions. Their sand-coloured costumes were ripped and hanging at points, as if the dancers had become reptilian and were shedding skin.

*Summerspace* (1958) and *Interscape* (2001) emphasised the sense of dancers emerging like bas-relief from 3D tableaux: a "summer space" is one suf-



STEPHANIE BERGIER

**TECHNO:** Merce Cunningham's  
Biped; on previous page,  
CoisCéim's Hit and Run

fused with thousands of points of colour, much like what happens when one comes into a shaded area after wandering around in bright sunlight. Also splattered with dots, the costumed dancers blended successfully into the pointillistic backdrop. A perception of history and architecture pervaded *Interscape*, as if Cunningham and set designer Robert Rauschenberg were now looking back on their rich careers. At the outset, dancers, dressed in work-out gear, warmed up behind a scrim depicting mythical and legendary fixtures: a Trojan horse and a Greek temple, among others. This lifted to expose an almost identical backdrop, against which moved the dancers, their costumes emblazoned with elements from the set. Of all the pieces, this evinced most clearly Cunningham's austere aesthetic, the homage to, and joy in, the purity of the body and its movement.

His austerity was echoed, but utterly transformed, in Jérôme Bel's eponymous piece performed in Project's Space Upstairs. Employing four nude dancers, with the addition of a clothed fifth towards the end, Bel's piece used a chalkboard for backdrop, with props consisting of a bald lightbulb, a piece of chalk, a red lipstick, and parts of the dancers themselves. While one of the dancers, who appeared to be pregnant, sang the entire score of Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*, a male and a female dancer, clearly destined for some kind of partnerdom, scrawled their names and vital statistics on the blackboard. An older woman, the light-bearer — in an echo of the French expression *je ne veux pas tenir la chandelle* ("I don't want to be the one holding the candle" — or rather, "I don't want to be the third wheel") — moved to the front of the stage and lay down, using her body to shield the glare

of the naked bulb from the audience.

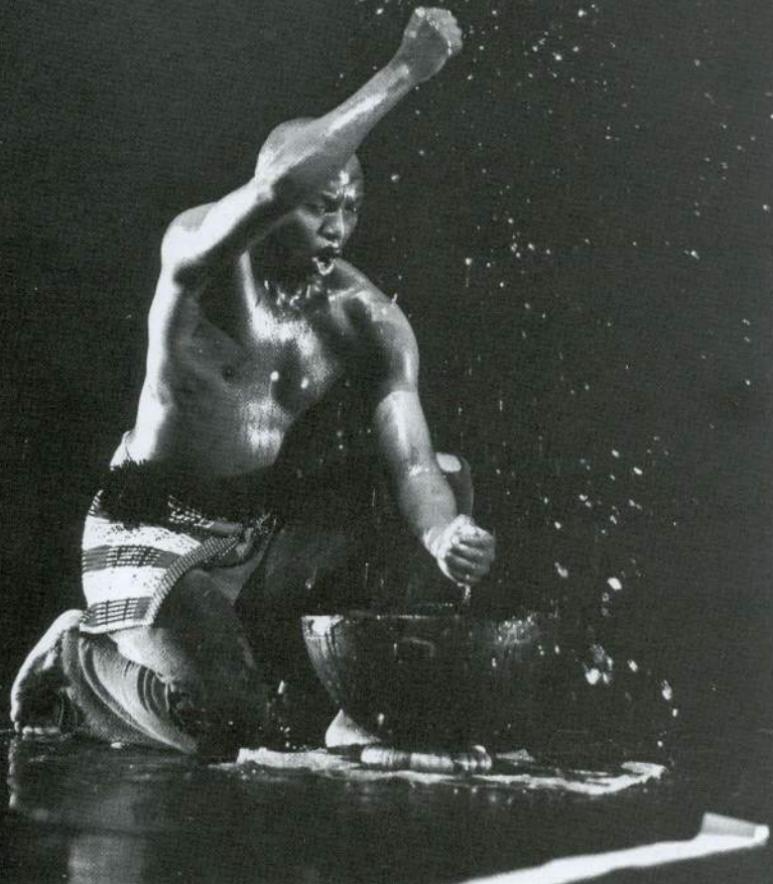
The dancers then proceeded to poke fun at and scrutinise the absurdity of intimate relationships, from sweet beginning to dirty end, as they poked fun at and scrutinised themselves. This sometimes employed tender elements, such as when the female dancer arranged, draped and inserted her hair through various parts of the male. Much of it was harsher, frequently employing the lipstick: the woman wrote its brand, Christian Dior, and the price on her leg, later to smudge some of it away to leave the word *chair* (flesh) and a price of 0.00; the male wrote something into the palm of his hand with the lipstick, then smacked the woman on the ball of her shoulder, removing the hand to reveal, in lurid red, the French word for "ouch."

While totally unabashed nudity and physical exploration may have been shocking enough for some, this wasn't the full test of their chaste endurance. Toward the end of the piece, both dancers urinate on stage, the male doing so after he has drooled onto his penis, which subsequently released some of its own pent-up moisture. On the second night, several audience members walked out at this stage of the production, and one individual was so perturbed as to ring into Joe Duffy *Liveline* radio programme with a complaint about what he saw as the production's shocking and needless vulgarity.

But why was the production more upsetting than a walk through Dublin's city centre on any given weekend? One can turn one's head and walk away from some drunk person pissing publicly in the street. Here the audience — socially conditioned to ridicule anyone who wets himself — was forced to confront the stillness and inherent misery of the dancer's controlled act of release. As the

**BREATHLESS:**

Vincent Sekwati  
Koko Mantsoe



inclusion at the end of the dance of a new, clothed dancer — accompanied by the song *An Englishman In New York* — illustrates, we get beyond it, gloss over it, find humour and even something endearing about this morbid and rapacious dance of the sexes. Whether *Jérôme Bel* was dance or it wasn't — and one could make a convincing argument for either — this piece rattled the mental limescale from a stiff-jointed social and artistic consciousness.

Rosemary Butcher's *Scan* also explored human relationships, but had her dancers go through the frenetic motions of partners in torment. As a piece done in-the-round (in a square, actually) in the Green on Red Gallery, her backdrop was the floor, across which was projected a scaffolding of light. Watching the four dancers as they chopped and changed partnerships felt uncomfortable, like watching the symbiotic anguish of a relationship from below the skin, muscles stripped and pulsing.

As suddenly as it started, it stopped, all dancers left the stage, and film was beamed onto the floor: closeups of body parts, a luminescent red hand, a foot mirrored on the polished floor, hands, hips... the viewpoint of the lens broadening into footage from rehearsals. Viewers' expectations were thrown callously back at them in the midst of the indifferent flashing images of this film, a story told from end to beginning, one that left no doubt that what you had seen was most definitely a fiction. It was a bit like coming out of a matinee performance, blinking in the sun that dissolved the mists of your temporary emotional involvement.

The energy of this conceptual work germinated something new in Liz Roche, artist-in-residence under the auspices of the Festival. Working with

Butcher, Roche quite literally threw herself into an evolving work, which shimmered with intensity. Her residency held her under no obligation to produce something; it enabled her to develop without pressure.

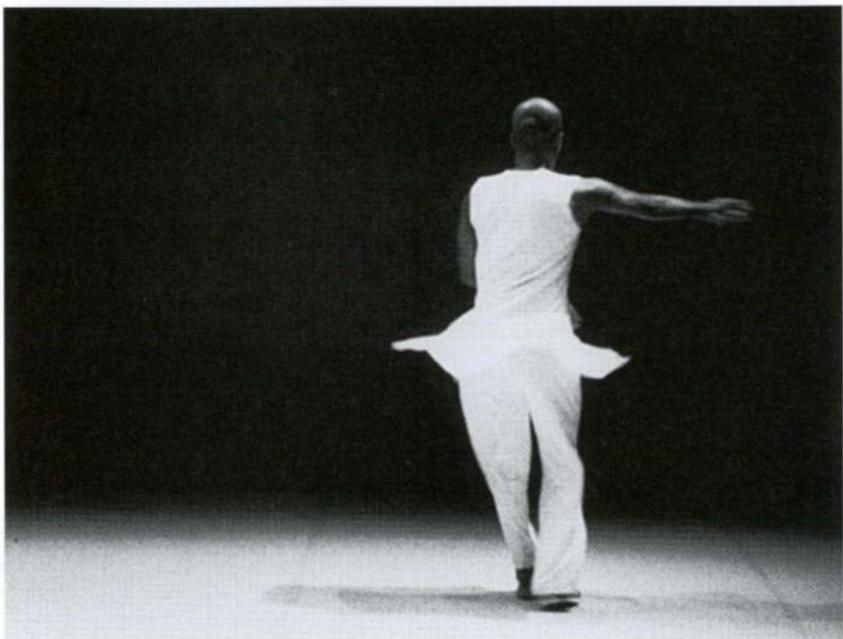
Nevertheless, she demonstrated what she had come up with thus far in a one-off performance in Project's Cube: she hurled herself to the floor, tumbling from one end of her stage to the other, engaging in furious movement only to lie still and leached as beached seaweed; she twisted herself over and over into knots; she lay her hand reverently on and around audience members, perhaps palpating for an energetic aura. The piece was filled with throbbing emotion — anger, frustration, sensitivity, longing for contact. Since Butcher was unable to attend this presentation, her collaboration with Roche is set to continue beyond the Festival, at least briefly through June and July, to round off and share the development set in motion. With it, Roche is a choreographer to watch. Her development looks set to take off in a new and breathless direction.

Vincent Sekwati Koko Mantsoe, dancer and choreographer from South Africa, also creates a breathless spectacle — quite literally — on stage. His dance weaves together many different strands of dance and ritual — the most interesting, perhaps, the influence of the *sangomas*, or wise women, in his family. The immense strength of his performance springs from the core pose — *douplé* — in which the dancer maintains a straight back but bended knees throughout, a position of poised force and flexibility. Think of the haunches of a lion and you'll get a sense of the power and vitality Mantsoe brings to his dance.

From the beginning, his contact with and connection to the audience was

intense, frequently uncomfortably intimate. In his first piece, *Phokwana*, he seemed to go into a fevered trance in which he relived his childhood. He leapt and shuddered, trembled, muttered, and moaned to himself epileptically, enduring — and communicating — an anguish that no words could ever describe. He emerged from this ordeal strong and self-aware, thumping his

contact, meeting people, celebrating with them. Through all this, his eye contact with the audience was unflinching. Mantsoe did not perform a rarified gymnastic feat on a pedestal. His was a public platform, an altar, and his dance was visceral: you could nearly feel your vital organs churning with the energy he generated on the stage. His body, you felt, was not his own to command; its leap-



**AWHIRL:** A member of Akram Khan's company performing Rush

chest proudly. The sense of pride carried over into *Barena*, during which, as a chief, he strutted like a peacock, asserting his authority and challenging the audience to contradict him. His final piece, *Motswa Hole* ("Person from far away"), flipped over to a different aspect of tribal personality: the joy of

ing, throbbing movement must be directed by some external force. And it taxed him — when he spun, he showered sweat across the audience like a water sprinkler.

Nor was he the only one to irrigate his viewing public in this way: in the final work of Akram Khan's programme,

sweat radiated from the three whirling dancers, even adding an aesthetic touch to their piece, *Rush*. Also rooted in an ethnic base, Khan draws energy and inspiration from the Kathak tradition of dance on the Indian subcontinent to develop a new fusion of styles, forms, and movements. As the audience assembled for the performance, *Loose in Flight*, a short dance film Khan made for Channel 4, was being screened. Then Khan arrived on stage, joined by Vishnu Sahai and a set of drums for another quirk of the evening: the piece *half and nine*, a drum solo based on music that runs on nine and a half beats per measure. The after-interval piece *Rush* also employed this vehemently unWestern beat.

*Fix*, a solo by Khan, was marked by a trait of Kathak dance: alternating stillness and slow motion with sudden vigorous, swishing, almost spasmotic movement. The process intensified through the piece; a sense of reverence, a ritualistic aesthetic permeated the atmosphere. Dance is a part of religious veneration in India, something almost antithetical to Christian tradition in the West. A great pity, as the quality and level of feeling and participation generated by Khan's and Mantsoe's work proves how very effective dance can be in inspiring a higher, awe-filled sense of spirit. The narrative systems of their cultures communicate, but don't necessarily tell stories, nor do they emulate the Judeo-Christian linear concept of time. In Mantsoe's work, time was an amorphous thing, warped into shape by the intensity of experience. The Kathak tradition that informs Khan's work employs narrative relying on procedure, repeated movements, rhythm — rather than logical subject-verb-object syntax, the concept of beginning-middle-end or the tangible — for its message.

An enchanting work for children by Quintavalla-Stori-Compagnia Abbondanza-Bertoni presented a more traditional type of narrative work. *Romanzo d'infanzia* ("A Childhood Tale") struck a note of sombre humour in its story of two children, Nina and Tomasso, ignored and mistreated by their self-centred parents. Michele Abbondanza and Antonella Bertoni played both children and adults, and so immaculately could they control expression and deportment, the audience were never in any doubt as to who played whom when. Abbondanza and Bertoni conjured up the fantasy worlds Nina and Tomaso fled to for spiritual survival, their immense skill and painstaking observation enabling them to convey the bleak existence of lonely, uncared-for children, and the moments of joy and light they snatch when they can. This piece embodied the sense of earnestness, the yearning for and fervent exchange of love, the gravity and profundity of child's play far more accurately than the confections funnelled into children from TV.

Nowhere was incongruity more prevalent than in Irish Modern Dance Theatre's *Last Supper*, which proved you don't have to be a child to have fun in play. John Scott set this ticklish piece, a diner's evening from hell, in the Trocadero restaurant in Dublin. Amongst the audience members seated at tables in a smallish room, the eight dancers lay in wait until the piped-in Sinatra went wonky — their cue to let loose. The performers behaved badly, drawing rings on themselves, blowing through straws into glasses of water until they bubbled over; Scott stuffed an entire cloth napkin into his mouth. They walked over people seated on the benches; slammed their hands on the table, jolting glasses and slopping wine about. It was like eat-

ing in a posh restaurant with the entire cast of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. The audience were captive, and torn by conflicting impulses either to act "normal" or to stare and laugh, and perhaps even take part. As inhibitions broke down, the piece became hugely entertaining.

Few art forms are as adept in breaking those barriers as dance. As 90% of communication is non-verbal, we all respond

means. Among the Dance Festival works, those of Mantsoe and Khan, Scott's *The Last Supper*, Jérôme Bel, and CoisCéim's film *Hit and Run* all illustrate how potent the language of dance is, and what an earthy and primal response it elicits from its audience. In *Hit and Run*, for example, a gang of eight self-consciously cool young people spend a night in an old warehouse, the atmosphere reminiscent of *West Side Story*. Sin-



**DINNER PARTY FROM HELL:** John Scott's Irish Modern Dance Theatre

instinctively to body language — and subsequently to dance, reacting and interpreting posture, attitude and movement subconsciously, even pre-consciously. Our response, too, hides more in our tissues than our brains: we feel more than we think about it and what it

uous and slippery, fast and reckless, David Bolger's dancers twined in and out of each other, leapt, pushed and pulled until their energy went out of control, leading from playful to pointed aggression, bloodshed, and accidental killing. The movement resounds within

us, we feel the story, we know it from the gut; our response is far more empathetic and instantaneous than if it were told through scripted dialogue.

Judging roughly by the plain counting-bums-on-seats method, the International Dance Festival was a great success: the acts drew in their audiences and filled the various venues, fuelling a buzz as the weeks passed. The second Festival is scheduled for 2004; over the next two years, we can begin to assess what impact three weeks brimming with myriad Terpsichorean gigs has made on the Irish dance scene. If nothing else, this first international dance festival was successful in allowing conditions for study, development, and experimentation in dance to emerge. With appetites whetted for dance, those in the sector — and those supporting them — should throw their backs into keeping up this momentum, elaborating on this achievement and allowing for stimulating and vibrant development of this important art form, to the enhancement of all the arts in Ireland.

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*Christine Madden is a freelance writer and editor for publications including The Irish Times.*

## NOT "IRISH" AT ALL

BY ANJA MUSIAT

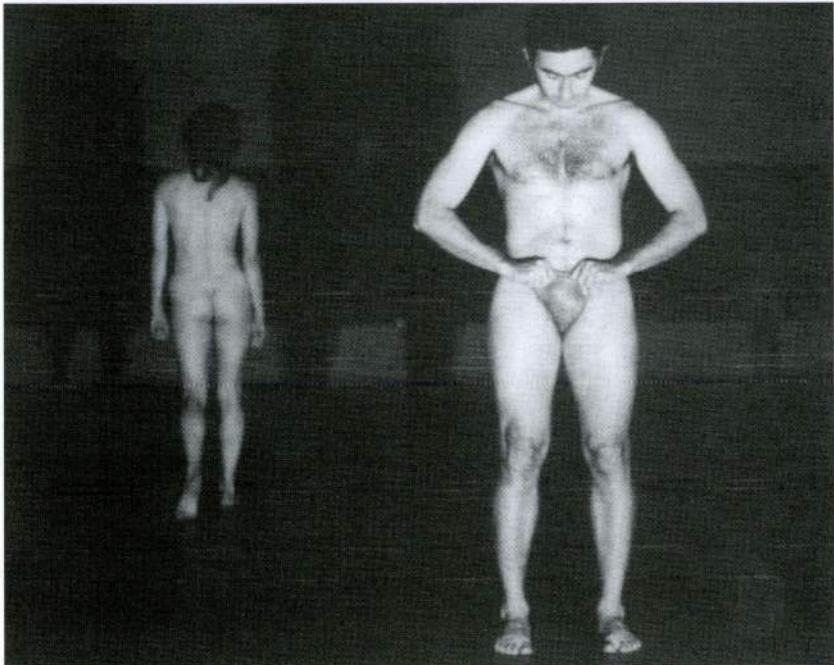
I WENT TO THE INTERNATIONAL DANCE Festival of Ireland specifically to look at what Irish contemporary dance could offer in an international context. As it turned out, the works I saw were not "Irish" at all — or at least they confirmed that you cannot put a national label on dance. It makes more sense to talk about contemporary dance by companies/choreographers that are currently based in Ireland.

In the final weekend of the Festival, three premieres were scheduled: two festival commissions of new work by independent choreographers Mary Nunan and Cindy Cummings, and the complete trilogy of Daghdha's *Reverse Psychology*, of which only parts one and two had been shown before.

Mary Nunan's duet for solo dancer and cellist, *Claim/Reclaim*, was performed in Project's intimate downstairs space. A lightbox showing an empty path through a golden forest provided the backdrop for an exploration of bodily and national boundaries. Nunan, in white vest, loose trousers, and a long skirt like soft paper, employs a release-based choreography perfect for the echoes of nostalgia, earthiness, territorial claims and reclaims that are evoked by both the backdrop and the dark melancholy voice of the Hungarian cello. When she begins her performance by letting her shoulder drop, the movement continues through the rest of the body. Likewise, a small movement of the knee creates one ripple effect after another, the body always returning to its centre, thus giving the ephemeral movement a solid groundedness. Despite this groundedness her balance seems fragile — she continually collapses in her pliés as if she is dangling from a thread that cannot hold her. The movements are internalised — flexed feet turned inwards, face downwards, the torso contracted. Sometimes she tries to turn outwards with a series of circular jumps, or falls into a forward tilt, but the body always pulls back, reclaiming its centre. This is release technique at its most sophisticated. Both cellist, Ferenc Szucs, and dancer are completely absorbed in their individual movement of strings and limbs, communicating beautifully, as if one is an extension of the other.

This same close relationship between musician and dancer marked the evening's second duet, *Smoke Rings*, this time between American dancer Cindy Cummings and saxophone player Majnoon Yehudi, both based in Cork. It's a work that sets out to explore an alternative response to the events of 11 Sep-

darkness and slowly begin to rub up against the wall, improvising rhythms with the material of their costumes. Yehudi softly begins to play the sax and Cummings dances away from the wall, revealing a cheerful blue suit with gold decorations and red stripes down her legs. She recites poetry whilst moving —



**REVEALING:** Some of the many body parts on show in Jérôme Bel

tember 2001 in New York, with layers of nationalist manifestations and a dynamic play with the preconceptions that Irish people and Americans have of one another. In doing so, both Yvonne Rainer's famous flag version of *Trio A* during the Vietnam War, and the Chicago-based performance group Goat Island come to mind. The performers enter the stage in

"In the dark you take your time" — stamping the rhythm with her feet. Like Nunan, Cummings' movements are release-based. As she prances around the stage, her movements flow from Irish traditional dancing through military marching to power-walking. Still reciting in her soft American drawl — "I dreamed of missiles cutting through the

air (...) I dreamed Nostradamus was making love to himself and said 'I told you so'" — Cummings gradually adds a darker element to the quirkiness. She leaves and Yehudi sets up a video monitor on the stage, then follows Cummings with a video camera, thus enabling us to see what's going on in the dressing room: Cummings is getting into Marilyn Monroe costume complete with blond wig, and fake boobs, and they chat away about the dress, her bunions and Roy

but she manages to find a delicate balance between playful quirkiness and seriousness.

Daghda's performance of Yoshiko Chuma's *Reverse Psychology* closed the festival. Unfortunately, the weather was against us, so we got the indoor rather than the site-specific version of part one. Actors tell the stories of martyrs, midwives and Maeve, all of which revolve around a seven-foot steel cube structure with open sides. Dressed in long white



**TOPSY TURVY:** Daghda's Reverse Psychology

Keane. Back on stage Cummings finishes the piece by singing parts of "America the Beautiful" whilst hugging her Monroe figure.

It's a bold move to treat the events of September 11 with humour. The main difficulty lies in Cummings' reliance on spectators' response. It's easy to get carried away by the audience's laughter,

dresses, skirts and shirts, the dancers move through and around the cube, constantly re-placing it, turning it round, and thus creating new spaces for each other. Time is marked by metronomes switched on and off by the dancers, who also announce the time with large clocks. The dancers illustrate the stories with individual poses or group tableaux.

ROBERT FLYNT

There's a lot of running from one pose to another, hints of Irish traditional dancing, long glances, and twisted bodies. After the interval, during which the dancers continue their silent movements in the foyer, there's a wild finale of traditional dancing, clapping, and "ho ha" shouting. The dancers look as if they are enjoying themselves tremendously.

Darkness and the sound of water indicate the beginning of part two, "In Gear," a piece for two male and three female dancers set in the 1950s. Again we have a metronome, the clocks, a steel cube, and traditional Irish dancing appear in the dancers' movements. Otherwise, it's an eclectic, jerky choreography with fantastic contact improvisational elements. Solos and duets are interspersed with group phrases. The cube is moved around in intricate patterns with dancers moving inside and around it, making it hard to see what is inside and outside and if the cube is following the dancer or the dancer the cube.

In the evening's premiere, "Tunnel," eight dancers wear futuristic, sparkling costumes and the music has become rhythmical, with a distinct drum. The movements are angular and acrobatic, yet flow smoothly. A double-cube is lowered from the ceiling and we now have three cubes forming a long tunnel through which one tall dancer navigates. She suddenly leaves, the music stops and all we hear are the four metronomes on the floor and the passing of time. Light shines through the three cubes creating a pathway to the future. We have passed through a century of rapid development in human relationships.

It is rare to see a full-length evening work on such an epic scale in contemporary dance. Even if it consists of three individual parts, these still work

remarkably well together, connected as they are by the endlessly changing movement vocabulary and the steel cubes. Despite the literal stories in part one, the piece defies conventional narrative strategies, just like Cummings' and Nunan's works. It's the theatrical element and the strong individual performances that make these works so engaging, linking them with traditions as diverse as Japanese Butoh, German tanz-teater and American performance. Does Ireland provide a particularly ripe environment for such a varied dance community because there is no century-old formal dance legacy to come to terms with? Or is the country simply fortunate to have some very strong choreographers currently residing there? In any case, it's a lively diversity that bodes well for future dance audiences.

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Anja Musiat is the Bristol-based overseas editor of the Danish dance magazine *Terpsichore*.

## BEHIND ENEMY LINES

BY PETER CRAWLEY

IN A DARING EXPERIMENT, *ITM* wondered whether a theatre critic, dropped behind enemy lines, could adapt to new surroundings. For me, dance is uncharted terrain and I'm not sure that I volunteered to be the critical paratrooper. Some weeks later, however, with a considerable sense of dread, I pitched for the dance I felt best suited for.

The choice was easy. Flipping through the Dance Festival programme, using my preconceptions as a filter, I barred anything Irish (too close to home), tasteless (too boring) or featuring Jérôme Bel's scrotum ('c'mon). I settled on Michael

Clark in a heartbeat. Dangerous, funky, choreographing material to the music of The Fall and (according to much publicity) telling stories of rising from the Stygian depths of heroin abuse, Clark was right up my alley. If you're worried about entering the ivory skyscraper of a medium you know next to nothing about, head straight for the pop-cultural foyer.

And still I hated it.

Perhaps hate is too strong a word. But after two pieces of Clark's work my teeth clenched tight while my legs carried me quickly from the venue as I searched for the right words. The bon mots came thick and fast with the Schadenfreude of preparing to pan a flop. But even while stockpiling ripostes, I was chased down Gardiner Street by two nagging doubts and one drunk guy:

1) I'm not a dance critic, I shouldn't have been here.

2) There were mitigating factors. Actually more than that, there were things that I liked about it. It's just so hard to articulate them.

3) The drunk guy wanted a cigarette. I don't smoke.

I can write easily about what didn't work in the performance. I could prove how tired the visual gags and clumsy left-hooks to moral majority values were on an etch-a-sketch. The pioneering deconstruction of masturbation jokes, which so elevated the teen gross-out study *American Pie* but failed to revive a flaccid *American Pie 2*, has left Michael Clark with little room to manoeuvre. The second of his pieces, "Rise," was a drawn-out gag that vulgar pier-side comedian Roy "Chubby" Brown would find only passingly amusing.

Moreover, Michael Clark was supposed to shock us. It says it there in the brochure: "Michael Clark is the bad-boy

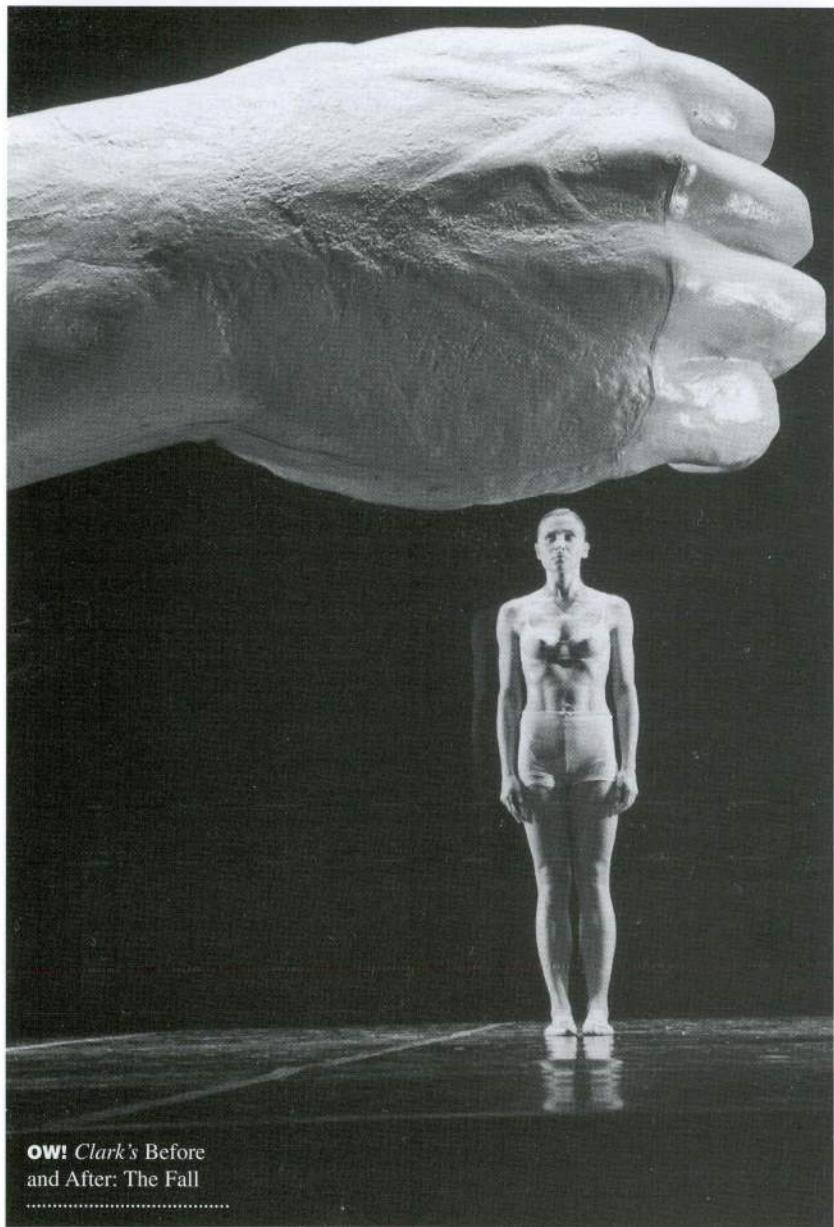
of British dance." In hindsight, this could be like labelling someone the rebel of a bridge-club — provocative perhaps, but compared to what?

Well, punk for starters. A mainstay of the 1980s London punk scene, Clark's style has been described as "punk dance", while choreographing pieces to the music of Bruce Gilbert (before he formed punk troubadours Wire) and post-punk legends The Fall has naturally invited comparisons to the Rottens and Viciouses of the 1970s. Sadly, it provides another thwarted expectation.

Not that even those slurring nihilists ever fully delivered on their promises. Elucidating the term "punk rock" in *The Guardian*, John Robinson recently explained: "[It] can be enthusiastic ('He defecated on the floor, then set fire to himself. It was pretty punk rock.') or ironic ('You missed your sushi lesson to go skateboarding? You're so punk rock.')" Clark fits the latter category.

The show started well enough. Insofar as it didn't start for nearly 45 minutes (Clark is known for having difficulty working to time schedules). The audience sit through a blaring loop of Mp3 bootlegs (Christina Aguilera vs The Strokes etc) before someone thinks of starting a slow handclap. According to Robinson's criterion, this is a little punk rock on both sides of the curtain. And then it starts. "Before and After: The Fall" a collection of two dances, "Fall" and "Rise," begins with a spotlight on a dancer's bum. My prejudices snap to attention.

The lone dancer begins a pattern that is reiterated throughout the two halves of the performance. She staggers through a faltering, itchy dance under a quasi-military hat, while punctuating it with occasionally captivating dance. In these moments the body is aesthetic,



**OW!** Clark's Before  
and After: The Fall

graceful, and (unfortunate choice of word given this festival) fluid, with each dancer demonstrating their undoubted accomplishment. But these images are consistently affronted and often ruptured by Clark's visual mayhem or sadistic choreography.

For example, the fascist attire of the bottom-baring dancers features a single, impossibly tall, silver platform boot, upon which one dancer performs a glacially slow pirouette. Despite frequent mimed actions (they appear to be demanding money and plunging it down their cleavages) and mood-enhancing embellishments (one spits into the audience during The Fall's cantankerous song "New Puritan"), I doubt I could have followed the narrative of "Fall," had I not been briefed by an article in "The Ticket" beforehand.

Boy meets fascist girls who in turn meet panda-eyed, y-front-wearing new-age hippies; boy plummets through the seven levels of hell as a junkie and eats a goldfish; boy is somehow liberated by fried-egg trees.

Or something. It is as autobiographical, idiosyncratic and tiresome as a tabloid tell-all. *My Drugs Hell!* Dominated by novelties, a start-stop soundtrack, and defused shock tactics, the dance is obscured or derided by the choreographer. This is doubtless the point, but it all feels like a stale joke. Perhaps Clark wants to create the effect of kicking sand in your eye when you're watching a sunset. But it feels closer to doodling glasses and a goatee on the Mona Lisa. Irritating but hackneyed.

The new dance "Rise," however, continues Clark's self-regarding interest with designer Sarah Lucas' expensive onanistic one-liner, towering twenty feet high, pumping towards its solipsistic release. The lighting rig

begins hovering around the waists of the dancers, before gradually rising into the rafters. Meanwhile background floodlights blind the audience while the soundtrack's volume increases to deafen it.

Which is a bit punk rock.

The performers, again in over-sized underwear, appear to be dancing behind the seared white splotches of my retinas. A whole new spin on the phrase, "You'll go blind" arrives with projected video of Clark, leaning against a wall, apparently in the act of self-abuse.

The theme is reiterated with Byzantine subtlety, as each dancer appears with enlarged prosthetic arms in tight-fisted grips. When the point has been made a few dozen times, on rolls a huge mechanical forearm in the same pose on some sort of hydraulic hinge while dancers in pubic-hair leg-warmers transform themselves into phalluses under the arc of the rising and falling fist.

Masturbation, narcissism, solipsism — it's all about looking after No.1. It's a performance without an audience in mind. It's not a communal event and it's certainly not an idea worth sharing. At the show's conclusion, however, there is a rumble of feet around the auditorium as though Clark had truly broken down boundaries or that the audience had simply gotten the joke.

And my mind still lingers on the dance buried somewhere behind the blinding lights and toilet graffiti. And on the art form I've never gotten to grips with: this time around, I simply didn't have to. This is where Clark and I have something in common: we took the easy way out.

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



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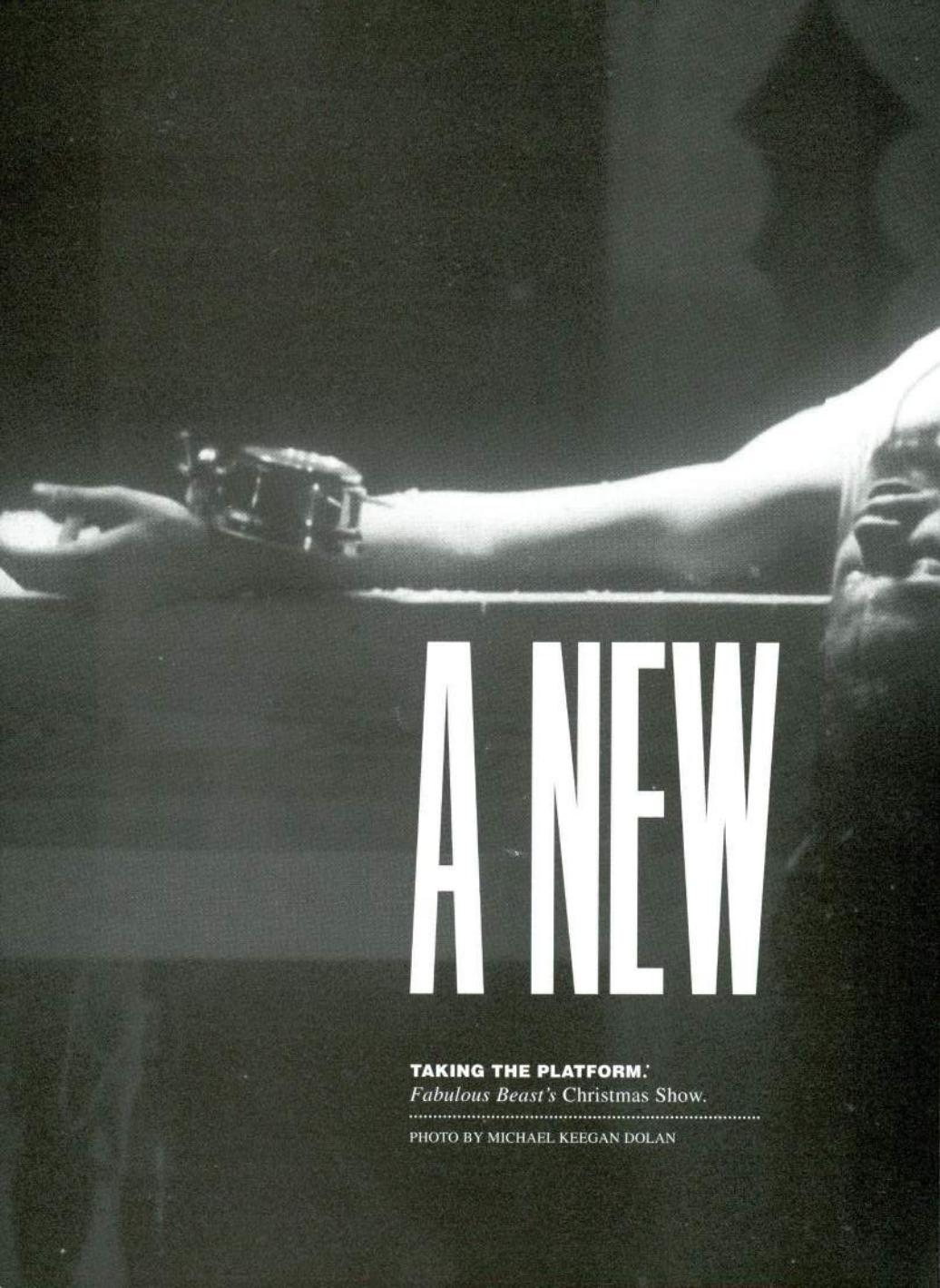
Contemporary Dance: Mary Nunan; Tel. 061 203464; email:  
[mary.nunan@ul.ie](mailto:mary.nunan@ul.ie)

Irish Traditional Dance: Dr Catherine Foley: Tel. 061 202922;  
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# A NEW

**TAKING THE PLATFORM:**  
*Fabulous Beast's Christmas Show.*

PHOTO BY MICHAEL KEEGAN DOLAN



# CROSSROADS

*The International Dance Festival placed Irish dance in a particularly cosmopolitan spotlight — but, as **SEONA MACREAMOINN** argues, the field has been internationalising for years.*

**T**HE MERCE CUNNINGHAM DANCE COMPANY'S illuminating performances on the stage of the Abbey Theatre during the recent International Dance Festival Ireland heralded a new era in the continuing development of contemporary dance in Ireland. They also offer a chance to reflect on how dance here might develop and make its next adept, choreographed moves. ■ The international

aspect of the Dance Festival signals the leap forward that the dance community needed. There has been a growing confidence among dancers, choreographers, and audiences but what was required was a catalyst, an external challenge, and independent recognition. The pivotal New Music New Dance Festival, which ran in the '80s and '90s at Project in Dublin, is the acknowledged precursor of the May 2002 event, but had in its final years outgrown its own success. The standard bar had to be raised, and artistic direction was required to steer and control so that audiences and critics who for many years had enthused or despaired could begin to evaluate in a wider context. The Festival was the culmination of a growing internationalisation of dance in Ireland, which has taken many forms and has been one of the elements that has ensured its survival and development to date.

Not that any of this is revolutionary. Dance has always crossed borders and oceans, and from its beginnings with Joan Davis and Karen Callaghan's Dublin Contemporary Dance Theatre, Irish contemporary dance has always looked abroad. This has not just been about study and training outside of Ireland. Dance Theatre of Ireland (DTI)'s inaugural piece, *La Beaute Des Fleurs* in 1989, was the work of French choreographers; the company's U.S.-born artistic directors Robert Connor

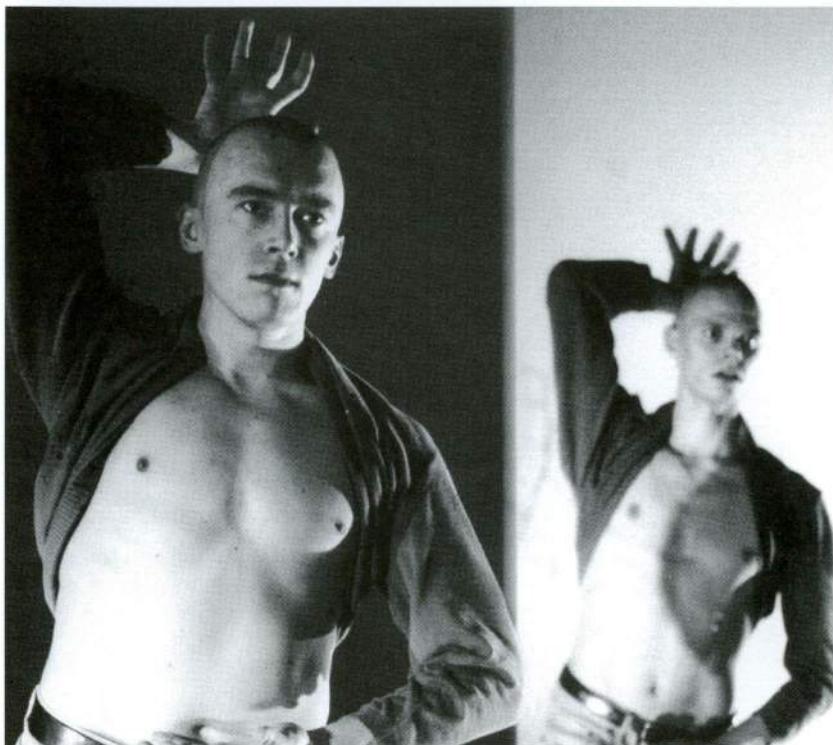
and Loretta Yurick have interspersed their repertoire over the intervening years with a gallery of visiting artists. Irish Modern Dance Theatre (IMDT) is another case in point through their use of visiting designers and dancers. All of this has helped to fertilise the ground for an art form which has no exhaustive tradition or resources to call on.

Dancers too have been migrating here, contracted for one show and then drawn by the culture if not the lure of regular employment to make this their base. Local choreographers have benefited from this as they search to cast new performers in new works, eager to have their ideas take on unfamiliar transformations. A quick glance at any recent productions will see a strong continental European presence augmented by dancers from Australia and New Zealand.

This network of visiting dance makers and performers has in recent years also led to another aspect of the international dimension. Irish dance companies have been seen abroad, beginning tentatively to join the world circuit of dance seasons and festivals. Daghdha have been to Mexico and New York; CoisCéim was invited to Jacob's Pillow Festival in the U.S. and to Tasmania; IMDT travelled to Sweden, Paris, and New York; and Dance Theatre of Ireland to Bulgaria, France, Italy, and the Netherlands. Younger dancers and newer companies have also been on the move,

including Rex Levitates at Uzeze in France and Cathy O'Kennedy's Fluxusdance to Seattle this summer. The Imaginaire Irlandaise festival in France in 1995, which included DTI's opening of the Montpellier Dance Festival (albeit with the work of a French choreographer), did mark a turning

dition (or at times, it seems, even the same planet), the gigantic international success of *Riverdance* does have a positive impact. It would be foolish to underestimate how much the profile is raised for all cultural forms by those that gain international acclaim and recognition, whether they be



**A VIEW FROM OUTSIDE:** Finnish choreographer Jyrki Karttunen's Digital Duende

point in the official recognition and support for dance as one of Ireland's contemporary cultural manifestations. It would be naïve to assume that companies have been swamped with prestigious invitations, but there has been incremental and continuous activity ever since.

While not emanating from the same tra-

Bono and U2, Michael Flatley and Jean Butler, or Brian Friel and *Dancing at Lughnasa*. Such successes are a testament to a vibrancy in the contemporary performing and theatrical arts. Irish contemporary dance companies that travel internationally also help debunk the myth of an homogeneous Irish cultural identity.

The modest export trade in Irish dance, and the overall high profile for Irish culture internationally, leads also to the reverse syndrome; an interest from other artists in performing here in Ireland. That too is good news and to be encouraged. Catherine Nunes, artistic director of International Dance Festival Ireland, can attest to well-known names perhaps not clamouring, but certainly keen to be invited. But it is likely that her judicious choices have increased the interest level in other international companies to challenge and win over what they now perceive as unexplored territory with unjaded audiences.

But how can all this growing globalisation be harnessed to assure a long-term benefit for the Irish dance community? One way is through the wealth of repertory that is created. This is one area, however, where Irish dance companies have been wanting, and slow to keep the old with the new. There have been recent signs of a change of heart: CoisCéim's revival of *When Once is Never Enough*, DTI's revival of Philippe Saire's *A Question of Distance*, and IMDT's reworking of *Slam and Macalla* mainly for touring. Repertory in general is not high on the dance agenda here, and yet it could provide sustenance and context for dancers and audiences. Access to the canon of classical dance, where not available through indigenous companies, can be provided by visiting performers.

But, for many years, Ireland was missing from the touring circuits of all dance companies, whether classical or contemporary. Between the visit of the Royal Ballet to the Gaiety in the early '60s to that of the Kirov to the RDS in the '80s, we did not see a world-calibre ballet company in Ireland. Then the *Swan Lake* syndrome took over and our exposure stalled; promoters and theatre were reluctant to test audiences with anything other than the safe time classics. So it is

doubly important that we have some way of engaging with the past in classical ballet and modern dance. Ballet Ireland certainly have a role to play here. It would be fun also to see some of our modern dance companies produce some of the so-called classics of the modern idiom. CoisCéim's recent version of *Rite of Spring* is a case in point, although it would have doubled its impact if audiences had been familiar with Nijinsky's original production.

Choosing such repertory presents a challenge, much as it requires a good eye to select a visiting choreographer or a mentor if you are already on the road to dance-making. Sean Curran and IMDT, Adrienne Brown's mentoring process at the Institute for Choreography and Dance at the Firkin Crane, and the immaculate partnering of Rui Horta with DTI spring to mind as examples that have worked well. It will be interesting to see how longer collaborations and partnerships might develop over time. We observe this happening in Yushiko Chiuma's recent long project with Daghdha and international dancers, and in the area of motion-sensor technology where artists including Cindy Cummings and Jools Gilson-Ellis have worked on projects that have had the freedom of longer incubation periods.

Developing partnerships is now seen to be a way forward in the area of youth dance, which over the past ten years has experienced growth and some structure. It is the nurturing ground for the future, and the longer-term investment is beginning to be seen whether in the ESB's continuing sponsorship of CoisCéim's Ezi-motion project, or the links created by Irish National Youth Ballet with Florida State University. There are numerous projects and participants all over the country

including Myriad in Wexford; Dublin Youth Dance in Dun Laoghaire; and similar ventures in Waterford, Galway, and Cork. On a performance level, Ballet Ireland also features a young international company, and it has benefitted too from the international credentials and back-

dance. Finola Cronin, after a successful career with Pina Bausch's company, brings much experience and knowledge in her role as choreographer-in-residence at UCD's Drama Studies Centre, and as an independent choreographer. Choreographer Michael Keegan Dolan's



**DANCE THEATRE:** Finola Cronin with Pina Bausch's company

ground of its artistic directors, Anne Maher and Gunther Falussý.

Maher is among a number of dancers and choreographers who have returned to Ireland after many years performing abroad, and who have again contributed to the layering of experience in Irish

commuting axis between Dublin and London is also to be welcomed, as his Fabulous Beast company now performs here twice a year and will be seen at the next Dublin Theatre Festival.

The flourishing youth dance sector is inevitably intertwined with the parallel

initiatives and aspirations of education and performance. And yet, its goals are difficult to achieve. We have still to make the quantum leap to a fully-fledged training school. In the meantime, the VEC courses in Inchicore, Coláiste Stiofáin Naofa, and Marino; the College of Dance in Dublin; and Ballet Theatre Ireland in Cork; along with the battalion of dance teachers around the country are continuing their efforts and increasing our temporary exports of students to further training, especially the UK. The model that currently seems luminously attractive is the Paris Conservatoire, whose youth training school was seen here recently touring and giving workshops, combining as it does both ballet and contemporary training.

Other linked developments that span the education and performance brief include the establishment of the Institute for Choreography and Dance at Firkin Crane. The Institute's mission of hosting small international companies, initiating a mentoring process, and forging links with other dance networks has contributed to the strengthening of the dance base here. The University of Limerick's MA in Dance Performance, directed by Mary Nunan, offers yet more scope and makes UL another potentially vibrant centre for dance. The emerging relationship there between traditional and "global" music and dance is underlined by the participation of former *Riverdancer* Colin Dunne, who is now pursuing both dance and choreography in a different idiom as an MA student.

Festivals and commissions are also vital. The featuring of dance as an integral part of the Dublin Fringe Festival, and the establishment of the Aerowaves network, which showcases current young European companies, has helped expand audiences. The first phalanx of Finnish companies in

2000 was particularly exciting, opening up network possibilities for artists in Ireland. Individual theatres also have played their role, none more crucially than Project, which despite its legendarily inadequate sightlines in the pre-renovation East Essex Street space, nurtured, promoted, and opened its doors to dance in the capital when no other commercial or subsidised theatre was interested. Project's connection with the New Music New Dance Festival under the direction of Tim O'Neill and Fiach MacConghail allowed it to grow substantially, and eventually outlive its role. MacConghail's subsequent, visionary appointment of Paul Johnson as Project dancer-in-residence stepped up the pace for equal status with other art forms. Choreographer and dancer Johnson and his MaNDaNCE project flourished and matured during this residency, which also afforded him time at the ICD in Cork. MaNDaNCE's exploration of male sexuality and sensibility indicates that ideas and subject matter are not concentrated in one area.

The notion of "theatre dance," by direction or aspiration, seems to be applied to many dance companies in Ireland. This is an intriguing, curious detail — perhaps evidence of our highly verbal culture. Currently, however, there is evidence of a retreat from dance as drama, and some advance to the more abstract ground of dance as pure movement. Being "about something," or not, is in fact not the dilemma at all: choreographers always begin with some fragment of an idea and success lies in how effectively they communicate that original intention. The choice is in what to add to or subtract from the movement itself. Text and technology continue to come and go as favoured partners but, as could be seen from the Irish participation in the International Dance Festival, creatively managing the process of inte-

gration so that the outcome is coherent is hard work, and does not always succeed.

One senses even in the work of a talented younger choreographer like Liz Roche that there is a question of confidence in exposing physical movement, unadorned and free-standing, and an anxiety about whether such movement can sustain itself with enough impact in

from its foreign counterparts. Perhaps the commissioning impetus of those old New Music New Dance festivals left an indelible mark — scarcely a new work is presented that is not graced by original dialogue between composer and dance maker. All those concerned about forging a distinct vocabulary or identity for Irish dance could certainly look to music for



**VARIED:** Riverdance (left) and Paul Johnson's MaNDaNCE

RIVERDANCE: JOHN MARCUS; MANDANCE: AMELIA STEIN

its fundamental relationships with music, light, and space. Certainly, adventurous and well-trained dancers might not be as susceptible to those anxieties, and many of those working here at the moment are more than equal to the challenge of grappling with pure movement. Much of the international work seen at the Festival should help focus the mind and steel the nerve.

Finally the collaboration with music sets much of contemporary Irish dance apart

specific rhythm and spirit, as traditional dance making has done so successfully. The crossroads are up ahead, and not a comely maiden in view nor a signpost. Therein lies the excitement — for dancers and choreographers, and the audiences who will be following their progress in all directions.

*Seona MacReamoinn is the dance critic for The Sunday Tribune and writes and broadcasts on theatre and dance.*

# THE DANCE IN IRELAND

*What is the relationship between Arts Council policy and the development of dance in Ireland? PAUL JOHNSON offers his view.*

# DARK

THE HISTORY OF CONTEMPORARY dance practices has still to be written, yet it is clear when we take an overview of development, from the 1970s to today, that Irish dance has suffered at the hands of fickle Arts Councils.

No one could gainsay the enormous amounts of money invested in dance over the past 30 years; what is questioned is the absence of a forward thinking, "ecological" dance policy, and how this absence affected the particular development of dance practices. For no one will also deny that despite policy vagaries, dance practices have survived.

Because of its specific funding history, we now have the unique reality of a two-tier dance system. On the one hand we have a glut of companies, variously funded, who dominate the dance scene; on the other a small number of established and

emergent independent dance artists. This system seems to favour product over process, and is symptomatic of a very uneasy relationship between the Arts Council and contemporary dance practitioners — a relationship based more on money than on understanding.

Irish dance companies are almost wholly dependent on the Arts Council for their livelihood, and yet unable to grow sufficiently to build other sources of support. At a time when the Arts Council has signalled its intention to transform from funding body to development agency — where does this leave contemporary dance? Dependent on the funding whims of an at times reactive, at times proactive Council, how secure are current (and future) dance practices? An overview of the last 30 years of our field will support my argument.

From its beginnings, contemporary dance practice has developed at a gradual pace. For many years it was an underground activity, fuelled by the work of Dublin Contemporary Dance Theatre (DCDT), exposure to occasional touring companies, and the chamber works of Dublin City Ballet (DCB) and Irish National Ballet (INB). It is due to the tenacity and visionary work of DCDT co-founder Joan Davis that we have a dance culture. Many of our current dance personalities — Mary Nunan, Finola Cronin, Gaye Tanham, Catherine Nunes, Robert Connor and Loretta Yurick among others — can trace their dance heritage back to DCDT and its studio.

The 1980s was a boom time for dance with three professional companies INB, DCDT, and DCB in operation. The formation of the Dance Council of Ireland, an umbrella promotional organisation, in 1983 was significant, and over its lifetime the Dance Council provided valuable support and stimuli for the companies.

The Dance Council contributed to the development of practices by hosting a number of initiatives: Composer and Choreographer courses, New Music New Dance festivals, Irish Youth Dance Company, the publication *Dance News Ireland*, and a range of educational projects — essential platforms to showcase work, disseminate ideas, and encourage indigenous choreographic talent.

The legacy of the Composer and Choreographer courses becomes apparent, for example, when we note that the unique partnership of composer Roger Doyle and choreographer Snaggy O'Sullivan was formed during one course — which led to the formation of the company icontact with lighting designer Paul Keogan. New Music New Dance festivals provided the valuable breeding ground for, among others, choreographers John Scott and David Bolger.

Outside of Dublin notable educational initiatives existed — Barefoot Dance Company in Wexford; the dance module for teacher training at Thomond College of Education; and the presence of Mary Nunan as dancer-in-residence at Thomond, which led to the eventual formation of Daghdha Dance Company.

At the same time Arts Council policy wavered depending on the particular make-up of the Council, which did not have an informed dance presence until the appointment of Mary Brady as dance officer in 1998. Within this context the Arts Council commissioned a report on dance from British dance professional and advocate Peter Brinson — *The Dancer and the Dance: Developing Theatre Dance in Ireland*. The Brinson Report (1985) is acknowledged as the first step towards a consistently forward-thinking Irish dance policy.

Brinson's brief was to examine the three professional companies, and to report on

dance-in-education, vocational training, and community dance. His main recommendations can be summarised as follows — cut funding to Dublin City Ballet, reduce funding to Irish National Ballet, increase funding to Dublin Contemporary Dance Theatre, support the Dance Council of Ireland, and to encourage the creation of a professional dance presence at Thomond College. The logic of his recommendations revolved around the fact that ballet is a very expensive enterprise and given the limited funds, the budget should reflect the developing dance landscape.

The Arts Council adopted the Report's recommendations in 1985 and continued to fund at the advised levels for the next four years. As a result DCB was forced to cease operations, and contemporary dance practices flourished. In 1989, however, the Arts Council cut funding completely to INB and DCDT — a sudden and deeply surprising partial reversal of their previous wholesale embrace of the Brinson Report's advice. By cutting funding, over that short span of time, to three of the country's most firmly established companies, the Council dramatically undermined many years of work.

This example should never be forgotten. The Council's goal in adopting the Report was to re-allocate funds towards grassroots activity; part of the rationale offered was its concern to provide resources for, as they wrote in 1989, "crucial elements of the infrastructure necessary to the development of a rich dance culture in this country." In the 13 years since, we have to ask if these aims have been realised.

Within a short time of cutting INB and DCDT, the Arts Council began a process of funding contemporary dance companies at the level of project-based grants. Beginning with the newly formed Dance Theatre of Ireland, quickly the roll call

# THERE ARE SIMPLY TOO MANY COMPANIES OUT THERE,

came to include Rubato Ballet, New Balance, MaNDaNCE, icontact, Irish Modern Dance Theatre, and Cois Céim. The rise of the company model from project funding to revenue grants to multi-annual awards reflects the Arts Council's commitment to increasing support for dance, and indeed was a natural development for many of the Arts Council's clients.

While it was exciting to witness the major increases in funding in the 1990s,

the period was not good for some: support was withdrawn from Rubato Ballet and New Balance in 1997, and brought back memories of the earlier cull. What was the point of giving support in the first instance and then taking it away only a short while later? Not enough time was allowed for those companies' choreographers to develop, let alone consolidate their practice. This clearly indicated that

the Arts Council still did not have a logical dance policy in the mid 1990s.

In the 1990s we experienced a hitherto unknown funding bonanza, but one that prodded dance artists towards working in the Arts Council's prescribed company-based model. The Council insists that an administrative structure be in place if a choreographer is to gain access to funds. This is understandable when dealing with public money and it has obvious benefits: working in the context of a company can create a safe and supportive environment for a choreographer, and it is a valid vehicle for artistic expression. It clearly offers some form of credibility and status to the choreographer. Yet it is not the only model that should be promoted, especially in light of what we know about previous Council dealings with companies. Too much of current funding for dance is spent keeping the companies' administrative structures functioning: rental of office space, payment of staff, marketing and PR (of the company itself as well as the work).

There are simply too many companies out there, producing dance that is often safe and unchallenging. Again, this is a direct result of current Arts Council funding guidelines. Strict income and/or matching funds requirements pressure companies to create work that they know will be marketable. All this may be admirable, but it is outrageous that this is so strenuously forwarded as the "best" way to make dance in Ireland. Moreover it implies that the dance product is of more importance than either the process or the dancers, which does not make sense if we are ever to generate a sophisticated dance aesthetic. Another growing concern is the fact that all companies are competing for the same small audiences. So while the marketing gets better, one wonders if the product does too.

On the other hand, independent

# PRODUCING DANCE THAT IS OFTEN SAFE AND UNCHALLENGING.

dance artists are confined within new funding structures which force them to compete for support not only with other dance artists, but also with other artists from different disciplines with a more resourced infrastructure. Previously awards were linked to art forms and assessed within the context of that art form by a selection of peers, who at the invitation of the Council sat on assessment panels. The new system has abolished separate art form categories and art form panels; now all requests for awards and grants are considered together by a combined panel. The benefit of this is recognition of the changing nature of certain practices, which encourages a more interdisciplinary approach to work. The disadvantage for an art form like dance is the lack of understanding of its forms and practices. While competition is a welcome incentive, sometimes it is not the most appropriate means to deal with nurturing the creative dance artist.

The only two notable alternatives to this two-tier system were the choreographer-in-residence posts in UCD (held by Finola Cronin) and that at Project (which I held from 1998 to 2000). The Arts Council in collaboration with the respective venues funded both initiatives. Both projects were about process and practice rather than simply a means towards performance.

The reality of making a piece of work is money. In dance the major problem remains adequate and affordable rehearsal space. While some artists prefer to be on the margins, the present scenario suggests that all independent artists are forced to be reactive rather than proactive in their career choices. The recognised pressure on arts centres and performing venues to programme saleable work has lead to a dearth of independent

dance activity. Although the Institute for Choreography and Dance is available for research processes and performing opportunities, it too seems to suffer from lack of resources to sufficiently make a difference to the current climate.

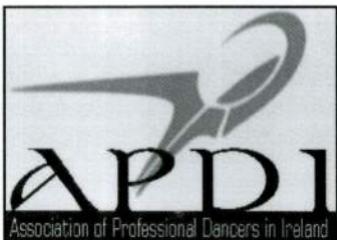
This is despite the emphasis placed on the necessity to actively support individual creative artists as highlighted in *The Creative Imperative*, the report commissioned by the Arts Council in 2000 to examine current policy and advise future policy. This report acknowledges how undervalued and marginalised creative dance artists are.

There are, however, some promising developments for the profile and confidence of dance practice at present: the opening up of membership to Aosdána for choreographers, and the inclusion of dance in the current Arts Bill — the first time that dance has been mentioned in official documentation at State level.

The Arts Council has undoubtedly invested extensively in dance over the past 30 years. The issues are now more about what sort of dance culture we want for Ireland. Any sustainable and vibrant dance culture needs to operate on many levels, yet the favouring of product over process needs to be addressed in a more imaginative manner. And it is not enough to throw money at the problem. We need to engage with the difficult discourse of what is right for our evolving dance consciousness.

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*Paul Johnson has written Fine Lines on Shifting Ground: Reflections on a Choreographic Process (Project Press 2000), edited Beyond Words (IDFI 2002), and is a contributor to the forthcoming Encyclopaedia of Contemporary Irish Culture (Routledge).*



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# ITM DANCE WORKS DOWN THE

LINDA MURRAY talks to leading Irish and Ireland-based choreographers about their work.

**A**s compared to ten years ago, dance would appear to be in healthy shape in Ireland today. There is a national ballet company, several contemporary dance companies, a fledgling dance publishing house, and a

centre of choreography in the Firkin Crane, Cork. How do its practitioners feel about this burgeoning Irish art? Do they feel supported in their artistic endeavours by the public and the various authorities? What does their work have to say? And, most of all, where did they come from, this new collection of choreographers who appeared in Ireland; and will there be anyone to replace them in the years to come? In a period of change and growth in dance, *itm* decided to raise these issues with several of the country's most prominent choreographers to find out exactly how they perceive the dance environment in Ireland at present. They were asked to respond to three questions:

1. What do you make dance about?
2. How does working in Ireland affect your national identity as a choreographer?
3. What does Irish dance need to grow?

Here are their responses:

**YOSHIKO CHUMA**

**DAGHDHA DANCE COMPANY**

I MAKE WORK ABOUT LIFE — PAST, PRESENT, FUTURE. I was born in Japan and have spent half my life in New York and now I have come to Ireland

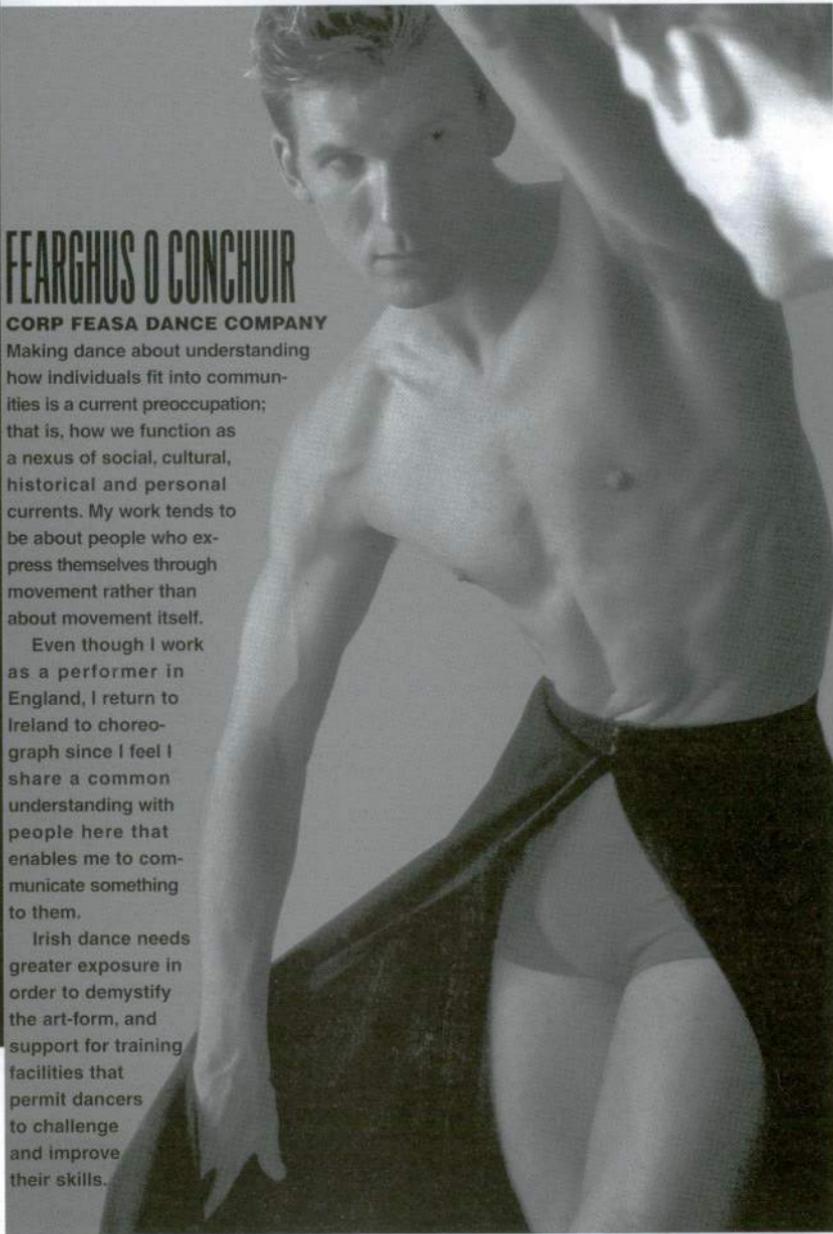
# FEARGHUS O CONCHUR

CORP FEASA DANCE COMPANY

Making dance about understanding how individuals fit into communities is a current preoccupation; that is, how we function as a nexus of social, cultural, historical and personal currents. My work tends to be about people who express themselves through movement rather than about movement itself.

Even though I work as a performer in England, I return to Ireland to choreograph since I feel I share a common understanding with people here that enables me to communicate something to them.

Irish dance needs greater exposure in order to demystify the art-form, and support for training facilities that permit dancers to challenge and improve their skills.



to Daghda Dance Company. It is exciting to see how a triangular relationship works — to see myself, my identity through my own country, Japan, USA, and now, Ireland. My national identity plays a huge role in my work. I think each country is almost like a close-up camera shot. I can zoom in and out. I try to maintain an overview, a wide-angle view of the cultures which have impacted on my life.

Sometimes major developments in art and in life happen in a natural, organic way. Sometimes major changes are forged. I prefer organic developments but we never know when they are about to happen. Maybe, now, we are in the middle of a significant artistic shift in the arts in Ireland. Maybe it can happen tomorrow.

## FINOLA CRONIN

### INDEPENDENT CHOREOGRAPHER

MY DANCE IS MADE IN A DEVISED AND collaborative way and so its themes can be quite vague. Often I set particular tasks for dancers, and from that the thematic information for a work emerges. Sometimes I engage with text-based work, and in these situations I have a specific subject matter, but in general I prefer what I create to be fluid, open-ended and ambiguous.

I would regard the relationship between my nationality and my work to be intrinsically linked, while simultaneously quite fluid. However, what does affect me is the lack of placement of dance in an Irish context. It is difficult to find a space in this country in which to be a dancer or a choreographer and this tends to push practitioners into the mar-



gins of society. That said, I don't feel the need to create work from that experience.

In order for dance to grow in Ireland it has to be integrated into the mainstream educational system. Beyond that, a better understanding of the needs of practitioners by the various responsible government departments and funding agencies is necessary if

there is to be any significant improvement in the current state of affairs.

## ROBERT CONNOR AND LORETTA YURICK

### DANCE THEATRE OF IRELAND

OUR DANCE COMES FROM LIFE, FROM LIVING. It is made to gain insight, to create and share emotions, to grapple with the truth, and to tell stories. We create dance so that we don't feel so alone; we do it to meet ourselves and to make something where there was nothing before. Earlier in our careers, movement came from a need to release feelings or was inspired by music. But as we have progressed we have found ourselves increasingly wanting to subvert ourselves and our dance vocabulary a little, and to move from what we know towards what we don't.

Dance, to us, is a universal language, which can then be made personal. In our company we have dancers of different nationalities who have difficulty speaking to each other, and yet we can all dance. That, to us, is remarkable. But in order to find a type of dance that can be defined as "Irish," Ireland will have to become more maverick, clearer, and more distilled. A



# RIONACH NI NEILL

INDEPENDENT  
CHOREOGRAPHER AND  
DANCER

I've only really started my career so I don't think I'm in a position to know yet whether I've a running theme in my work. My next project will deal with the creation of identity, both gender and sexual, in Victorian women. I would say, though, that my interest lies primarily in people and not in the abstract.

I can't help but be affected by Irish concerns in my work. This does not imply, however, that what I create is overtly political; my

first piece, *Seandalaiocht*, is about losing my language, which is Irish, and was inspired by my own experience rather than considering a larger Irish theme.

In order for dance to grow, Ireland badly needs resources. There should be a building devoted to dance in Dublin as well as physical resources throughout Ireland. Dance training should be an educational right, and students shouldn't have to travel abroad to study dance at undergraduate level. Furthermore, educational facilities should reflect the specific interests of the country's artists. There should be the opportunity to study drama, music and the visual arts, along with music, from a basic to advanced level.

real Irish dance culture will only emerge when the uniqueness of Irish stories find their life blood in the way they are told by the people here and when dancers are trained in this country.

For dance to grow in Ireland there needs to be more dancers, and thus improved training for dancers, recognition by the Department of Education that children and young people have a right to practice this art form and to choose it as a career in the same way that they can choose music or architecture.

## JOOLS GILSON-ELLIS

### HALF/ANGEL

I DON'T MAKE DANCE "ABOUT" THINGS, I use the language of physicality to explore specific themes — such as the nature of the secret, or the metaphor of spinning. I want to make dance that inhabits an unsettled space between recognition and strangeness. I make dance to cause a feminine kind of trouble.

I'm an English woman working in Ireland for 6 years. I'm very aware of working in an Irish context, and meeting that in various ways. I've always worked with Irish as well as international performers. Some have translated my writing into Irish and performed it. Others speak my text in performance. Being in Ireland is a smaller community than working in the UK, which means we see less diverse work, but it's also more supportive.

Irish dance needs training contexts that trains young artists in experimental and improvisational skills as well as

### CONNOR AND YURICK



classical. Irish dance needs third level training in practice and theory. Irish dance needs more exposure to radical work.

## CINDY CUMMINGS

### INDEPENDENT CHOREOGRAPHER

I make dance about cultural identity, stereotypes, challenging mass belief systems, instant responses/communication with the audience, hybridity, and the significance of Other.

My national identity as a choreographer — what nation are you speaking of? I live in between and of two cultures, Ireland and America, so have the benefit of drawing from both what is necessary for dancemaking — whether it be methodology, cultural references, symbols, communication skills, resources, approach, style, genre, or technique.

To grow, dance in Ireland needs many things... but here's a short-list (not necessarily in order of importance): A national training infrastructure encompassing a diverse range of techniques/styles/methods; coverage on national television and in the media in general on a consistent basis (not just at festival times); variable and affordable spaces to work in, which could be either studio spaces and/or performance spaces equipped with appropriate technologies for the dancemakers who work in them (such as visual artists have for their daily practice); tax exempt status for choreographers (as composers and writers have).

*Linda Murray is completing an MA in Drama and Theatre Studies at UCC and will soon take up the position of dance curator at the Library of Congress in Washington, DC.*

# FACTS & FIGURES

*A selective and annotated listing of resources available for dance in Ireland, compiled by CHRISTINE MADDEN.*

■ **SUPPORT ORGANISATION** The Association for Professional Dancers in Ireland (APDI), in operation since 1989, works to aid dancers and choreographers in pursuit of their careers. Its functions include classes and workshops; maintaining a database; providing information to members; and it also works as a forum and lobbying body.

#### **APDI @ The Mint**

6 Henry Place, off Henry Street

Dublin 1

Tel: 01-873 4573

Fax: 01-873 4584

Email: [prodance@iol.ie](mailto:prodance@iol.ie)

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

#### **COURSES**

At present, there is no third-level degree in dance available in either the Republic or Northern Ireland. Those students interested in dance have had to go abroad, usually to the UK, to study at a recognised college for the performing arts.



**DANCE ON THE DÁIL**

Until recently, the Arts Council awarded study grants to some eligible dance candidates. This policy has recently been withdrawn, as it did not always work to students' best advantage, and also because educational funding is normally the remit of the Department of Education. This Department, however, has not yet been able to make such financial awards available to dance students, because those courses in the UK that

provide a professional diploma in dance are offered at private universities. In effect, young people who wish to obtain a professional degree in dance at a recognised school for the performing arts must go abroad, and must themselves shoulder the financial burden of both their studies and their travel and accommodation abroad.

*Those interested in studying dance up to performing arts academy-entry level may contact the following schools:*

**College of Dance**

Knox Hall, Monkstown Road,  
Monkstown, County Dublin.  
Tel/Fax: 01-230 4115  
Principal / Director: Joanna Banks  
A two-year foundation course in professional dance training. Entry procedure is by audition.  
Contact: Joanna Banks

**Coláiste Stiofáin Naofa**

College of Further Education, Tramore Road, Cork City  
Tel: +353 21 496 1020/496 1029  
Fax: +353 21 496 1320  
E-mail: csn@iol.ie  
Website: [www.csn.ie](http://www.csn.ie)

Principal: Tim Kelleher  
Deputy Principal: William McAuliffe  
A one-to-two year post-leaving cert course in Performing Arts/Dance with a NCVA Level Two accreditation. Entry procedure by interview and audition.  
Contact: Alan Foley

**Inchicore College**

Emmet Road Dublin 8  
Tel: 01 453 5358  
Fax: 01 4545494  
E-mail: [enquiries@inchicore.ie](mailto:enquiries@inchicore.ie)  
Course co-ordinator: Marion Lennon  
A two-year post-leaving cert course in

dance with an NCVA accreditation. Entry procedure is by audition and interview.

Contact: Marion Lennon

**Marino College**

Marino, Dublin 3.  
Tel: 01-833 2100  
Fax: 01-833 4951  
E-mail: [Info@marino.cdvec.ie](mailto:Info@marino.cdvec.ie)  
Course Tutor: Roisin Lonergan  
A post-leaving cert in course in drama and dance with a NCVA Level Two accreditation. Entry is by application and interview.

Contact: Roisin Lonergan

**Sallynoggin College of Further Education**

Pearse Street, Sallynoggin, Co Dublin.  
Tel: 01 285 2997; Fax: 01 284 8437  
E-mail: [reception@scs.dife.ie](mailto:reception@scs.dife.ie)  
Course co-ordinator: Deirdre O'Neill  
A two-year post-leaving cert course in dance with a Royal Academy of Dancing and Imperial Society of Teachers of Dance accreditation. Entry is by audition and interview.  
Contact: Deirdre O'Neill

*Although you can't obtain a BA in dance in Ireland, you can do a post-graduate degree in dance at:*

**University of Limerick**

Plassey, Limerick, Ireland  
Tel: 061 202 807; Fax: 061 331 490  
E-mail: [teresa.leahy@ul.ie](mailto:teresa.leahy@ul.ie)  
Web: [www.ul.ie](http://www.ul.ie)  
UL offers a one-year full time MA in Dance Performance (Traditional or Contemporary) with accreditation from UL. Entry is by application, interview and audition.

Contact: Mary Nunan

UL also offers a part-time graduate diploma/MA in dance accredited by UL. Entry is by application.

**■ REHEARSAL VENUES** Please note that this list is not definitive. Other venues might be available at regional theatres and community centres, which are not usually purpose-built for dance. There are also plans afoot to build a dance centre at Liberty Corner on Talbot Street in Dublin, as well as a municipal arts centre. Funding to match governmental allocations is currently being sought. The proposed dance centre would be open for training and rehearsal.

**APDI**, The Mint, Dublin 1. Tel 01-873 4555

**AXIS**—Ballymun Arts Centre, Ballymun, Dublin 9. Studio for classes and rehearsal. Tel. 01-883 2100

**Ballet Ireland studio**, Finglas, Dublin. Available for concentrated studio work if

not needed for the company's own work. Tel. 0405-57585

**Dance Theatre of Ireland**, Bloomfields Centre, Dun Laoghaire. Tel. 01-280 3455

**Draiocht Arts Centre**, Blanchardstown, Dublin 15. Tel. 01-885 2610/2622

**Firkin Crane, Cork**. Rehearsal spaces and technical support available within the context of independent residencies (along with their own residency programme). For more info tel 021-450 7487

**Garter Lane Arts Centre**, Waterford. Tel. 051-855 038 (enquiries to Caroline Senior)

**Glor Irish Music Centre, University of Limerick**. Facilities primarily for students,

DANCE CLASS AT ICD



but course director Mary Nunan is open to being approached with enquiries and projects. Tel. 061-202 700

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**Linen Hall Arts Centre**, Castlebar, Co Mayo. Tel. 094-23733

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**Samuel Beckett Studio**, Trinity College, Dublin 2. Available outside term time (May-Sept, short periods at end of December and March) Tel. 01-608 1334

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**SFX Theatre**, Sherrard Street, Dublin 1. Tel. 01-855 4090

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**Siamsa Tire Theatre**, Tralee, Kerry. Tel. 066-712 3055

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**YMCA**, Aungier Street, Dublin 2. Phone 01-478 2607 8.30am-3pm Mon-Fri

**■ CRITICISM** September 2002 sees the beginning of Dr. Diana Theodores' second term in the capacity of dance writer in residence at the Institute of Choreography and Dance at the Firkin Crane in Cork. The programme is set to continue through 2004, when it will be evaluated to determine how to proceed further. Theodores, currently also a reader at Dartington College, has written extensively about dance both here and abroad. Under the auspices of this residency she has already compiled *Writing Dancing Righting Dance: Articulations on a Choreographic Process* for the icd; her forthcoming work, *Conversations on Choreography*, will feature interviews and talking shops with choreographers. The residency serves to facilitate and encourage writers to engage in working and critiquing dance, and to indicate that dancing and writing can exist simultaneously to their mutual benefit as artistic expression and process. The series of workshops will continue this autumn; it is not necessary

to have attended the previous workshop(s) to attend. For more information, tel. 021-450 7487; website: [www.instchor-dance.com](http://www.instchor-dance.com).

#### ■ PUBLICATIONS

**Kinetic Reflex** (see news section) will soon be publishing books about Irish dance... APDI publishes **ProDance News**, a monthly newsletter including news and listings. Ring APDI, or e-mail [prodance@iol.ie](mailto:prodance@iol.ie) for more information.

**■ ARCHIVES** There is not a great deal of archival material regarding dance in Ireland. What exists is scattered, and much is in private hands. Best to begin with the APDI. They house a resource and video library — which should also include a full set of *Dance News Ireland* magazines, the periodical published by the erstwhile Dance Council of Ireland. You must, however, be a member to access their materials. The Arts Council (1-850 392 492) also has some materials. Further information can be sourced at the following locations:

**Trinity College Dublin**: various journals and periodicals listed in their online catalogue. Tel. 01-608 1657

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**Glor Irish Music Centre, University of Limerick**: library with books, videos, and archival material. Tel. 061-202 700

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**icd (Institute for Choreography and Dance), Firkin Crane, Shandon, Cork**: small but growing library of books, periodicals, videos.

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**Dance Northern Ireland**, Vicky Maguire, 048-9024 9930. This umbrella and support organisation is currently building data bases for a website, and have materials and general information on dance.

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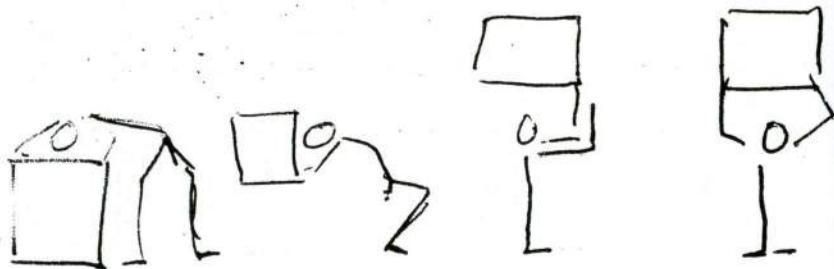
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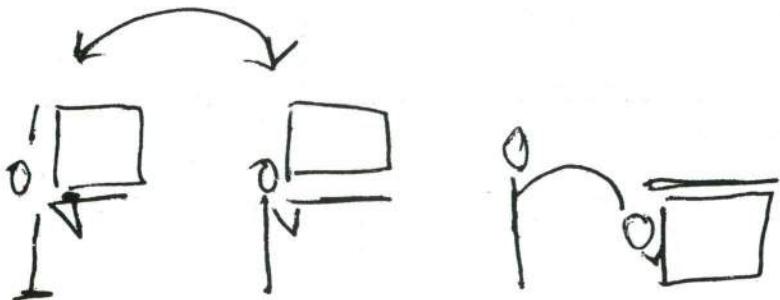
## Writing in the Air

*In this section of item, we usually include an excerpt from a new Irish play. For this dedicated dance issue, however, we instead confront the tricky issue of dance notation: how do choreographers record their work, given that it consists of the movement of bodies and very rarely involves language? Here, two leading Irish choreographers, DAVID BOLGER of COISCÉIM DANCE THEATRE, and JOHN SCOTT of IRISH MODERN DANCE THEATRE, offer some thoughts on, and examples of, their unique forms of notation.*

### DAVID BOLGER

I've never really had one strict way of notating anything. Every piece is different and requires a different way of working. I don't know the classic forms of notation like Labanotation — I have my own forms. Sometimes I will draw if want to work out some patterns, but I don't draw very well so they tend to be pretty simple! With "Boxes," we were working with the idea of the

architecture of the box, and the idea of being "boxed in." How the body relates to the box — how we fight with straight lines? While brainstorming I would sometimes draw things as part of the process [drawings for Boxes are printed above]. After a dance is finished, I will always go back to the notes I made before a show, and amend them so we have a record. If you're coming back to a piece and are going to restage



it, it's important to have a record of what ideas went in and what didn't go in as well. I used to use video for nota-

tion but I've gone off it. It's quite hard to recreate movements from looking at them on the TV. The good thing about video is looking at the dances in reverse! You can get some good ideas by looking at things backwards.

### **JOHN SCOTT**

*The Bowing Dance* (2001) is a duet which is both a dance and a description of a dance. It exists in a poetic form on paper [see text of dance on next page] and when performed on stage is both spoken and danced, or rather marked.

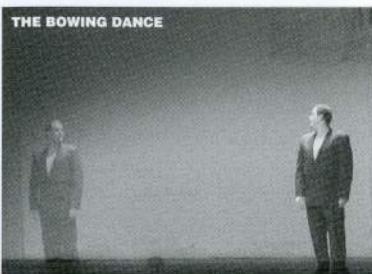
*Bowing Dance* began as my shorthand notes in rehearsal preparation for a duet in my work *Rough Air*. It was a desire to create a duet that rigorously adhered to a single element of choreographic language: Bowing. When we were in the studio it interested me that the dance existed more vividly when it was marked by one person demonstrating both roles — not fully executed and left to the imagination of the audience. In performance as choreographer I perform the roles of both "Me" and "You." Some audiences have felt *Bowing Dance* may be an allegorical description of an encounter or relationship between two people. This



**BOXES**

# dance excerpt

THE BOWING DANCE



may be so but the original impetus for this dance was bowing, nothing more, nothing less.

I do not use any official notation system. In my work process I have my own personal shorthand for notating movement ideas. In rehearsal with Irish Modern Dance Theatre we use video to

record material. I like to use notebooks with little squares because they make the space on the page more interesting to me. My notebooks have little stick figures, circles and at times laboured verbal descriptions together with text, and collections of images from books and newspapers.

## ME

I BOW

I BOW

I DON'T BOW

I LOOK UP THEN BOW DOWN

I WAIT DOWN THERE

I COME HALFWAY UP

I GO DOWN AGAIN

I COME UP IN ONE COUNT

I WAIT FOR YOU

I LOOK DOWN

I LOOK AT YOU

I STEP ONE STEP CLOSER TO YOU

I BOW DOWN

I COME UP

I BOW DOWN

I WAIT THERE

I WAIT THERE BUT LOOK AT YOU

I COME UP WATCHING YOU

I STEP ONE STEP OR TWO AWAY FROM YOU

## YOU

YOU BOW  
YOU BOW

YOU BOW  
BOW  
BOW WOW WOW  
YOU DON'T BOW EITHER  
YOU LOOK UP

YOU BOW DOWN  
SO DO YOU

WITH YOU

YOU COME WITH ME

YOU LOOK UP

YOU STAY

YOU LOOK AT ME

YOU STEP ONE STEP OR TWO CLOSER TO ME

YOU

YOU BOW DOWN

YOU COME UP

YOU BOW DOWN

YOU WAIT THERE BUT LOOK AT ME

YOU LOOK DOWN AND DO NOTHING

YOU COME UP

YOU STEP ONE STEP OR TWO AWAY FROM ME

## New Directions

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



**PAULA McFETRIDGE** (pictured, with playwright Tom Murphy) has been appointed the new artistic director of the Lyric Theatre. She had been working for the theatre in a freelance consultancy position for a year... The Galway Arts Festival's new managing director will be **JOHN CRUMLISH**, formerly of Macnas's MacTeo. He will take the position vacated by **FERGAL McGRATH** following the conclusion of this year's festival. At the

time of writing, Macnas had not yet advertised the vacant position.

**HELEN CAREY**, formerly director of Galway Arts Centre, has been appointed director of the Irish College in Paris. The Galway Arts Centre position has been advertised... **SALLY HARRIS** has left as administrator with Barnstorm. The position has been advertised... **ALI ROBERTSON** is to leave his position as artistic

# entrances & exits

director of the Granary Theatre in August. The position will be advertised in late July. Robertson will run the Cork Fringe Festival while a temporary replacement will handle his Granary duties until November.

**WILLIE WHITE**, general manager of Loose Canon Theatre Company and founder of this magazine, has been appointed artistic director of Project. He will take up his duties in August... Galloglass have appointed **ANN KENNEDY** as their new company manager. Kennedy was formerly manager of deValois House... **POLLY O'LOUGHLIN** (pictured) is the new director of the Pavilion Theatre; she has previously worked with numerous Irish arts organisations including Project, Dance Theatre of Ireland, and Rough Magic. **PHELIM DONLON**, who was running the venue on an interim basis, will continue to serve on the Pavilion's board.

**ORLA O'DEA** is the new administrator of Focus Theatre, while **BREEGE BRENNAN** will vacate her position of company manager. The Focus expects to announce new appointments as artistic director and manager at the start of August... **VICTORIA WHITE** and, subsequently, **HELEN MEANY**



have departed from the *The Irish Times* where each served as arts editor.

**DEIRDRE FALVEY**, previously editor of the Weekend section, is the acting arts editor. It is believed an internal appointment will be made to take over the position in the near future... **BARNEY WHELAN**, public relations manager for the ESB, has left the organisation to take up a position with Safe Food...

**NESSA O'MAHONY**, head of communications at the Arts Council, is leaving the organisation to pursue an MA in creative writing. The Arts Council will be reviewing the position as part of an overall restructuring later this year.

**BRIAN JACKSON** (pictured), most recently managing director of a computer services recruitment agency, has been appointed the new managing director of the Abbey Theatre.

**SITUATIONS VACANT:** The Corn Exchange has advertised for an administrative assistant on "flexible full-time" basis. Applications can be made to the general manager of Corn Exchange. Daghda Dance Company have advertised for a dance teacher to instruct creative movement and hip-hop dance classes for ages 5–teens.

## Volume Control

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

### DENIS JOHNSTON: A LIFE

by Bernard Adams

Reviewed by Paula Shields

*Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 2002*

FATHER TO THE MORE FAMOUS WRITER, Jennifer, Denis Johnston is a somewhat forgotten figure these days. The centenary of his birth was quietly marked last year by an NAYD production of his first and best-known play *The Old Lady Says No!* (1929) and an Abbey reading of his Easter Rising drama, *The Scythe and the Sunset* (1957). This first biography goes some way to reinstating the reputation of the theatre director, writer and broadcaster.

Johnston's initial calling, in his father's footsteps, was to the Bar — he practised in London and Dublin between 1925-1936 — but the lure of the theatre was to prove decisive both personally and professionally. Popular with the fairer sex — indeed, photographs of him (one reprinted here) attest to his dark matinee-idol looks — both his wives were talented actresses, Shelah Richards and Betty Chancellor. Writing for the theatre would eventually lead away from the law to a more creative life, writing and producing for radio and TV, and ultimately to teaching drama and directing in American colleges.



Starting out in the 1920's, the Abbey Theatre was the obvious first choice for any budding young playwright, and Johnston established a relationship with the theatre when he directed an expressionist *King Lear* there in 1928. Yeats and Lady Gregory turned down Johnston's first offering, however, originally titled *Shadowdance*, largely because of its expressionist leanings. He was in good company — O'Casey's *The Silver Tassie* was famously turned down that year for the same reason. Immortalising this rejection in the play's new name, he vigorously revised *The Old Lady Says No!* (incorporating some of Yeats' criticism) and found it a more congenial home at the newly-formed Gate Theatre, under the auspices of Hilton Edwards and Micheal MacLiammóir, housed, ironically, in the Abbey's adjoining theatre, the Peacock. The

play opened in 1929 to a mix of controversy and acclaim: its avant-garde form (the first Irish expressionist play to be produced) matched by its radical content, questioning the then sacred cow of Irish nationalism, challenged both the dramatic conventions and the conservative thinking of the time. Overnight, Johnston, Edwards, and MacLiammóir had all made their mark.

# opinions & overviews

Frequently revived over the years, *The Old Lady* was to be Johnston's most significant and successful drama. He went on to pen eight more plays, some of which would be produced in England and the US also, but somehow he did not fulfill the early promise of greatness. Adams, an undoubted fan, offers several possible explanations and makes a plea for "reassessment... on the stage" of Johnston's work.

Johnston's reputation, at home and abroad, certainly grew in the 1930s as *The Moon in the Yellow River*, a more conventional piece centred again on the young Irish state, premiered at the Abbey in 1931. However, his next work, the highly ambitious *A Bride for the Unicorn*, 1933, had a less than successful realisation at the Gate. It marked a return to the riskier expressionist form and revolved around a complex abstract theory of time. Responsibility for the production's flaws was acknowledged by all involved, but negative reaction in Dublin hit the playwright particularly hard. Adams suggests this blow to his confidence augmented his disaffection with Dublin, where his personal life was also rife with wife and mistress complications; the bright lights of the BBC in Belfast and London beckoned.

He certainly was not the first writer to feel compelled to leave Ireland (and the begrudgers) behind. He did write for the stage again but in later plays, such as *Storm Song* and *The Golden Cuckoo*, his thirst for dramatic experiment seemed to have waned.

Johnston's pioneering inclinations were poured instead into two of the major cultural inventions of his century: radio and television. Back in Ireland in 1933, he had turned his hand to filmmaking when, on no budget and a steep

learning curve, he directed a short black-and-white silent film of Frank O'Connor's story, *Guests of the Nation*. He cut his broadcasting teeth with BBC Radio in Belfast in the late 1930s and went on to serve with distinction as one of the few radio war correspondents in North Africa, Italy, and Germany at the height of World War II. He also had a promising, if short-lived career in the fledgling medium of television, for which he wrote well-regarded plays and features, until the privations of post-war Britain sent him off again, this time in the direction of American universities.

Denis Johnston's life spanned most of the 20th century (he died in 1984). His story follows that of some of the key cultural institutions of these islands: the Abbey in the reign of Yeats, Gregory and Robinson, the origins of the Gate with Edwards and MacLiammóir, their worsening relations with Lord Longford, the innovative days of the fledgeling BBC. First-time biographer Bernard Adams has produced an absorbing, highly readable life of a man who wrote his own diaries (now lodged in Trinity College, Dublin) in anticipation of such a moment!

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*Paula Shields is administrator of Theatre Shop and freelance writer.*

## A HISTORY OF IRISH THEATRE

1601-2000

by Christopher Morash

Reviewed by Eamonn Jordan

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002

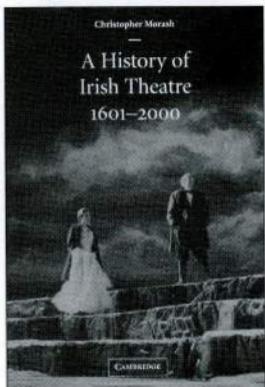
INTENDED "AS A SUCCESSOR" TO D.E.S. Maxwell's *Modern Irish Drama 1891-1980* (Cambridge 1984), Christopher Morash's book is a seriously ambitious project that attempts to chart in a single volume a comprehensive history of

Irish theatre over a 400-year period. Morash concludes his book with the statement: "at the end of four hundred years of Irish theatre history, there is no such thing as *the* Irish theatre; there are Irish *theatres*, whose forms continue to multiply as they leave behind the fantasy of a single unifying image, or origin or destiny." Through the sheer range of this book, he clearly proves this argument.

Morash, amongst others, has pointed out how theatre really thrived in Ireland long before the emergence of the Irish Literary Theatre in 1897 — even the notion of a national theatre goes back a good deal further than what is often regarded as the most significant starting point. Morash's book is concerned with audiences as much as with national mood and socio-economic circumstances; with cultural policy, whatever there was of it, as much as with theatre architecture; and with performance styles and stage configuration as much as with cultural mores. So we get welcome deliberations on buildings, patronage, the nature and seating arrangements of the theatre spaces, ticket prices, entrepreneurship, account books, administration, and so forth. Local, regional, national, and international dimensions are all considered, and clear weight is given to the Northern Irish theatrical dimension in this book. So the book's great strength, through the continuous emphasis on the experience of theatre, is to give back, in a way, to theatre history its theatricality, and to shift somewhat from the idea-dominant, intellectually driven evaluations of some academics.

After each main chapter, Morash's chief innovation is then to focus specifically on a single evening's/afternoon's performance that captures many of the essentials of that performance and of that period. He assembles these nights at the theatre from documented accounts, hints provided by stage directions, political and social conventions from that time and from details of theatre architecture, even when no real proof is to be found archivally-speaking — a task that is conjectural, imaginative, and forensic in its endeavour as much as it is rewarding for a reader.

Ultimately, books on Irish theatre cannot avoid the extensive politics of history, and Morash charts the relationship between politics and performance superbly. The building of the first theatre in Dublin around the mid to late 1630s did, Morash argues, "bring together the tight circle of courts, castle and college that would form the foundation of Irish theatre audiences for almost two centuries." The book's opening chapter considers the revival by Baron Mountjoy (the then-Lord Deputy of Ireland) of *Gorboduc*, where, according to Morash, "Mountjoy was doing more than entertaining his guests; he was using the theatre to define the terms of war," as the country itself prepared for rebellion and the response to it. After the restoration of Charles II, the theatre would be used as "a means of political rehabilitation," the author suggests. Later Morash argues that, towards the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, "many people still thought of the Irish stage as a sort of alternative parliament, both as an embodiment



# opinions & overviews

of Irish rights and the place in which rights denied could be debated." Divisive politics ensure that the theatre stages are radical spaces, but equally reconciliatory, reactionary, and conservative, where rights, liberties, patriotism, heroism, and oppression are filtered through an audience's allegiances, fundamentally shaping how they respond to the performance text.

From the events of Easter 1916 and O'Casey's version of them, to the work of Northern Irish playwrights in the 1960s, the concluding chapters maintain a firm interest in the politics of violence. It is often easier for an audience to make political readings of a play than it is for plays to articulate a political perspective, and this is something that has been with the nation for almost all of the last 400 years. Morash reminds the reader that in Northern Ireland post-1968, these problems remain, for the "generic Troubles play," while it could provide a model that "all too easily accommodated the conflict, the dark logic of terror remained, for the most part, beyond the glare of the stage lights." In such plays, the source of the violence remains relatively anonymous, and dependent in some ways on having a young woman sacrificed off-stage, serving as some sort of symbolic gesture of a travesty that cannot be articulated.

Towards the end of the book Morash quotes a 1972 article in which Brian Friel argued that "matter not form" was "our concern." Obviously, for he is a writer well regarded for his formal concerns, Friel was not dismissing form in a simplistic or out-of-hand manner. Although "matter" has dominated much of the discussion on Irish theatre — and that can be put down to all kinds of things — Friel was drawing attention to the need for theatre to be urgent, immediate, and relevant.

In a way Morash's book throughout challenges this, by being concerned with "form" as much as "matter." Thirty years on from Friel's statement, form and not matter is increasingly our dominant reality. I look forward to the marking of the politics of that fact.

Overviews and survey books, while relying on a type of listing to some extent, are weakened by absence of detail and by the hurried compression necessary to such an activity, yet still can reward by the very pressure to summarise. To Morash's credit his own interpretations are authoritative, credible, and concise, yet his succinctness is also a problem because it must close off from the very anomalies and contradictions that often ensure the attraction of a script or performance text, and the qualifications that often give rise to more explicit engagement. Occasionally, the scale of the task results in conclusions and summations that are not fully earned.

Overall, Morash's writing style is agreeable, fluid, light, but never lightweight, making it a delightful read. When one writes a book of this kind one may be leaving oneself open to accusations from a certain type of reviewer, one who scores points by indicating what the writer ignores, does not consider worthy of inclusion, or maybe doesn't know of. But in a work of this scale omissions are not cardinal sins, and the selection process is onerous. Yet Morash chooses with great precision and authority. What makes this book an important contribution is its readability, its relatively jargon free approach, its focus on performance and the sense of ease Morash brings to the task.

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*Eamonn Jordan lectures in drama at the Institute of Technology, Sligo.*

# opinions & overviews

## THE BELLE OF AMHERST

by William Luce,

## A IS FOR AXE by Mark McCormack, and

## THE WAY OF ALL FISH by Elaine May

Bewley's Café Theatre, reviewed on 6  
March, 2 April, and 17 April

BY SUSAN CONLEY

BEWLEY'S CAFÉ THEATRE IS BECOMING AN old reliable, and its quirky little corner of a stage is never lacking for fare (nor are the patrons, thanks to a new and improved lunch that is served on a real plate, with crisps!) The producers consistently give their one-acts a respectable run, and have created a collegial feel by employing many of the same names and faces in various capacities — one production may feature an actor in a lead role, only to have him or her working the box office and the lights for the next. In the arctic wasteland that is the Dublin theatre scene during the months of February and March (and at this writing, we may have to add April to the list), three plays that ran in quick succession are worth looking at as a whole, not only for the sake of evaluating each show's merit, but also for examining what has emerged as the theatre's identity, which ranges between new work by Irish young wans and "Little Gate" offerings.

First up this year was William Luce's *The Belle of Amherst*, a solo piece in which Geraldine Plunkett plays the American poet Emily Dickinson. From a modern viewpoint, it seems easy to reduce Dickinson to a kind of boilerplate for tragic female poets: eccentric at best, nutty at worst, writing by candlelight in the small hours of the morning in order to hide her poetical passion from her strict father. Luce portrays her oddity as irrepressible spirit, her choice to clothe herself all in white like a debutante a canny decision to

play into society's perceptions of her eccentricity. She perceives her relationship with her father to be loving, despite his cold and distant personality, and rationalises its one-sidedness as sufficient, and the best the man could do. Luce's text presents a thoroughly modern Emily, and despite the dazzling beauty of her verse, and its revolutionary construction — its sparseness and directness an anomaly in mid-nineteenth century, Civil War-torn America — it is hard to believe that the woman herself would have had the wherewithal to express herself as Luce has chosen that she does. Lines like "I've always been intense about relationships" ring anachronistically false, and destroy the Merchant-Ivory air of the piece that is actually quite pleasing.

What Luce's script does do very successfully is reacquaint us with this idiosyncratic poet's extraordinary voice, from her burgeoning creativity to her house-bound death. Plunkett's performance falters when required to vocalise the teenaged Emily, and indeed her generic-American accent is not even close to the distinctive New England tones that Dickinson would have sported. However, Plunkett is at her best when she recites the poetry as a seamless part of the dialogue, and does such justice to the work that an impulse buy of a volume of Dickinson poetry disappoints — it's not as lively on the page as it was in Plunkett's interpretation. Bronwen Casson's set perfectly evokes a straight-laced drawing room of the Yankee kind, and although it seems somewhat underused in Noelle Brown's blocking — Plunkett is moved from desk to hassock unimaginatively — it can be rationalised that a proper Northern matron wouldn't be messing with the coal scuttle.

If Mr. Dickinson was passively abusive, he has nothing on the father of Gerard

## opinions & overviews

Quirk, the lone character in *A is for Axe*, an adaptation of a story by Mark McCormack. Such a maudlin drunken bully was Mr. Q that his son had no choice really but to split dad's head open in a fit of rage. Produced by X-Bel-Air, whose debut at the Dublin Fringe Festival 2001 with *Giants Have Us in their Books* was well received, *A is for Axe* reeks of the kind of literary worthiness and gritty simplicity that young producers can, perhaps, be forgiven for falling for. What could be simpler, and indeed more appropriate for Bewley's minimal space, than a monologue? Except that the monologue isn't really a monologue, but a short story, and is not dramatic enough to be engaging.

Dylan Tighe plays Gerard, a highly articulate and intelligent fellow who wears his piercings and his Metallica T-shirt with the pride of a rebellious dosser, whose lifetime of abuse — at home and in the world — he feels justifies his brutal patricide. Drinking away his dole one night, spurred on by his best friend James' drunken confrontation with Gerard's own father, the axe is raised and let fall in the heat of built-up resentment, and he trades one kind of imprisonment with another. Theatrically, one is immediately reminded of Christy Mahon, Synge's famous *Playboy*: Gerard is also a dweller of the Irish West, but instead of charming lies, he tells us the brutal truth, a tale of stunted, angry, and ultimately sad male youth that is no allegory.

McCormack's story treads turf already well trod by the likes of Mark O'Rowe and Ken Harmon, and sheds no new light, no bracing insight, on the deeply troubled soul of his young man. His ranting, his vulnerability, his drunkenness — there is nothing in it that is enlightening or special, and if we are supposed to be horrified at his deed... well, we've heard this all before, haven't we?

Tighe's performance was energetic and, as directed by Róisín McBrinn, compelling to watch, and the company devised a highly creative setting that tips its hat to its literary origins: Gerard's story takes on an alphabetical structure, and ranged from A is for Axe, to O is for Obsequies, through

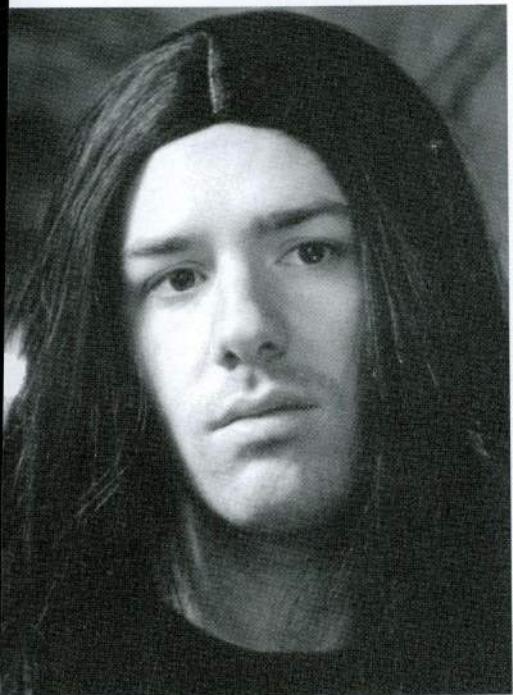


**MULLET OVER:** Geraldine Plunkett in *The Belle of Amherst* and Dylan Tighe in *A is for Axe*

to Z is for Zenith — and this served an intriguing decorative purpose as the alphabet was drawn directly on the walls of Gerard's room. This device gave depth to what would have been a rather dull prison cell setting... but on a less positive note, it became an unfortunate way to

count down to the play's end.

And then for something completely different: *The Way of All Fish*, an acerbic and neurotic two-hander written by ageing American comedienne Elaine May. Her style is that of the old school of relentless one-liners flung with spite



and/or pathos between two people — in this case, two women — engaged in a teeter-tottering battle of status. This sort of funny man/straight man binary harks back to the days of vaudeville and Borscht Belt comedy, and it gives May's piece a dated air — this reviewer was astonished to find that the play had been written in 1999, not 1969.

Miss Asquith (Justine Mitchell) is the top dog: CEO of a company of indetermi-

nate but prosperous enterprise, she is highly strung, overwrought, underfed, and overbred; if she was a dog, she'd be a greyhound. Miss Riverton (Elizabeth Bracken) is a mutt, the secretary with aspirations of the title of assistant, an overworked, undergroomed, and unappreciated peon. It is Friday night, and Miss A finds herself without an engagement to fill her evening; grasping desperately at the straw that is Miss R, she proposes that they order in Japanese take-away to the office — a nice dinner, just between girls.

By the second bottle of wine, Asquith has gone through the obligatory *crise de conscience* and has emoted vulnerably; pouring with a liberal hand, Riverton begins to slowly shift the balance of power. Conversation abounds regarding personal trainers and physical strength, and one feels the presence of a paradigm shifted in way too facile a manner: see, women used to compete against each other for men, now they compete for prestige and money. And instead of physical force — although there is some threat of that, which disintegrates into a press-up contest — Miss Riverton employs psychological torture via a psychotic childhood fantasy in which she garners fame for herself by killing someone famous. She shares this dream with her rich and privileged boss — who believes that she is someone worthy of generating headlines — as the means to blackmail her into a pay rise.

Plucked out of the bedroom and plopped into the boardroom, May's thesis is limp at best, and insulting at worst. By feminising the king of the jungle, she liberates the situation of its offensive sexual politics, but also manages to leech it of any real threat, interest, or drama. The turned table turns back to where it belongs, with an unvanquished and unvanquishable Miss Asquith back on top, the place — in

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the kind of Manhattan that May obviously loathes and thinks she's viciously satirising — she was born to occupy.

The forward motion of the play is not helped by an unequal team of players: Mitchell is superb at playing this kind of jittery, obsessive creature, and clad from head to toe in cream and sporting a lethal slash of red lipstick, she is utterly convincing and a pleasure to watch. Bracken, however, is far too sturdy for a part that the play itself calls a "bimbo," and her clenched monotone adds nothing to already difficult to swallow, air-heady text; we neither believe that she is pushover, nor a threat. Mitchell also came out the winner in the linguistic sweepstakes, effortlessly handling the kind of upper crust American tones that a character like Asquith requires, while Bracken seemed to be tenuously holding on to her vocal stylings as desperately as she clutched her wine glass: in general, her tone lacked variety and its general monotony also failed to play up to the supposed bimbo aspect of her character.

All three plays were well produced, beautifully set and dressed, with outstanding attention to detail — all things that have become hallmarks of this theatre's work. If there is a fault that can be gleaned from these three shows, it is in choice of material: while the texts perfectly satisfy the constraints of lunchtime theatre, none are the fully formed little jewels that one-acts can be. Nevertheless, the two masters that Bewley's apparently sets out to serve — the quirky/edgy and the urbane/sophisticated — are both routinely satisfied, and it is never an arduous duty to take a chance on the Café's programme. If nothing else, they have built the kind of camaraderie and loyalty, immeasurable but perceptible, that an established

venue using a rotating troupe of practitioners, inspires.

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

## A BRIEF TASTE OF LIGHTNING

by Malcolm Hamilton

Blue Raincoat Theatre Company

The Factory Performance Space

15 - 20 April 2002; reviewed 16 April

BY IAN WIECZOREK

*A BRIEF TASTE OF LIGHTNING* IS THE SECOND of two premiering works in just over a month for Sligo's industrious Blue Raincoat Theatre Company, a two-hander by Malcom Hamilton that takes us into the world of Gath and Gertie, a seemingly ageless, nicely middle-class couple living within their own quiet corner of modernity. Through interweaving monologues that only rarely border on the dialogic, we are presented with the participants in a dysfunctional modern-day relationship seemingly held together more by inertia and familiarity than any positive attraction. Gath is a character immersed in lethargy and ennui, finding more interest in the obituaries column of the newspaper than in conversation with his wife, seemingly taking comfort only in the certainty of death. Gertie is a more worldly entity, taking refuge in the minutiae of her experiences in the outside world and the hate-love relationship she has with her sister.

Hamilton's previous three plays have all been concerned with time and the malleability and persistence of memory. In *A Brief Taste of Lightning*, rather than the past, we are presented with an ongoing present, two intertwining streams of consciousness that neither develop nor diminish within this limbo-like continuum. Hamilton's writing is dense, hypnotic, subtle, and

poetic, and the result on this occasion is a sort of Noel Coward-meets-Samuel Beckett world where the bleakness of sterile existence is vocalised in a mannered tone that borders on the insouciant.

Hamilton proposes a depressingly logical product of the moribund self-obsession of the Me generation. His vision offers a bleak take on the glib, knowing quality of sophisticated postmodern life, lacking any belief system, certainty, faith, or point of spiritual anchorage. We are presented with a state of existence rather than a developing story. There is little room for emotional engagement, the characters almost devoid of history or motivation. Neither is there any real resolution, although over the course of the play the characters do acknowledge fleeting moments of mutual understanding or agreement and we are given some small insights into the mechanism behind Gath and Gertie's relationship. The result is hypnotically fascinating.

We are very much in Blue Raincoat's characteristic territory of physical theatre, where the form becomes an integral element of the production. Director Niall Henry creates a limited vocabulary of movement that takes on its own dynamic, running in parallel with the play's text, finding an eloquence in moments of reinforcement and nuance that make this theatre more than merely an exercise in style. In contrast with recent productions such as *Macbeth*, on this occasion Henry's physical exegesis is understated and mesmeric, echoing the tenor of the text. The production is underpinned by two excellent performances from Kevin Collins and Sandra O'Malley, who eloquently invoke Hamilton's text. This is a typically pared-down production designed by Feargal Doyle, with minimal props — chair, newspaper, hairbrush — set on a bare circular wooden

stage that simply and effectively evokes the confines of Gath and Gertie's world. All in all this is a production that quite appropriately allows Hamilton's words to take centre stage.

This is the fourth play that company co-founder and writer-in-residence Hamilton has written for Blue Raincoat, and as such it gives some insight into the potential advantages and disadvantages of such a symbiosis. On the positive side, the intimate nature of the relationship allows the



**STRUCK:** A Brief Taste of Lightning

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playwright not only to play to Blue Raincoat's strengths but also to assist in the further exploration and development of the form-based company's distinctive idiom. However, there would also seem to be a danger that by tailoring work so specifically Hamilton may not be allowing the full range of his playwriting talents to come to the fore. And as his oeuvre to date suggests — and *A Brief Taste of Lightning* confirms — those talents are considerable.

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Ian Wieczorek is a Mayo-based arts writer and editor.

## **BRUEN'S TWIST** by Eamonn Sweeney

Corcadorca Theatre Company

4-13 April 2002; reviewed 13 April

BY PETER CRAWLEY

THERE'S A TWIST IN NATHY BRUEN'S fiddle-playing, says blind old madman Piper Moran, that will take him all over the world. There's a twist in the tale too, which pursues the Sligo gasúr as he travels the globe (well, some of it) as a prototypical tortured rock star. And then there are several twists in Corcadorca's production of Eamonn Sweeney's play, wedging a hackneyed Faustian story into a magic lantern of playfully gaudy *Moulin Rouge* visuals and *The Odyssey-meets-O Brother Where Art Thou* zaniness.

In awe of himself, or rather the instrument that seems to possess him, Bruen escapes the stony grey soil of early 20th-century Connaught for the stonier, greyer soil of a barren Scottish island, with his grinning amadán friend Morrisroe (Máirtín de Cogáin) in tow. After brief gigs harvesting potatoes and serenading a brothel in London, their slingshot diaspora flings them to the US of A, where a whole new world of police corruption, instant fortunes, and intellectual-propert-

ty-rights violations await.

For a while Sweeney's seems to be a story of sex, drugs, and trad'n'roll, trac-ing the burden of talent, how success can change you, and how drink is not the answer. The reappearance of Piper, however, who shows up routinely to remind us of the play title, suggests we look a little deeper. Director Pat Kiernan, on the other hand, seems happy to stick to the surface. If Corcadorca is renowned for site-specific performances, the alarming decadence of the Everyman Theatre suggests a cop-out, until the curtain draws back to reveal Davie Dummingan's inspired design: the Everyman Theatre, in scale miniature. Echoing the gilded frame of the stage like a hall-of-mirrors illusion, a projector screen allows for amusing camera obscura effects and shadow puppetry, providing eerie background effects and picture postcard scenography. Where Baz Luhrmann viewed 19th-century Paris through a Méliès-tinted lens, Kiernan's postmodern geography reduces Prohibition-era New York to polarized skyscrapers and a flip-book version of the Charleston. In *Moulin Rouge*, the moon growls down with a rocket in its eye. In *Bruen's Twist*, the New York skyline boasts King Kong clinging to the Empire State Building. In this context it doesn't matter that the performers' accents come across as passing pastiche. It's partly the point.

It does suggest, however, that the production is in wandering counterpoint to the play, for there is certainly no emphasis on harmony. There's nothing ironic about Sweeney's musical emphasis and it's not unfair to expect a performance. But not once does Bruen play his instrument, nor does David Pearse's protagonist have to mime to a soundtrack. The



**PARTNERS IN CRIME:** David Pearse and Emma McIvor in *Bruen's Twist*

instrument itself it fetishised. At pivotal moments, Pearse opens the violin case, his face a picture of entranced wonder, illuminated (*à la Pulp Fiction*) by a lamp in the container. Simultaneously, jigs and reels are belched out by a pro-tools tampered sound design courtesy of Cormac O'Connor. It seems frustratingly irreverent to distort the focus of the play, mulching melodies out of shape while scoring the play with dark synthesizer drones and paranoid electronica.

But the fetishisation does neatly enforce the notion of possession. If a bad workman blames his tools, a virtuoso credits his instrument, while an alco-

holic blames the bottle. With newfound celebrity, gombeen-turned-wildman Bruen and his zesty cabaret-star lover, Gilda (Emma McIvor), end up well and truly mashed, laughing through the cardboard wreckage of their hooch-fuelled 30-mile-an-hour burn ("Krash!" emphasises the back-projection). Ultimately, they get sense, hitched, and sober, all in one go, after the stock market repeats the car's feat.

When De Cogáin appears in yet another guise (the production has that sense of restless energy and threadbare inspiration: i.e. multiple role-play and countless props on castors) the final twist in the tale assumes a forked tail. Southern-boy banjoist Mississippi Jeb can play a mean hoe-down. We know this because his banjo case glows when he opens it. Along comes a blind, old mad-man hillbilly to offer some words of encouragement and confirms that the devil does indeed possess the best tunes.

It's hard to know what Sweeney is saying here and Bruen's glib final monologue, delivered to his hitherto wailing ma, neither ties up loose ends nor resolves the contrapuntal ideas of page and stage. Yehudi Menuhin, the real-life child prodigy violinist said, "Music creates order out of chaos, for rhythm imposes unanimity upon the divergent; melody imposes continuity upon the disjointed, and harmony imposes compatibility upon the incongruous." Clearly this is the relationship that Kiernan and Sweeney lack. What they have produced is light and amusing — an energetic and flippant performance winking cheerfully at the flimsiness of its score. The Faustian revelation is an inconsequential and silly twist for a play that could have been more movingly concerned with possession. Where it aims for a crescendo, it concludes with a coda.

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**COMMUNION** by Aidan Mathews

The Peacock Theatre, Dublin  
25 April-8 June 2002; reviewed 2 May  
BY HELEN MEANY

PERHAPS THERE ARE HOUSEHOLDS IN affluent south Dublin suburbs in which the nuances of Catholic doctrine are the source of banter between brothers in their twenties; perhaps not. It doesn't matter. Once we realise that Aidan Mathews' new play takes religious belief as its subject, and takes it seriously, questions of strict plausibility or social realism recede in importance. It's not that Mathews ignores them: the portrayal of this contemporary middle-class household is full of acute observation which, on the whole, does not resort to caricature or cliché. But it's not what concerns him.

In seeking to portray a ritual — the cel-

ebration of the sacrament of communion by the bedside of Jordan, a terminally ill young man — the play draws on theatre's origins in religious ritual, and becomes itself a ritual enactment. Beautifully designed and lit by Francis O'Connor and Rupert Murray, it is laden with rich symbolism that at times threatens to drag it into stasis. Cloaked in the playfully serious Jesuitry of the two brothers is an articulate meditation on death, transcendence and on two different kinds of suffering: Jordan's brain tumour and the manic depression of his brother Marcus. Though at times the actors' delivery of the lines is histrionic, the work is saved from being merely a rhetorical exercise by its resonant archetypal quality: the inevitable death of Jordan provides the dramatic core.

Fraternal rivalry, maternal jealousy and filial resentment are some of the themes,



PAUL McCARTHY

**SEARCHING FOR TRANSCENDENCE:** McCusker and Hanly in *Communion*

expounded at a pace that occasionally drags. The brothers' experience of illness becomes the locus of an extended dramatic exploration of the nature of religious faith, intensified by the imminence of Jordan's death. Each of the characters — the brothers' snobbish mother, Martha (Stella McCusker — the character's name a biblical allusion too far?); their Methodist neighbour Arthur (Bosco Hogan); a Catholic priest and family friend, Anthony (Peter Gowen); and Marcus's enthusiastic Church of Ireland girlfriend (Janet Moran) — has a profound need for faith, even if, like Marcus, they comically mock themselves for it.

At first it is the loquacious Marcus who dominates each scene. His torrents of sacred and profane rhetoric create a kind of antic disposition through which he partially conceals his painful resentment of Jordan's beloved status in the family and of his more easily comprehended illness. Frank McCusker brings conviction to Marcus's adolescent rantings which fluctuate between the absurd, the humorously grotesque, and the metaphysical. Under Martin Drury's carefully modulated direction, the spotlight gradually moves to the quiet-spoken, kind-hearted Jordan, in a characterisation by Peter Hanly that stops just short of being too good to be true.

If Jordan manages to be likeable in spite of his pious interjections — "God bless her," "God forgive us" — the priest, Fr. Anthony, has to overcome more serious audience resistance, at a time when respect for the Catholic Church in Ireland has never been so scant. Anthony is an unusually sympathetic priest, a sensitive, reflective man, whose faith is rooted in simple, enduring acts "that are fundamental to human beings everywhere."

"We meet to tell stories and to share food," he says, as all the characters cluster

round Jordan's bed to take communion. "Along with our stories and our food we offer our fears, our fragilities, our mistakes, our regrets..." The emphasis on human flaws and vulnerability rather than any apologia for the institutional Church is timely and deliberate — but it's clear that *Communion* will outlive its current topicality and endure as an absorbing work that has the courage to tackle questions about the limits of human knowledge and the yearning for the sacred.

Helen Meany is a freelance writer and editor.

## CONVERSATIONS ON A HOMECOMING

by Tom Murphy

The Lyric Theatre, Belfast

12 April-4 May 2002; reviewed 16 April

BY MARK PHELAN

INEXPICABLY LEFT OUT OF THE Abbey Theatre's recent Murphy Festival, *Conversations on a Homecoming* enjoyed its own homecoming north of the border in this brilliant Lyric Theatre production directed by Conall Morrison.

Originally written and performed in the context of the economic collapse of the 1980's, the play opens with the return of prodigal son Michael, an actor fleeing his failed life in the New World in the hope of finding spiritual shelter and sanctuary in his hometown in Galway — "the last refuge in Europe." He returns home to meet his childhood friends in the White House Pub, a place they had all helped to build as a "cultural cradle" under the idealistic inspiration of JJ, a local JFK look-alike. Initially Michael refuses to acknowledge that a decade of disillusion has elapsed since his departure and all has changed utterly. As with so many of Murphy's plays, *Conversations* is a damning diagnosis of the state of the nation: a coun-

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try suspended between modernity and myth, drained by emigration, and disillusioned as the romanticised rhetoric of JJ and JFK collapses with the bitter realities of political conflict in the North and socio-economic depression in the South. Accordingly, the setting of the White House is a material and metaphysical metaphor for the condition of Ireland, something brilliantly realised in Monica Frawley's set design: in the decrepit and dilapidated lounge, phlegm-green paint peels off walls on which two limp flags — Irish and American — hang lankly as a mocking reminder of their former idealism.

In spite of this seedily naturalistic set, the play is performed in a mode of heightened realism, a performative conflict which lies at the heart of the play. In one of the opening exchanges, when the town hall and church clocks fail to syn-

chronise, a character laconically comments upon this "discrepancy between Church and State," and indeed, this sense of disruption or "discrepancy" is inherent in the play. While seeming to conform to the classical unities of time, place, and action, the "real" evening, as measured by these pealing bells, takes place over more than three hours but is performed in less than two — a temporal displacement rupturing the play's realism and amplifying its action so that the characters get drunk and the evening disintegrates with disturbing speed.

"The Boys'" eponymous conversations take place with all of the exaggeration, excessive drink, emotional dysfunction, machismo, and misogyny that characterize the Irish male drinking session, where violence seems always to bubble beneath the surface and tension seeps into the space of every pause and silence. The



**THE WEST WING?** The cast of Conversations... in the fictional White House pub

CHRIS HILL

play's muscular, musical dialogue also has a fugal quality, as certain conversational motifs — bitter jibes, false memories, piercing questions, subtle threats — are repressed, recirculate, and return as the evening moves towards its bitter climax. Not only was this dialogue conducted at the right pitch and pace, but it was choreographed in the staging, as the group start off sitting soberly together at a table, but as the divisions and drink take hold they break apart, physically and visually embodying the dramaturgical movement that leads to the group's disintegration.

Adrian Dunbar, as the schoolteacher and failed poet Tom, was malevolently mesmerising as he held court over the proceedings and systematically dismantled Michael's illusions with an exquisite mixture of tenderness and ferocity. While thriving on Tom's excoriating diatribes, Dunbar also portrayed a man whose cold, cynical intelligence conceals a profound loathing for his own emotional and economic paralysis, he having remained engaged to Peggy for over a decade and still living at home with his parents.

The casting of Conleth Hill as Michael, the actor returning home from New York, was a clever, intertextual touch: this is Hill's first new role since returning from his success in London and New York with *Stones in his Pockets*, which originated at the Lyric. The warm welcome extended to the actor's homecoming, by both actors and audience, palpably and poignantly exposed his character Michael's failure to make it in the same profession in the States. This janus-like doubling of the actor/character embodied and enacted many of the play's themes; illusion/reality, romanticism/cynicism, salvation/damnation, as Hill's success constantly mocked

Michael's failure.

In sharp relief to Hill's rather subdued performance was that of Vincent Higgins, who played Liam, the Catholic reactionary, "culchie & Western" gombeen man as a hilarious comic grotesque. However, Higgins also revealed how under the harmless guise of his phony American drawl, Catholic piety, and sentimental country music, he functions as a ruthless petit bourgeois capitalist who is the local auctioneer, landlord, salesman, travel agent, cattle dealer, and rent collector, while constantly keeping his avaricious eye on the "few acres of bog" around his sisters' family home. As Junior, Frankie McCafferty was also excellent in his comic counterattacks of Tom's criticisms.

As with many of Murphy's plays, women's roles are marginal, but Barbara Adair brought a wry, weary disapproval to JJ's Missus who serves drinks to "the Boys," while her daughter Ann, who is more symbolic cypher than character, was convincingly played as a youthful innocent by Lesley-Ann Shaw. Eleanor Methven, in another consummate performance as Peggy, brought a bruised poignancy to her role as Tom's long-suffering fiancée, and was utterly convincing even when passively involved.

Sitting in the audience on the opening night, the playwright must have been proud to see this powerful staging of his play. Although it is a bruising, brutal piece of theatre which offers no relief, no illusions, and no interval to its audience, there was a palpable sense of promise as the lights faded on the smiling figure of Ann radiating her "gentle hope out into the night" — a promise of dramatic new possibilities resuscitated by what is one of the Lyric's finest productions in a long time.

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Mark Phelan is lecturer in drama at Queen's University, Belfast.

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**COPENHAGEN** by Michael Frayn

Rough Magic Theatre Company  
Project Arts Centre, 17 April-11 May 2002;  
reviewed 22 April BY PETER CRAWLEY

LATE IN THE RUNNING TIME OF ROUGH Magic's brilliant production of Michael Frayn's phenomenal play, *Copenhagen*, Owen Roe's intellectually fastidious Niels Bohr suggests, "one more draft." Coming after so many drafts, his insistence is strained under the fatigue of constant, rapid enquiry but driven by a relentless moral imperative. It elicits the same response from both audience and cast: a muted groan.

We almost had it. In the previous two hours we had gone so far and come so close. We had received a ferocious and lucid education in quantum physics and metaphysical ethics. The equations stretching across the walls of Project's Space Upstairs, which may have seemed like mathematical aesthetic on our arrival, had had their meanings and implications unravelled before us upon the stage. And somehow we had kept pace. In high-pressure circumstances we had learned quickly about guilt, fear, symbols, and science—in short, we had crammed, and come so close to a breakthrough. Was he really going to make us go through all that again?

There are so many ideas in *Copenhagen* that they whir through the brain, like particles accelerated in a cyclotron. As with any scientific epiphany, the play begins with a question, "But why?" Why did German physicist Werner Heisenberg visit his Danish mentor Niels Bohr in Nazi-occupied Copenhagen in 1941? The question begs others: What information passed between them during an unobserved walk in the woods? Did it lead to the development of the atom bomb? Bohr, his wife, Margarethe, and

Heisenberg continue their questions while weaving in and out of different time periods. They are ghosts probing their story "now that we're all dead"; they are also living entities making discoveries for the first time, capable of stepping outside the action, even for just a second, to elucidate with the benefit of hindsight. Questions proliferate like a chain reaction hurtling towards the ultimate split decision—the atom bomb. As time collapses, abstract theory immediately becomes devastating praxis. In the same instant, an equation is solved and 100,000 people are incinerated in Hiroshima.

It's that remarkable feat of taking esoteric theory and investing it with historical meaning and emotion that makes the play, as realised in Lynne Parker's production, such an important work. Heisenberg is concerned only with whether something works. "But, what does it mean?" begs Bohr routinely. What are the consequences in plain language? Parker's understanding of what's at play here is meticulous, resonating human, and made more astonishing by the clarity of its statement from her excellent cast under deft direction. John Comiskey's design is as deceptively simple and intelligently informed.

The play starts with interior thought (the theories) and extends into exterior application (the bomb), only to revert back inside the mind (the rationale); thus Comiskey's lighting and set refract the inner/outer relationship into a physical lattice. Tall, bare trees sprout up from wooden floorboards, organisms rooted in their reification, as the inside and outside spaces of the plot merge seamlessly together. Stripped trees connote late September and nuclear winter at once. Beneath the

veneer of elegant dining chairs (the only other items of set), white light seeps up from cracks in the wooden slats. These scientists might fear descending into the "darkness inside the human soul" (Frayn's perhaps too-neat invocation of the nearby symbolic landmark, Elsinore), but with the bomb, that darkness is heralded by a blind-

the experience does reach critical mass rather early. Well before the end of a long first act one is left craving the interval. When it arrives, it feels like you haven't breathed in over an hour, light-headed with a barrage of abstractions and ramifications, exhausted but excited.

The first act seems to provide an answer too early, however. The ideas, the relationships, the reversals and twists have all been aired. Although Bohr asks for another draft of the paper, it seems Frayn could only possibly offer a revision. In fact, the second act becomes a recapitulation of the academic facts, enlivened with accessible illustrations. "Copenhagen is an atom. Margarethe is its nucleus," Heisenberg begins to illustrate the Uncertainty Principle. "About right, the scale? Ten thousand to one?" But as science becomes increasingly personal, so the soul reasserts its troubled existence.

Owen Roe turns in a magnetic performance as Bohr, the father-figure and moraliser caught eventually in his own ethical quagmire in Los Alamos, while Declan Conlon is superb as the impetuous Heisenberg, a literally calculating, competitively fierce mind, waging an oedipal struggle against Bohr. Ingrid Craigie excels in her role of Margarethe, although the character is problematic. At a remove from the phallocentric physics that place "man at the centre of the universe," her role is that of typist, witness, mother, and therapist foisting one too many gender stereotypes upon her, although her admonishing insights appear the most measured.

All of which makes it sound dry and worthy, but it pulses with a life for which there is no equation. Frayn's play poses an engrossing problem; Parker's production provides an elegant solution. A complex masterpiece.



**CIRCLING THE SUBJECT:** *Copenhagen*

ing light. Brilliant too, is Parker's decision to stage the production in the round, transforming Project into a moral arena. Orbiting the nucleus of the stage the audience are both whizzing electrons and wartime spies. In this theatre, as in the scientists' philosophising struggles, interpretation varies with which side you are on.

Charged with a giddy cerebral energy,

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## A DELICATE BALANCE

by Edward Albee

Focus Theatre

13 March – 20 April 2002; reviewed 20  
March BY PATRICK LONERGAN

THERE ARE MANY REASONS TO WELCOME this new production of *A Delicate Balance*. Its author Edward Albee is currently enjoying something of a renaissance, with new plays and revivals stimulating a renewed appreciation of his importance to American drama. His impact on Irish theatre is also significant: Garry Hynes has spoken of how Druid benefited from their early productions of Albee's plays, and his influence is discernible in the work of such writers as Tom Murphy, Frank McGuinness, and Sebastian Barry. However, the most important aspect of this production is that it re-states the Focus's commitment to the legacy of Deirdre O'Connell, the founder of the theatre and its adjoining Stanislavski Studio, who died in June 2001, and to whose memory the show is dedicated. It's a tribute that all concerned can be proud of, and one that augurs well for the theatre's future.

*A Delicate Balance* is set in the home of Agnes and Tobias, whose marriage has gradually decayed as a result of numerous pressures, notably the ongoing presence in their house of Agnes's alcoholic sister Claire. As the play opens, they are anticipating the return home of their daughter Julia, whose fourth marriage has just broken down — when their "closest friends", Edna and Harry, arrive unexpectedly, claiming to be suffering from a terror they can neither explain nor overcome. The relationships of these six characters will become increasingly strained as the action progresses.

The play is set in the 1960s, but these people are leftovers from an earlier time —

and that's their problem: their old-money refinement has made them obsolete in a society with which they have completely failed to interact. Claire's alcoholism persists because of her distaste for the people who attend her AA meetings; Tobias reacts with apathy to everything around him; and Edna and Harry are terrified by the outside world. This obsolescence is made clear by the revelation that Agnes and Tobias' son had died years before — and underlined when Agnes expresses her disappointment that Julia has not yet had children. So brilliantly and shockingly used in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, Albee's most famous play, the trope of childlessness is deployed here to show the deep unease of a family that is both metaphorically and actually on the verge of extinction. Intriguingly, the dead child is named Teddy, a diminutive of Albee's own name.

The characters' sense that they are gradually losing their grip on reality is further illustrated by the play's formal qualities, with action that moves fluidly between naturalism and impressionism. When Agnes speaks at the play's commencement about her fear of insanity, and at its conclusion about waking from a nightmare, she is not only expressing her own anxiety, but drawing attention to the formal instability of a play that combines melodrama with shocking realism — while on occasion taking on a hallucinatory, dreamlike quality. The need to maintain the audience's credulity while negotiating this complicated formal arrangement creates huge challenges for actors and director, who are not helped by the fact that all six characters are essentially unlikeable. *A Delicate Balance* is therefore very difficult to produce successfully.

That these difficulties were in no way evident in this wonderful Focus produc-



#### **PLAYING UNHAPPY FAMILIES:** A Delicate Balance

tion was due mainly to the excellent ensemble acting, and Caroline FitzGerald deserves a great deal of praise for her direction of a fine cast. As Tobias, Barry McGovern anchors the play beautifully, constantly appearing on the verge of action before frustratingly retreating to inertia, so that his "aria" at the play's conclusion was thoroughly believable. Ena May skillfully maintained the difficult balance between Agnes's intelligence and brutality with a performance of remarkable depth. Deirdre Donnelly as Claire was consistently impressive, showing an understanding that, as a drunk savant reminiscent of many of Eugene O'Neill's characters, she must earn the audience's respect, but never its sympathy — thereby exercising a restraint too rarely seen in performances of alcoholic characters. Julia is a study in sexual suppression straight out of Strindberg, and conse-

quently a difficult role to portray before contemporary audiences, but Elizabeth Moynihan's performance was excellent, her character's self-destructive nature grimly evident from her first moment on stage. Philip O'Sullivan's Harry was a perfect mix of vulnerability and assertiveness, and Fidelma Cullen's characterisation of an Edna oozing with malevolence was original and highly effective.

Presented at a time when some Dublin theatres with significantly higher budgets were producing vastly inferior work, *A Delicate Balance* clearly demonstrates the importance of the Focus Theatre, making a near irrefutable case that this importance must be recognised in the form of increased funding and support.

*Patrick Lonergan is carrying out research on contemporary Irish theatre at NUI Galway.*

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## DOWN THE FLATS by Tony Kavanagh

Pathways Players and

Mountjoy Prison Drama

The Crypt Arts Centre, Dublin

12 February–2 March 2002; reviewed

1 March BY MAURICE DUNPHY

TOO MANY COOKS SPOIL THE BROTH, the old adage goes, but, in the case of *Down The Flats*, too many directors do not simply spoil the plot as actually lose it. Providing a regular giggle-inducing diet at the expense of exposing the reality of society's marginalised serves only to deny us the necessary access to the issues of the play.

The secretive Flyns have buried their disappointments and dreams for over 20 years and the burden is beginning to show; they are as afraid of the past as they are of the present and the future. Recently paroled Fran is back home and already working hard at his burgling trade, as his (possible) father, the alcoholic Peadar, continually taunts and challenges him to shape up. Mrs. Flynn defends her offspring and effectively referees the ensuing arguments and fights, while daughter Bridie lives in a bubble, almost totally unaware of the tensions until they explode in her face. The dubious blood relationship between Peadar and Fran also serves to put the whole household on tenterhooks. Added to this are the regular intrusions of nosy neighbour, May, bearing gossip and stolen goods, and Fran's partner-in-crime, Henry. Although the parents condemn lawlessness, the stolen goods are welcome (and necessary), and hypocrisy is rife.

Despite all this, Fran desperately desires a fuller life and, more importantly, understands how to attain it. This means financing his escape, leaving the home turf, and going straight, preferably in

America. He does his final "job" and refuses the offer of further work, despite Henry's warnings of the impossibility of change. In the interim, however, Bridie gets pregnant by a local heroin addict/dealer, Paul Costelloe, and looks set to follow her mother into youth motherhood and partnership with a substance-abuser. Peadar tries to reform himself too, but after a day on the wagon, goes back on the drink, has one final family row, and storms out, vowing never to return. Despite his mother's pleas, Fran eschews the role of father figure and leaves, ending the play on a darkly hopeful note.

Tony Kavanagh's play exposes the hypocrisy of Irish society and its impact on the disadvantaged with authenticity, and uncovers many potentially dramatic issues and relationships. However, by abandoning them almost as soon as they emerge, they remain unexplored in enough depth. Potentially excellent dramatic scenarios, such as resolving the paternity question between Fran and Peadar, or Bridie and Henry's mutual attraction, were glossed over and never fully developed. It is at these moments neither the writer nor directors Michael Roddy and Frank Allen seemed capable of pulling the play back on course. The writer's tendency to resort to unbelievable and ineffective word-play at crucial moments, when perseverance would more likely pay off, seriously weaken the play. Thus, the actors are left in a middle ground where they cannot explore their characters' predicaments. The action takes place in the home, yet the inherent dangers on the street are never fully communicated to the audience, and as great opportunities arose, premature exits and entrances killed much of the dramatic potential. Just as the Flyns cannot confront the issues, the writer too cannot go

the extra yard and make the drama count. Constantly resorting to "comic relief" betrays the unsureness of the play's mission, effectively sacrificing dramatic potential. This problem is exacerbated by using two directors, as such a play demands a singular and focused approach.

Although the main actors handled their parts reasonably well, too many acting "tics" continually weakened characterisation and Roddy and Allen must shoulder that and all other directional responsibilities. Joan Pierce (Mother) ably held her own throughout, yet Owen McCabe and Joeleen O'Brien (Fran and Bridie) were awkward and more than a little uncomfortable with their own bodies. Joe Shannon's Henry and Ken Fletcher's Father regularly lost focus, particularly during serious confrontational situations. Geraldine Callaghan and Viviana Verveen (May

and Margaret, both caricatures), hammed it throughout and their inclusion defies any logic apart from providing a laugh at the local "character", and the ridicule of somebody who escaped the poverty trap. However, Jimmy Kavanagh's precisely played dealer/addict, Paul Costelloe, gave a frightening glimpse of Bridie's future life.

Pathways Project is excellent and worthwhile, using drama as an educational and socially inclusive tool for prisoners and ex-prisoners (the well-made set was constructed by Mountjoy inmates). This, however, does not excuse the weaknesses in both the play and the production. The programme highlights "similarities" between Kavanagh's work and that of O'Casey and Behan. There is a little truth in this but, importantly, both had excellent dramaturgs coaching them (O'Casey had Yeats and Gregory,

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# opinions & overviews

and Behan had Joan Littlewood). It is this path, perhaps, that the undoubtedly talented Kavanagh should consider.

Maurice Dunphy is a community arts worker with Tallaght Partnership.

## EN SUITE by Joe O'Byrne

Peacock Theatre

14 March-20 April 2002; reviewed  
on 8 April BY DEREK WEST

I CHOSE TO SEE JOE O'BYRNE'S PLAY on the night of an after-performance discussion between the audience, author, and director; but must confess I scuttled out as soon as the play ended — rat leaves sinking ship. I was wracked with incredulity that our national theatre, "cradle of genius" — with its own commissioning manager, literary officer and senior reader — could mount such a shoddy piece of writing. It is astonishing that a production, in the hands of a credible director like David Parnell and a professional cast, could produce such howling tedium. There seemed to be a total lack of selectivity (what justified the choice of this text?) and discipline (no evidence of editing or re-writing). It's far from the cutting edge that this one was conceived.

I have admired Joe O'Byrne's work in the past, notably *The Sinking of the Titanic and Other Matters*. If, like the eponymous liner, the play was not 100% seaworthy, it was ambitious and energetic. I was captivated by *Frank Pig Says Hello*, in which he pared back the narrative of Patrick McCabe's novel *The Butcher Boy* to be performed by two actors who made a crazy world hum with life, in a production that was both simple and riveting. For *En Suite*, O'Byrne fell back on his own powers of imagination and, to be frank, he sank.

There is no perceptible inner core to this

play. The plot offers a slice of family life in an east-coast seaside setting. In the kitchen of a boarding house, Evelyn (Marion O'Dwyer) tries to hold two stroppy daughters in train — one, Emer (Lesley Conroy), pregnant by a passing Italian; the other, Ella (Kelly Campbell), heading for Lesbos. The ne'er-do-well brother, Owen (Enda Oates), comes homes from exile to die and the family skeleton (literally, and moving close to plagiarism of Martin McDonagh's *A Skull in Connemara*) is exhumed.

It's a rag bag of impressions. For most of the time it is like listening to obnoxious adolescents "slagging" each other. The petulance of the prose is depressing. In Parnell's strident production, it comes across as crude caterwauling, vicious and vulgar.

In aiming at comic effect, O'Byrne has achieved less of the black and more of the bland. What might be savage impropriety turns into mere tastelessness. He picks up and drops at will issues of human concern. He neither adequately abuses, nor effectively uses them. He can't treat them seriously and he fails to be funny about them. Owen's brain tumour might be a cause for manic hilarity or genuine suffering — instead it becomes an embarrassing prop, presented at intervals with distressing naturalism. The lesbian daughter seems planted to ensure a happy ending by opting for heterosexuality (courtesy of a bed-and-breakfast from Bristol) — such gratuitous trifling with sexuality might be funny if it were witty; instead it appears to be stodgily sensational, another non-statement among many.

A German couple — paying guests, played with Teutonic glee by Arthur Riordan and Noelle Brown — are straight out of Ray Cooney, tempting xenophobic tendencies in the audience, turning up as functionaries in Act Five, but as extraneous as anything else in this play.



**BED AND BUMP:** O'Dwyer and Conroy in *En Suite*

O'Byrne seemed to be aiming at the iconoclasm which McDonagh has mastered. Instead of the obsession with Kimberley biscuits, we were treated to a diatribe on pancakes and a lot of alliteration built around the B & B setting of the play (Bed and Buggery, Bed and Bastard, but really the predominant "B" word had to be "Banality").

He moved into territory that Arthur Matthews and Graham Linehan occupied with *Father Ted*, but with neither their absurdist lunacy nor their lightness of touch. He stayed away from the pointed accuracy of Roddy Doyle's comedy; he came nowhere near the precision of Conor McPherson's dialogue. At times one wondered if he was trying to emulate the slickness of Hugh Leonard's Feydeau phase, or was there a touch of the Bernard Farrell? The Abbey advertisements picked up Fintan O'Toole groping for comparisons: *Fawlty Towers?* *Hedda Gabler?* All this adds up to a picture of a play with an identity crisis, as if

O'Byrne set out first to write a play, any play, THEN wondered about the themes and THEN wondered about the style.

When one witnesses such an intense effort (pulling out all the stops but never finding a true note) one has to note the terrible loneliness of the playwright. As my companion remarked, Joe O'Byrne should have tried the text out first on his friends, in the privacy of his living room. Their silence would have warned him.

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

#### **AN EVENING OF IONESCO**

Danse Macabre Theatre Company  
Project, Dublin (30 April-4 May 2002)  
and the Hawk's Well Theatre,  
Sligo (7 May)

Reviewed 4 May BY SARA KEATING

IT IS ALWAYS REFRESHING TO SEE NEW productions of little-known plays by well-

# opinions & overviews

known playwrights: they can remind us of the greatness of the writer in question and surprise us in many subtle ways. Subtle, however, is not the word to describe the wildly absurd work of Eugene Ionesco, nor this strong production of five of his forgotten plays, which remain startlingly relevant despite having been written in an era now past.

Danse Macabre is a young Dublin-based theatre company, led by director and sometime actor Nicole Wiley, which is particularly interested in resuscitating the works of "forgotten" playwrights. Their interest in a non-naturalistic aesthetic, ensemble performance, and the tragic farce epitomised by the work of Samuel Beckett led them to explore the works of Ionesco, the Paris-based Romanian absurdist who died in 1994 but wrote most of his best work during the '60s and early '70s. *An Evening of Ionesco* is in fact five plays in one, which condenses and intensifies Ionesco's main dramatic ideas into one thoroughly enjoyable and thought-provoking hour. Exploring themes such as the irrationality of human behaviour, the futility of man's attempt to determine his future, and the meaninglessness of language in a world determined by chance, these snapshots of life are both tragic and farcical and manage to provoke our laughter while confronting us with some of the most violent, sad, and inhumane aspects of the human condition.

"Salutations" simultaneously analyses the behaviour and rituals of both performers and audiences. It opens in a burst of verbal energy, but as the words spoken become more and more erudite, the short play exposes the clichés, pretensions, and ultimate meaninglessness of language. Members of the six-strong cast are also scattered throughout the audience, and their interruptions and asides interrogate

our behaviour and thought processes as spectators. The actors, however, ensure that we do not get lost in the verbal outpouring, by playing on phonetics to physicalise the words. The words themselves, then, become dramatic, until they, like the characters on stage and those sitting with us in the audience, disintegrate into caricature and parody.

"Double Act," written in 1970, is a terse meditation on the nature of desire and beauty that is still relevant today. It cynically re-evaluates society's reliance on image as means of determining self-worth. Two women simultaneously dress and undress in their closed bedrooms as



**ABSURDITIES:** *An Evening of Ionesco*

their eager admirers wait outside. It is gradually revealed as the scene unfolds that these two women are one and the same person. Without stage effects and using minimal make-up, the actresses adeptly create the illusion of woman ageing in minutes through physical, facial, and verbal statement.

Words are discarded entirely in "Learning to Walk," which involves a wheelchair-bound young man and nurse who tries to teach him to walk again. The tragedy at the centre is a retelling of the Frankenstein myth, where what is created can overpower the creator. The corporeal emphasis, however, demands a fluidity of movement on the part of the two actors. While Norette Leahy achieves this fluidity with grace, Conor Delaney fails to deliver: his face perfectly captures the strain of effort and the wonder of discovering his body's abilities, but his actual movement is too clumsy, and this distracts considerably from the magic of the play.

"New Scenes A and B" are played simultaneously, and this adds an extra dimension to the double-sided tale of love and death. Two men return home during the war to find their families ravaged by pain and desperation. As the roles of man and wife, invalid and nurse, victim and consoler are swapped, the play becomes an analysis of masculinity, femininity, and humanity in general, when faced with the dramas of love, death, and sickness.

The final play provides a suitable climax. "Anger" is an analysis of the mechanical behaviours and materialistic values of society, and *Danse Macabre* expertly brings the play to its ridiculous but inevitable conclusion. The play treats a normal day in the lives of ordinary villagers, complete with the platitudes and clichés of socially acceptable behaviour. When the villagers return to their homes,

however, all civility is discarded and the mundane exterior of human life is stripped away to reveal the cruel nature and baseness of human behaviour.

The very nature of the plays and *Danse Macabre*'s insistence on ensemble performance makes it difficult, and somewhat unfair, to single out actors for their individual performances, but it is necessary to commend Carol Brophy and Lenny Hayden for their performances in "Scenes A and B." They play a desperate couple with a poignant intensity that eclipses that of the scene being played alongside them, and evokes more than a simulated pathos. A multipurpose set (designed by Orla Bass), combined with the multi-tasking cast, cleverly parallels and enhances the different levels at work in Ionesco's plays. Under Wiley's precise direction, *Danse Macabre* celebrates how Ionesco captured the fundamental comedy in the tragedy of human existence.

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*Sara Keating will begin a PhD on the drama of Tom Murphy at the School of Drama, Trinity College, this autumn.*

## FEILE 2002

26-31 May

Review of **AINGILÍN** at Bananaphoblaacht

Café, reviewed 25 April

**BY BAIRBRE DE BARRA;**

and reviews of **CRÉ NA CILLE**

(reviewed 28 March) at the Taibhdhearc

and **UALACH AN UAINIS** at the

Town Hall Theatre (reviewed 29 March)

**BY JEANNINE WOODS**

A LITTLE LESS CONVERSATION, A LITTLE more action. All this monologue ain't satisfaction...

The story of *Aingilín* is promising: the young waitress, Aingilín, has sold herself to the devil in exchange for one last meet-

# opinions & overviews

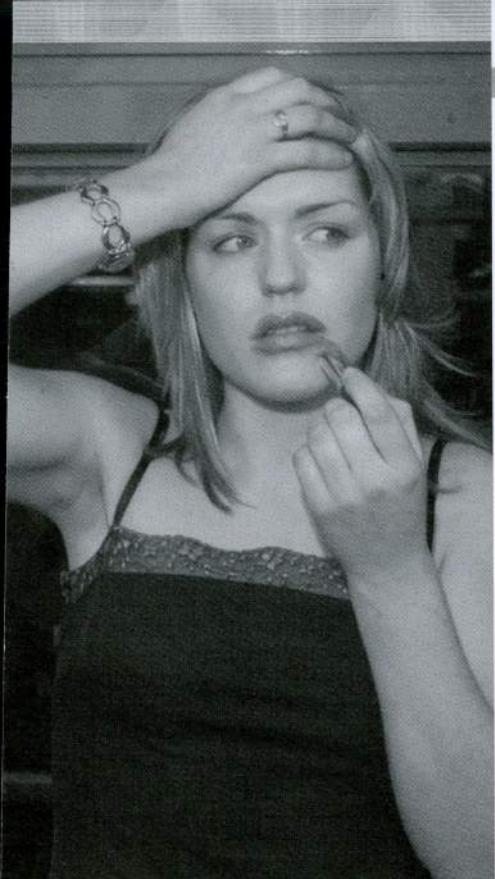
ing with her long lost love, Feardorcha. She must sleep with 666 men before her wish can be fulfilled. Dark and dangerous, mysterious and sexy... an interesting recipe for drama — except that Aingilín tells us all at the beginning of the play. Instead of allowing the story to unfold naturally, the protagonist explains everything to the audience in her opening monologue while the other characters stand redundant. Irish language drama has long been prioritizing language over the physical and visual elements and this play is no exception. Never mind the "show and tell," skip right to the "tell." And so *Aingilín* did.

But if there was nothing new in the way it over-used language, *Aingilín* had plenty else to offer in the way of originality. The script itself, for instance. For many years now, Irish-language drama has been relying on translations and adaptations. Crowd pleasers and classics these may be, but if very little original material continues to be produced, then Irish language drama, prepare to meet thy doom. The difficulty is that few producers will take risks with material or authors that haven't been tried and tested. Alex Hijnmans got around this problem by producing his own work himself in *Bananaphoblacht*, the Irish-language café he runs in Galway city. The production was part of Féile 2002, Galway's Irish language arts festival, and is apparently the first "location drama" ever to be performed in Irish.

The play begins as the audience take their seats in the café. Appropriately mellow music plays in the background as three smiling waitresses take drink orders. The audience/customers chat over freshly brewed coffee while the waitresses go about their business behind the counter. A fourth waitress — Aingilín — stands in a trance behind the till, then

finally steps forward and starts to explain her story to the audience. Here the line between reality and theatre blurs as the customers become audience and the waitresses become characters. At times the characters try to re-establish an interactive relationship with members of the audience but never again is the illusion, so well established in the opening of the play, recreated. The close confines of the café doubtless restricted the actors' movements and this may account for the lack of direct communication. But if the actors are restricted to positions from which they can only talk at the audience rather than with them, the enclosed space is certainly effective in heightening the discomforting effect.

For *Aingilín* is fundamentally a dark and disturbing play. We watch as Aingilín escorts various male customers into the toilets behind with unsettling passivity. From behind the door we hear a crescendo of sexual cries. We laugh but there is nothing funny about this. When she finally reappears, she is expressionless. Even as she crosses a kitchen knife across her thighs and arms she hardly winces. Six hundred and sixty six gashes, one for every man she has slept with. We do the wincing for her. Having said that, there were quite a few blank faces to be seen by the end of the play, for although there is a sense of intensity and dramatic tension maintained throughout, the fundamental message is vague. The author plays around with various ideas pertaining to death and sexuality, desire and despair, yet the central theme of this work is open to an array of different interpretations. Although Faustian in essence, it is in many ways a modern fable, with its juxtaposition of opposing forces; black and white, good and evil, male and female. But if *Aingilín* was



**SELF-DESTRUCTIVE:** *Aingilín*

abstract and ambiguous, it was also thought-provoking and innovative.

Although Siobhán Ní Cheallaigh was hampered by the overly-verbose script, she gave a strong performance in the challenging central role. Especially powerful were her scenes with Darach Ó Dubháin, who was striking in his portrayal of the devil. Although Hijmans did a good job of directing this difficult play given the limitations of the space, the script itself could do with some tidying in places. Nevertheless, this Galway-resident Dutch native

has done more for Irish language drama than we can yet imagine by taking matters into his own hands.

Níos lú béisim ar chomhrá, níos mó ghníomhaíocht. Ní leor an t-oráid aonair le muid a shásamh. . . Tá scéal féin Aingilín gríosach a dhóthain: tá freastalaí óg, Aingilín, i ndiadh í féin a dhíol leis an diabhal ar an gcoinnioll go bhfeicfidh sí a grá geal, Feardorcha, aon uair amháin eile. Le go dtar�d seo, caithfidh sí a leaba a roint le 666 fear. Duaire agus dain-séarach, diamhrach agus gnéasach . . . meascán chaoi le haghaidh drámaíochta-ach amháin go n-insíonn Aingilín chuire short dúinn ag túis an dráma. Seachas ligint don scéal titim amach go nádúrtha, déanann an phríomhcharachtar gach rud a mhíniú don lucht féachana ina horáid aonair, fad is a bhíonn na caractair eile ag feitheamh diamhaoin. Tá béisim á chur le fada an lá ar an teanga féin i ndrámaíocht na Gaeilge seachas eilimintí fisiciúla agus radhairce agus ní haon eisceacht í an dráma seo. Ná bac an taispeántas agus insint, gabh ar aghaidh ag an insint. Agus sin mar a rinne Aingilín.

Ach más ea nach raibh aon rud nua sa chaoi inar baineadh an iomarca úsáide as an teanga, bhí go leor eile le tairiscint ag Aingilín ó thaobh gnéithe úra de. An téacs féin, mar shampa. Le blianta fada, tá drámaíocht na Gaeilge i ndiadh a bheith ag brath go mór ar dhrámaí aistrithe ón bhéarla nó teanga eile agus scéalta cóirithe don stáitse. Is cinnte go bhfuil tairbhe faoi leith ag baint leo seo ach mun a ndéantar scriobhnoireacht úr, dhrámatúil, a chur chun cinn, ní fada eile a mhairfidh drámaíocht na Gaeilge slán. Is é an deacracht is mó atá ann ná an drogall a bhainneann le scriobhnoireacht nua, anaithnid a chur ar stáitse. Chuaigh Alex Hijmans i ngleic leis an fhadhb seo trí stáitsiú a dhéanamh ar a

dhráma féin i mBananaphoblacht, caifé dhá-theangach atá ar bhun aige i gcaithair na Gaillimhe. Bhí an dráma mar chuid de Féile 2002, Féile Ealaíne Ghaeilge na Gailimhe, agus tá sé de réir dealramh ar an gcéad dráma suíomha le bheith i nGaeilge.

Tosaíonn an dráma agus an lucht féachana á shocrú féin sa chaifé. Cluintear ceol oiriúnach séimh sa chúlra fad is a imíonn triúr freastalai thart ag glacadh ordaithe do tae agus caífé. Déanann an lucht féachana/ na custaiméirí comhrá lena chéile agus na deochanna á n-ól acu fad is a bhíonn na freastalaithe ag tabhairt faoina gcuid oibre taobh thiar an chúntair. Bíonn an cheathrú freastalaí chomh maith ann-Aingilín agus í ina staic i rith an ama. Faoi dheimireadh, seasann sí amach agus tosaíonn ar a scéal a hinsint. Is anseo a thosaíonn an meascán idir réalachas agus drámafocht, mar a thiontaíonn na custaiméirí ina lucht féachana agus athraíonn na freastalaithe ina gcarachtair. In amanta déanann na caractair iarracht gaol idirghníomhach a athbhunú leis an lucht féachana ach cliseann orthu an suíomh inchreidte a athbhunú mar a bhí go héifeachtach ag túis an dráma ar fad. Níl aon amhras ach gur cuireadh srian ar ghluaiseachtaí na haisteoírí le teorann spáis an láthair agus gach seans gur toisc sin a bhí an easpa cumarsáide díreach leis an lucht féachana. Ach más ea go raibh na haisteoírí teanntaithe i suíomhanna ónar gá dóibh labhairt ag an lucht féachana seachas leo, is fior chomh maith gur chuir an srianadh spáis go mór leis an atmais-féar míshuaimhneach.

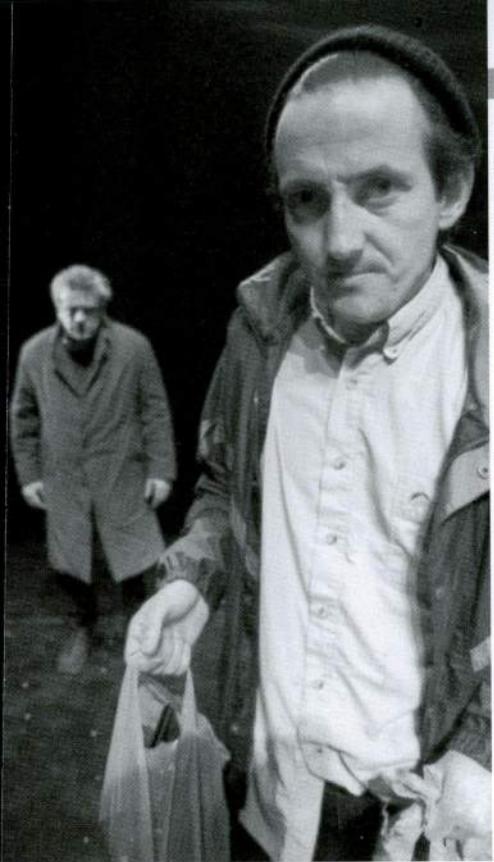
Dráma is ea Aingilín nach fágann ar ár gcompórd muid. Bíonn muid ag faire fad is a dhéanann Aingilín tionlacann ar fir difriúla isteach sna leithreasáí gan móran aire. Tríd an doras bíonn screadaíl scléipfear gnéasach le cloisteáil ó na fir. Déanann muid gáirí cé nach bhfuil aon ní

greannmhar faoi. Nuair a fhilleann sí, ní bhíonn rud ar bith le sonrú uirthi. Fiú nuair a tharraingíonn sí scian cistine trasna a cosa agus lámha, ní bhíonn giog nó meangadh aisti. Déanann muidne meangadh pinn di. É sin ráite, ní féidir é a shéanadh ach go raibh roinnt aghaidheanna loma le sonrú ag an deireadh, mar in ainneoin an seo a bheith drámatúil agus géar tríd síos, tá sé ábhairín doiléar chomh maith. Déanann an údar plé ar leithéadaí d'ábhar agus an bás is gnéas, an dúil is an éadóchas, ach is féidir neart léamh difriúla a dhéanamh ar an téama lárnach. Cé go bhfuil eilimintí 'Faustach' le sonrú tríd, scéal nua-aoiseach is ea é sa chaoi is go ndéanann sé plé ar théamaí contrálta ar nós dubh agus bán, bás agus beatha, fir agus mná. Ach más ea go bhfuil an dráma seo teibí agus doiléar, is fior chomh maith go bhfuil sé fiúntach agus go spreagann sé macnamh.

Cé gur dúshláin ab ea é do Shiobhán Ní Cheallaigh dul i ngleic leis an téacs foclach, thug sí taispeántas tréan sa pháirt lárnach. Ba chumhachtach ar fad na radharcanna a bhí aici le Darach Ó Dubháin, a bhí thar barr i bpáirt an diabhail. Cé gur eirigh le Hijmans stiúrú deas a dhéanamh ar an dráma seo in ainneoin deacrachtáí spáis, ní dhéanfadh sé dochar roinnt eagarthóireachta a dhéanamh ar an téacs féin in áiteanna. É sin ráite, sa chaoi is gur ghlac sé cursáil ina lámha féin, tá níos mo déanta ag an Ísiltíreach seo do dhrámafocht Gaeilge ná mar is léir duinn go fóill.

*Bairbre de Barra is studying for an MA in Drama and Theatre Studies at NUIG.*

DRAMA HAS ALWAYS BEEN A MAJOR FEATURE of Féile, the country's biggest Irish language arts festival. Féile 2002 was no exception, serving as a forum for new tal-



**LONESOME:** Ualach an Uaignis

ent as well as for more established works. The festival managed to include two major productions this year; an adaptation of *Cré na Cille* by Máirtín Ó Cadhain, and a translation of Martin McDonagh's *The Lonesome West*, retitled *Ualach an Uaignis*. It was fitting that the central dramatic productions of the festival (which runs in Galway) were set in Connemara; each play is an exploration of a region and community which has figured centrally in Ireland's cultural and political imagination.

*Cré na Cille* has long occupied pride of place in modern Gaelic literature, and its

canonical status has resulted in several stage adaptations of the novel. This latest production, staged in the Taibhdhearc Theatre, was adapted by Macdara Ó Fátharta and directed by Darach Mac an Iomaire. Set in a graveyard in the Cois Fharraige region of Connemara, the narrative unfolds as a study of the interactions between a community of corpses and their associations with those still living, serving as a powerful and complex exploration of human relationships. The play opens with Caitriona Pháidín's arrival in the graveyard, wondering whether she is in the pound plot or the fifteen-shilling plot. Thus emerges one of the central themes of the narrative, that of a community of self-seeking individuals caught up with the external trappings of status and respectability. The group we encounter in the graveyard contrasts sharply with the dominant, idealised images of Gaeltacht communities fostered by cultural and political nationalism; there is little sense here of a unified group based on co-operation which stands above crass materialism.

Nor does it seem that the cemetery's characters are at variance with those in the land of the living; rather we have a sense of business as usual. The bitter, acrimonious relationship between the corpses of Caitriona Pháidín and Nóra Sheáinín is a resumption of the enmity existing between the two women in the mortal realm which death has done nothing to alter. Caitriona's invective is not confined to her co-occupants, however; her most vitriolic judgements are directed against those who are still living, particularly at her sister Neil and her daughter-in-law, who is also Nóra's daughter. Self-definition here is predicated upon the denigration and negative judgement of others, where one's status is elevated through the

# opinions & overviews

outdoing of one's neighbours and a glorying and broadcasting of others' failings and misdemeanours. It is in this context that the corpses eagerly seek news of the earthly world, not just as a means of relieving their suffocatingly monotonous graveyard existence, but in order to boost their standing and esteem through gossip and barbed denunciation.

As more characters arrive in the graveyard, it becomes clear that Caitríona's self-absorption is shared in varying degrees by her co-inhabitants. Each corpse is concerned primarily with his or her own life and manner of death; where the focus turns to others, it is to create discord or wrest satisfaction. Despite the constant flow of talk in the graveyard, there is little communication; behind the copious dia-

logue, what we witness is a series of monologues in which words serve as weapons. Towards the end of the drama, however, we are given a sense of the insecurities underlying these barbed interactions and self-aggrandisements. Caitríona's preoccupation with the absence of a headstone on her grave begins to take on a different resonance. Aside from its importance as a status marker, the headstone comes to symbolise a marker of presence. Caitríona's anxiety reflects the fear that, without a concrete monument, all traces of her life will disappear and fade as her presence ceases to impact on the living. Identity issues from social interaction, no matter how acrimonious. The Gaelic adage that people live in the shadow of each other (*Ar scáth a chéile*

## CONVERSATIONS ON CHOREOGRAPHY

The Institute for Choreography and Dance (icd) at Firkin Crane continues its innovative Dance Writer in Residence programme with Diana Theodores and is pleased to announce the forthcoming book, **CONVERSATIONS ON CHOREOGRAPHY**.

This book on contemporary choreographers of Ireland will be the first such mapping of dance making practices here. Through lively dialogues, interviews, recorded talk-shops and intensive viewings, **CONVERSATIONS ON CHOREOGRAPHY** explores the motivations, stylistic approaches, manifestos and contexts that help locate these choreographers' work, from the established to the emerging and signals an important development in choreographic research and critical dialogue in dance.

### DANCE WRITER IN RESIDENCE PROGRAMME

The presence of a writer in the space of choreography prompts many questions about the relationship between writing and moving bodies, about the physical acts of writing and moving, about the language and texts of writing dancing, about the narrative of observation, and the dramaturgy of documentation itself. This programme aims to address these questions through a series of dance criticism workshops, live events and documented conversations with choreographers.

See [www.instchordance.com](http://www.instchordance.com) for further details.

*a mhaireann na daoine) seems to hold after all.*

This production of *Cré na Cille* features some excellent performances. Brid Ní Neachtain is superb in her ability to portray both the grandiosity and pathos of Caitríona Pháidín, while Macdara Ó Fátharta's Máirtín Crosach and Bearrtle Chois Dubh are performed with a skill which retains their depth while imbuing them with moments of comedy. Dara McGee's clever and imaginative set, where the corpses arrive unexpectedly through various openings in the "clay," creates an atmospheric setting helped along by Barry O'Brien's lighting design. It was a pity that the same innovative energy did not extend to Breege Fahy's conventional costume design, which added little to the drama.

The production's weaker elements issue from the complexity of the work on which it is based. *Cré na Cille* can be read on multiple levels, satirising the Gaeltacht community as it denounces stereotyped images of that community. The satire is also directed against revivalist visions of the Irish language. The earthy speech of Caitríona Pháidín and others is contrasted with the Máistir Mór's pretentious rhetoric, underscored by Nóra's fawning admiration of the Máistir and her attempts to emulate him in her pursuit of *cultúr*. This work also moves beyond localised issues to raise more universal questions however, engaging with modernist themes of the failure of language as a medium, the collapse of certainty, and the notion of stasis. Such issues and questions offer rich potential for dramatisation, but remain largely unexplored in this production. Without such a context, the lack of movement on stage gives a stilted feel to the production. Overall though, this is a fine adaptation of Ó Cadhain's novel.

Caitríona Pháidín's assertion that acri-

mony is better than loneliness is taken to farcical extremes in *Ualach an Uaignis*, where community and family relationships are pervaded by violence. This translation of the third play in McDonagh's Leenane Trilogy was staged in the wake of the success of an Irish translation of *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, performed at Féile 2000. Micheál Ó Conghaile, who translated both plays, once again provides a rich and sensitive translation of McDonagh's work, directed in this instance by Páraic Breathnach.

The drama opens in a kitchen dotted with holy statues, where we encounter Colmán and Father Welsh, returning from the funeral of Colmán's father whom Colmán "accidentally" shot. We hear echoes of Synge as Father Welsh bemoans his lack of influence in a parish which has lately witnessed two murders. Welsh's sense of ineffectuality is compounded in the face of the tensions between Colmán and his brother Veailín. It is this filial relationship which forms the centrepiece of the drama, as the brothers' squabbles frequently spill over into violent altercations.

The irredeemably violent nature of their relationship is exposed in their attempts to follow the last wishes of Father Welsh, who commits suicide in the face of his own inability to reform his flock. The brothers' attempts at reconciliation, through admission and attempted forgiveness of the wrongs they have committed against each other, soon revert to type, each attempting to outdo the other in cataloguing the numerous acts of spite and revenge that they have committed. It is here that the slapstick element of the production really comes into its own; echoes of *Pulp Fiction* abound as the brother's brutalities and atrocities serve as a source of hilarity.

The farcical tone of the play is excellent-

# opinions & overviews

ly captured by Pádraic Ó Tuairisc's range of expression and gesture in his portayal of Veailín. Tommy Ó Nia's Colmán is similarly executed, although Ó Nia's rapid delivery of his lines made for some difficulties, particularly for those in the audience without a fluent grasp of Irish. Linda Bhreathnach plays Girleen, a schoolgirl poitin peddler and admirer of Father Welsh; she portrays well the character's irreverence and bravado, which slips to reveal her vulnerability. Micheál Tierney's Father Welsh, although serving as a foil to the antics of the other characters, doesn't quite manage to imbue the character with the depth it demanded.

Vanya Lambrecht's stage design allows plenty of space for the fracas between Veailín and Colmán. Michael Byrne's colourful lighting design picks up on the drama's echoes of pantomime, as does the exploding cooker complete with sparks and fireworks, eliciting jumps even from those familiar with the play.

This production concentrates on the darkly comic elements of McDonagh's work, eschewing its more sinister and tragic aspects. One can speculate as to whether this serves as a challenge to claims that works such as McDonagh's are a reflection in some sense of the social reality of rural Ireland, or whether it is simply born of a desire to provide some serious comedy in the field of Irish language theatre. In this latter regard, *Ualach* is an unqualified success. The range and quality of the drama in this year's festival places Féile firmly on the map as a positive and important vehicle for the development of Irish-language theatre.

Go n-uige seo, tá áit shúntasach tugtha don dhrámaíocht ar chlár Féile, an Fhéile Ealaíona na Gaeilge is cuimseáil sa tir. Leanadh leis an nós seo ag Féile 2002 agus

i mar shuíomh saothar úr agus clúiteach araon. D'éisigh le Féile dhá mhórléiriú a chur os ár gcomhair i mbliana, cóiriú ar Cré na Cille le Máirtín Ó Cadhain agus aistriúchán ar *The Lonesome West* le Martin McDonagh ar bronnadh an teideal *Ualach an Uaignis* air. Diol spéiseis is ea é go raibh priomhdhrámaí na féile, a reacháiltear i nGaillimh, lonnaithe i gConamara, iad ag cioradh réigiún agus pobal atá ag croílár shamhlaíocht chultúrtha agus pholaitiúil na hÉireann le fada an lá.

Feictear gurb é Cré na Cille an Chadhnaigh buaicshaothar litíocht nuaoiseach na Gaeilge, agus is iomaí cóiriú státse atá déanta ar an úrscéal mar gheall ar a stádas canónach. Tá an leagan is déanaí, a léiriódh sa Tabhldhearc, cóirithé ag Macdara Ó Fátharta agus léirithe ag Darach Mac an Iomaire. Lonnaithe i reilige Chois Fharraige, diríonn an dráma ar an gcaidreamh idir baill phobal na reilige agus an ceangal eatarthu agus an dream atá fós beo, é mar iniúchadh chumhachtach, casta ar an gcaidreamh daonna. Osclaíonn an dráma le teacht Chaitríona Pháidín faoin bhffód. Trína himní faoi luach na háite ina bhfuil sí curtha, agus an diomá agus fearg a thagann uirthi agus í in 'ait an chúig déag', múslaítear ceann de larthéamaí an scéil, pobal de dhaoine leithleasacha gafa ag comharthaí soirt an stádais agus na measúlachta. Is fada lucht na reilige ón iomhá idéalaíoch, cheannasach de phobail na Gaeltachta cruthaithe agus treisithe ag an náisiúnachas cultúrtha agus polaitiúil; nil rian dá laghad anseo de phobal aontaithe a chomhoibríonn le chéile, saor ó lochtanna suaracha an ábharachais. Is léir gurb ionaínn na saghasanna carachtair i gré na cille agus iad siúd os cionn taltún. Feictear gur leanúint é an caidreamh searbh achrannach idir Caitríona agus Nóra Sheáinín ar an naimhdeas a

cothaíodh idir an bheirt agus iad beo, naimhdeas nach bhfuil aistrithe pioc ag an mbás. Ní ar a comháitritheoirí amháin atá rabhán cainte Chaitríona dírithe, áfach. Is i gcoinne na mbeo, go háirithe in aghaidh a derifíúr Neil agus bhean a mhic (arb í iníon Nóra í) a thugann sí a breithíúnais is nimhní. Is ar dhímheas agus cáineadh daoine eile atá féinshonrú bunaithe anseo, ina ndéantar féinstádas a ardú trí chéim chun cinn a fháil ar na comharsanna agus a gcuid lochtanna a chur go neamhbhalbh os comhair an phobail. Is as seo a eascraíonn dúil na gcorpán i nuacht ó dhomhan na mbeo, ní hamháin ar mhaithle faoiseamh ó liostacht thachtach shaol na reilige, ach d'fhonn cur lena gcéimíocht feín trí bhiadán agus cáineadh nimhneach.

De réir mar a mhéadaíonn ar phobal na reilige, is léir go bhfuil féinmhórtas Chaitríona Pháidín le sonrú a bheag nó a mhór i measc an phobail i gcoitinne. Is é a saol agus a mbás feín an chloch is mó ar a bpайдrín ag gach uile chorpaí. Ní chastar óna scéal pearsanta ach amháin ar chuíis féinleasa nó cothú coimhlinte agus buaire. In ainneoin na cainte flúirsí i measc na gcorpán, is beag an caidreamh eatarthu; nil le fáil taobh thiar den chomhrá fairsing ach sraith monalóga ina bhfuil an teanga mar lón cogaidh. Níos déanaí sa scéal, áfach, faighimid éachtaint ar an ahmras a luíonn faoi bhonn an nimhneachais agus an fhéinghasice. Feictear cúis eile le buairt Chaitríona agus a huagh fágtha gan leac thuama. Seachas an tábhacht a bhaineann leis mar chomhartha stádais, is siombal de láithreacht an duine í an leac thuama. Cuireann inní Chaitríona Pháidín friotal ar an bhfaítios nach mbeidh rian dá saol le brath mun a bhfuil cloch cuimhne aici, de réir mar a théann sí i ndearmad i measc na mbeo. Is as an gcaidreamh sóisialta, is cuma cé



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chomh naimhdeach is atá sé, a eascríonn féiniúlacht an duine. Is amhlaidh gur ar scáth a chéile a mhaireann na daoine ar deireadh thiar.

Tá aisteoireacht den scoth le brath i *Cré na Cille*. Tá cumas neamhghnách ag Bríd Ní Neachtain agus í ag léiriú idir mhórtas agus thruamhéileacht Chaitríona Pháidín. Éiríonn le Macdara Ó Fátharta Máirtín Crosach agus Beairtle Chois Dubh a chur i láthair sa gcaoi is go bhfuil doimhneacht na gcarachtar fite le heilimintí as a dtagann gnéithe an ghrinn sa dhráma. Déanann seit eirimíúil agus shamhalioch Dara McGee, ina dtagann na corpán i láthair trí oscailt sa 'chré', atmaisféar fheiliúinach a chruthú le cúnamh ó dhearadh soilse Barry O' Brien. Is trua nach bhfuil an fuinneamh céanna i gceist le dearadh cultacha Breege Fahy, dearadh coimhlinseanta nach gcuireann leis an léiriú.

Eascaíonn laigeachtaí an dráma seo as castacht an tsaothair ar a bhfuil se bunaithe. Is ionfáid leibhéal i *Cré na Cille*, é mar scigaithris ar phobal na Gaeltachta agus é ag caitheamh anuas ar íomhánná steireatiopacha den phobail sin. Tá eilimintí den scigaithris dirithe chomh maith ar fhíseanna lucht na hathbhceochana i leith na Gaeilge. Cruthaítar codarsnacht idir caint thíriúil Chaitríona is na carachtair eile agus bréaguaisleacht an Mháistir Mhóir, go háirthe agus Nóra ag lútáil leis agus ag iarraidh aithris a dhéanamh air mar chuid dá tóir an an *gcultúr*. Glúaiseann an saothar thar cheisteanna sainiúla, áfach agus téann i ngleic le ceisteanna uilíocha agus le téamaí nuaoiseacha i leith theip na teanga mar mheán caidrimh, bás na cinnteacha agus nójsean an *stasis*. Musclaíonn meán na drámaíochta féidearthachtaí shaibhre chun cíoradh a dhéanamh ar a leithéid de cheisteanna, ach fágtaí gan iniúchadh iad

sa léiriú seo, nach mó. Atmaisféar craptha a cruthaíonn an easpa gluaiseachta ar an stáitse mar thoradh. Ar an iomlán, áfach, cóiriú spreaghthach ar shaothar an Chadhnaigh atá sa léiriú seo.

Déantar ceap magaidh de dhearbhú Chaitríona Pháidín gur fearr an t-achrann ná an t-uaigneas in *Ualach an Uaignis*, ina bhfuil an foréigean mar bhun agus barr gaolta clainne agus pobail. Léiriódh an t-aistriúchán seo den dara dráma i dtríolóig McDonagh ar shála *Bainrion Aláinn an Lónáin*, a bhí ar cheann de bhuaicphointí Féile 2000. Maraon lena leagan den *Bainrion*, tá aistriúchán saibhir, tuisceanach déanta ag Mícheál Ó Conghailte ar shaothar McDonagh, léirithe an babhta seo ag Páraic Breathnach.

Osclaíonn an dráma i gcistin breactha le dealbha naofa, áit a gcasaimid le Colmán agus an tAthair Welsh agus iad tagtha ó shochraíd athair Cholmáin, ar scaoil Colmán piléar leis trí thimpiste, mar dhea. Musclaítar macallaí de Syngé agus an tAthair Welsh ag caoineadh a neamhthionchair i bparóiste a raibh dhá dhúnmharú ann ar na mallaibh. Cuirtear leis an neamhfeachtacht a bhraitheann sé i bhfianaise an teannais idir Colmán agus a dhearthair Veайлín. Is é an gaol idir an bheirt croílár an dhráma, a gcuid bruíonta ag criochnú suas mar iomarbhána foréigneacha ar bhonn rialta. Tugtar éachtaínt dùinn ar nádúr doghleigheasta an chaidrimh fhóréignigh seo agus Colmán agus Veайлín ag déanamh iarracht mianta deireanacha an Athar Welsh a leanúint, tar éis don sagart lámh a chur ina bhás féin mar gheall ar a éagumas an pobal a leasú. In ainneoin a gcuid iarrachtaí athmhuintearas a chothú trí admháil agus maithiúnas a thabhairt as na hoilc atá imeartha acu ar a chéile, briseann an dúchas eatarthu. Tagann an eachtra chun buaice leis an mbeirt ag iarraidh bob a

bhualadh ar a chéile trí ghaiscíocht a dhéanamh as na feallta agus gníomhartha mailiseacha atá déanta acu ar a chéile. Tagann greann rópánta an dhráma chun foirfeachta ag an bpointe seo; tá macallá láidre de *Pulp Fiction* agus ainghníomhartha brúidiúlacha na beirte mar fhoinsí scléipe.

Tá scigairthis agus greann rópánta an tsaothair curtha in iúl go sár-éifeachtach trí gheáitsí Phádraic Úi Thuairisc i bpáirt Veailín. Mar a chéile le Colmán mar a chuireann Tommy Ó Nia inár láthair é, cé gur chruthaigh caint thapaidh Úi Nia roinnt deacrachtá, go háirithe dóibh siúd sa lucht féachana ar bheagán Gaeilge. Tugann Linda Bhreathnach dea-léiriú ar ghaisciúlacht agus dánaíocht Girleen a bhfuil an leochaileacht ag a mbun. Cé go ndéanann an tAthair Welsh na carachatair eile a chomhlánú, ní éirionn le Micheál Tierney an dhoimhneacht atá de dhíth sa ról a chur in iúl.

Fágann dearadh seite Vanya Lambrecht neart spáis do na himris idir Veailín agus Colmán. Baineann dearadh soilse Michael Byrne usáid as dathanna a chuireann le macallá geamaireacha an dhráma, mar a dhéanann an *cooker* a phléascann le neart torainne agus splancacha, ag baint geit fiú astu siúd a bhfuil seanaithne acu ar an saothar.

Dírionn an léiriú seo ar dhuhghreann shaothar McDonagh, ag séanadh a ghnéithe tragóideacha, drochthuaracha. D'fhéadfai a mhaíomh gur dúshlán atá ann don tuairim go ndéanann saothair mar chinn McDonagh scáthánú ar réadúlacht shóisialta an tsaoil tuaithe in Éireann. Ar an taobh eile, d'fhéadfai breathnú air mar mhian an fiorgreann a léiriú i ndrámaíocht na Gaeilge. Níl aon amhras ach go n-éirionn go rí-mhaith le *Ulach an Uaignis* ar an mbonn seo. Dearbháin réimse agus caighdeán na drá-

maiochta ag Féile na bliana seo go mbeidh ról dearfach, tábhachtach le himirt aici i bhforbairt dhrámaíochta na Gaeilge amach anseo.

*Jeannine Woods lectures in English at NUI Galway.*

#### **GATES OF GOLD by Frank McGuinness**

The Gate Theatre, Dublin

25 April-8 June 2002; reviewed 3 May

BY HELEN MEANY

**TELL ME A STORY, THE DYING MAN**  
Gabriel urges his lover in the closing moments of Frank McGuinness's new play. A story to die by, to match all the stories he has lived by. Throughout this 95-minute play, this terminally ill actor (Alan Howard) has been trying out a succession of roles, testing lines and re-telling old tales, while his partner and former theatre director, Conrad (Richard Johnson) adopts the part of audience and critic. Inspired by the lives of Micheál MacLiammóir and Hilton Edwards, founders of the Gate Theatre in 1930, the play is a celebration of theatre, of the necessity of storytelling and role-playing.

There is little attempt at straight biography here; McGuinness assumes the audience's familiarity with the essential facts of the lives of Edwards and MacLiammóir, two Englishmen who ran their theatre and lived openly together in a long-term homosexual partnership, at a time in Ireland when such a thing could not be spoken of — or more accurately, could only exist if it were not spoken of. Ireland's most famous homosexuals before David Norris were granted a special status because they were artists; as a performer of the most flamboyant type, MacLiammóir transcended ordinary morality.

*Gates of Gold* doesn't dwell on the two

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men's nationality, on MacLiammóir's bogus Irishness, on Irish public life or the Gate's performance history. What's explored is the capacity of theatre to transcend gender, age and nationality, which McGuinness also links to the notion of

opening scene. Aspects of the two men's professional past are evoked through their reminiscences. Their bantering dialogue is deliberately arch and camp; while clearly aiming to be humorous, it is often too strained and heavy-handed to succeed.



**BEDTIME STORIES:** Richard Johnson and Alan Howard in Gates of Gold

homosexuality as a performance. Gabriel's impassioned quote from John of Gaunt's speech in *Richard II* reminds us of its paean to England, but it's clear that the only "sceptred isle" these two artists recognise is the sovereign realm of the imagination. "We are our own men," Conrad declares proudly towards the end.

Set in their elegantly designed apartment, the play focuses on Gabriel's preparation for death, assisted by a nurse, Alma (Donna Dent) hired by Conrad in the

What it does succeed in demonstrating, supported by Patrick Mason's sensitive direction, is the deep familiarity, the affection, frustration, resentment, jealousy, tenderness and playfulness played out in turn in this, as in any marriage.

There is lighter humour in Gabriel's scenes with Alma. A straight-talking, pragmatic young woman who views plays as "a waste of time and money," she is a foil and prompter to Gabriel. Enthroned on his bed in lilac kimono, wig,

and make-up, he is an androgynous chameleon, who enjoys regaling her with yarns from his various invented pasts, which she recognises as fabrication. For all her impatience with the fantasies of Gabriel and his highly unreliable sister Kassie (Rosaleen Linehan), Alma has her own internal histrionics which eventually erupt, in one of the least convincing episodes in the play.

The question of Gabriel and Conrad's legacy, both as a couple and as theatre practitioners, troubles both men and it is an enjoyable irony to watch this enacted in the auditorium that is in fact their legacy. Gabriel refers to "the child that might have been," while Conrad assures him that the theatre they established was their child. Yet later, in a mood of gloomy stoicism, Conrad tells Kassie that he has achieved nothing in the theatre and will leave nothing behind.

This theme is worried at by McGuinness in a more literal way through the sketchily developed, unconvincing character of Kassie's son Ryan (James Kennedy), a petulant young man, to whom Conrad was attracted and with whom he may have had an affair. That both men regard Ryan as a surrogate son is further complicated by the faint suggestion that Ryan could be Conrad's actual son, as he had a sexual relationship in the past with Kassie — and indeed with her husband. This introduces further layers of ambiguity, thickening the play's web of allusions to lies told through necessity or love, to the truth embodied in artifice and the kernel of revelation to be found in performance.

McGuinness didn't need this unsuccessful subplot to highlight these themes: the superb performances from Rosaleen Linehan, Richard Johnson, and above all, Alan Howard were ample demonstrations of the defiantly transient art of theatre.

## **GHOSTS By Henrik Ibsen, adapted by Thomas Kilroy**

Brown Penny Theatre Company

On tour; reviewed at the Civic Theatre,

Tallaght, on 14 May 2002

BY PATRICK BURLEIGH

IBSEN'S *GHOSTS* CAUSED A FURIOUS OUTCRY in Germany and Scandinavia when it was first published in 1881. The play challenged the stalwart institutions of marriage, the church, patrimony and the role of women in an orthodox Christian society. Even after the huge successes of *The Pillars of Society* and *A Doll's House*, bookstores refused to carry the play and theatres rejected it for years. However, Thomas Kilroy's problematic adaptation of *Ghosts*, performed by Cork's Brown Penny, has provoked little more than a peep among the Irish public.

Kilroy's adaptation is set in mid-1980s rural Catholic Ireland. A young painter, Oliver, has returned home after living a depraved bohemian artist's life in Paris. While abroad he was diagnosed as HIV-positive. The play begins after Oliver has returned to live with his mother, the widow Mrs. Aylward, and their servant-girl, Regina. The play is set on the eve of the opening of a centre for women and children named for Mr. Aylward, and it is this unseen character who is the true focus of the play. The characters are haunted by his legacy. As Michael Meyer has written, Ibsen's play is about "the devitalising effect of inherited convention," or, as Mrs. Aylward puts it, how "the sins of the father are visited upon the children." The parish priest, Father Manning, presides over the estate and represents conservative Catholic Ireland, while Oliver represents the liberal, free-thinking values that, for Father Manning, will be the country's ruin.

The play is essentially a series of con-

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**HAUNTED BY THE PAST:** Ghosts

fessions from one character to another, an exodus of skeletons from closets. Publicly, Mr. Aylward was a civic leader and upstanding churchgoer, as evidenced by the founding of the centre in his name. Yet as the play unfolds we learn that privately Mr. Aylward was a lascivious, unfaithful drunk who died of congenital syphilis. (In Ibsen's play, the son too has contracted syphilis, but here the more socially relevant AIDS has been visited upon Oliver.) From the outset the characters are bent on stripping away the public side not only of Mr. Aylward, but also of themselves and every one around them.

The tone of tearing down the institutional facades that mask our daily lives is set from the very beginning, and ends with the literal burning down of the newly constructed Aylward Centre. The problem

is, however, that the audience never gets to see what is being torn down, only what is underneath. Unlike *Public* and *Private* Gar in Brian Friel's *Philadelphia Here I Come*, there is no counterpoint to the intensely private drama here. Thus the characters undergo extraordinary catharsis, but the audience never entirely understands why, for there has been little change of tone or behaviour since the beginning of the play. As in so many Irish dramas, the audience must simply take the writer's word for it.

The acting does not add dimension to Kilroy's adaptation. Provincial Roman Catholic priests may not be reputed as the most dynamic people, but Karl O'Neill's portrayal of Father Manning is physically stiff and vocally monotonous. Ann O'Neill also seems to have settled on a confused, neurotic tone from which she rarely deviates.

ates. Gary Murphy's Oliver is the driving force of the play and at times succeeds in making the audience share the torment of living with a fatal disease. His intransigent restlessness and distracted melancholy is often unnerving. However, like his fellow actors, Murphy waivers little from that particular pitch. The saving grace of the play is Julie Sharkey, who, in the more minor role of Regina, manages to demonstrate a range and energy in the final scene that is unrivalled in the rest of the play. Nevertheless, she and Murphy lack the intense sexual chemistry that Regina and Oliver are intended to have.

Cliff Dolliver's drab set of depressed oranges and browns contributes to the sense of the play existing on one plane only. Though Kilroy describes the set as "heavy furniture and wallpaper, stolid, moneyed taste," with its paint-on design and single decrepit loveseat, Brown Penny's set resembles that of a hasty school production. In this stagnant environment, the actors pose and posture under Tim Murphy's direction with little fluidity or grace, often with their backs to the audience at key dramatic opportunities, or talking across the stage to each other in intimate moments. It is a stiff, one-dimensional production.

In 2002 Kilroy's *Ghosts* fails to pose the challenge to orthodox ways of thinking that Ibsen's play once did, or that it may have even in its first run at the Peacock Theatre in 1989. While there is still undoubtedly tension between old and new Ireland, that central dramatic conflict is mostly lost on today's postmodern Irish audience. Ireland in 2002 is not hegemonically Catholic — or hegemonically anything, really, anymore — and the ideas that made Ibsen's play so controversial in 19th-century Scandinavia, even with Kil-

roy's contemporary adaptations, seem quaintly anachronistic in today's theatre.

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

### **THE HISTORY OF THE TROUBLES (ACCORDIN' TO MY DA)**

**by Martin Lynch, with additional material by Conor Grimes and Alan McKee**

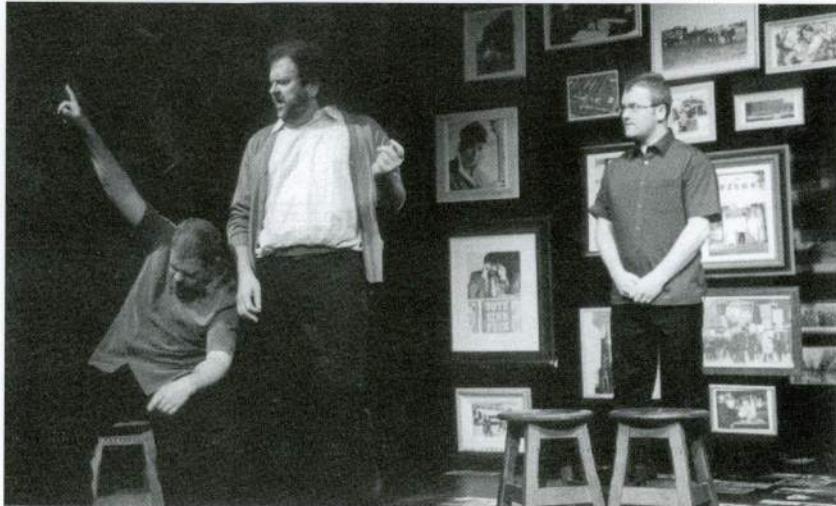
The Northern Bank Building, Belfast

2-19 May, 2002; reviewed 8 May

**BY UNA KEALY**

*THE HISTORY OF THE TROUBLES (ACCORDIN' to my Da)* was one of the high points of this year's Cathedral Quarter Arts Festival. Lynch made no attempt to be "politically correct" in terms of the play's point of view: it emanated from a Catholic, West Belfast, middle-aged man, and was one-sided in its gender and political perspectives. But Lynch used this to his advantage, herding up all of Northern Ireland's sacred cows and milking them for all they were worth. The writing and performances were funny and entertaining, and the production was excellently designed and directed. Ivan Little gave a strong performance as the main character, Gerry, and Conor Grimes and Alan McKee, playing a wide array of other characters, captivated the audience with their energy and comic precision.

This "history" is the story of Gerry's route through the Troubles. A fictitious contemporary of Lynch, Gerry is 18 in 1969, and into the Rolling Stones and soul music. Lynch's script suggested a soundtrack of popular songs of the time, but director Karl Wallace limited the music to short loud excerpts. This gave new resonance to songs that have become clichéd anthems of their era; the Rolling Stones'



**CAN'T GET NO SATISFACTION:** The History of the Troubles...

"Satisfaction" suggesting aggressive and frustrated pent-up political rather than sexual energy, and "Sittin' on the Dock of the Bay" providing an ironic comment on the lack of tranquillity in Northern Ireland during the '70s and '80s. Both in the programme and the play Lynch suggests that the political situation in Northern Ireland from '69 to '71 was redeemable, but that there was no way back after the introduction of internment and the events of Bloody Sunday. Although he makes serious points, Lynch takes a light-hearted route through his history, and Grimes and McKee get great comic mileage out of an impressive number of archetypal/stereotypical characters. After a bout of antics that make them look like Laurel and Hardy on barricade duty, Gerry and his neighbour decide to join the IRA. This involves a visit to The Happy Flat, one of many sheebeens felicitously spawned by

the Troubles, but in true slapstick style they, along with the local oddball and darts fanatic Fireball, get caught up in a raid and end up imprisoned in Long Kesh for several years.

When they get out, life is hard: the violence and sectarianism of the Troubles affects every aspect of Gerry's life and begins to wear him down. Little sensitively portrayed Lynch's idea that, if an individual is not free to express his frustration, this suppressed anger and emotion will turn inwards and wreak havoc upon his body and mind. Gerry opts out of vigilantism, but by doing so becomes merely a spectator on life, powerless to do anything but stay at home and watch its horrors on TV. As the Troubles intensify, so does Gerry's drinking and aggression, but Lynch, always allowing for comic relief, uses Gerry's haemorrhoids as a humorous barometer of civic disorder: the more soci-

ety breaks down, the more painful Gerry's backside becomes.

Gerry's only true source of pride and happiness are his children: his daughter gets married and his son gets into Queen's University. Between them they symbolise the future — new life and new thinking — but Gerry's good fortune is short-lived, and tragedy strikes. When Gerry finally seeks out counselling to help him deal with his feelings about the misfortunes he and his province have encountered, he discovers everyone he knows in the queue: this is Lynch's amusing, but pointed, way of suggesting that, for whatever motives, his community are attempting to come to terms with what has happened and heal themselves. The play ends with the birth of Gerry's grandson, the next, blank page of Northern Ireland's story. Though this was a convenient ending, it also plants the seed that hope, optimism, and a sense of family could be a powerful political position in present day Northern Irish politics.

David Craig's set consisted of photographs of Northern Ireland's history over the past 30 years. The majority of the photographs were framed and attached to vertical wires, layered upstage to give a three dimensional depth and structure to the stage, with additional images pasted to the floor like a carpet. The photos ranged from those of Van Morrison to Margaret Thatcher "and her boyfriend" Garrett Fitzgerald, and gave a flavour of the popular and political cultural experience of living in Northern Ireland since 1969. Craig's set design encapsulated Lynch's dramaturgical design: both demonstrated how, although Northern Ireland's troubled past is still present in memory, it is nonetheless fading like the photographs themselves. Amy Smith's lighting design was subtle, but compli-

mented the writing and direction and, when necessary, effectively focused the audience's attention through a tightening of lights on characters when they were trapped or in trouble.

The night that I attended the production, the audience received it warmly; the Festival extended the run for a week due to public demand. After the performance, the audience stayed to mill about the stage looking at the photos as though they were a gallery exhibition, and according to the front of house staff this happened every night. The audience moved around and through the set as though the hands-on, democratic legacy of Lynch's work in community drama had somehow infused itself into the upper-middle-class audience in the Northern Bank building. It was the perfect play for the Festival, the venue and the audience: political without being too confrontational, carrying serious issues without being bogged down by their weight, and written, directed and performed with wit and finesse.

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*Una Kealy is studying for a PhD in drama at the University of Ulster.*

**LADY CHILL, LADY WAD, LADY LURVE,  
LADY GOD** by Kay Adshead

Activate Youth Theatre  
The Granary Theatre, Cork  
4-6 April 2002; reviewed 6 April  
BY THOMAS CONWAY

POLITICS AS SUBJECT MATTER BY ALL MEANS, but aim to politicise an audience at your peril, on these islands at any rate (see *itm* 10 on Hanoch Levin's *Murder*). To galvanise an audience into a body with one political viewpoint, while, in Gavin Kostick's words, leaving "space for the audience to have its own intellectual and emotional response," is a juggling trick

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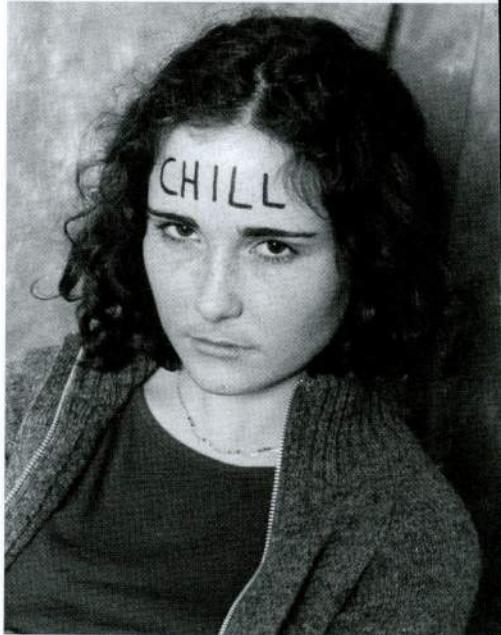
that seems bound for failure. The response, so often, is audience resentment. This could be why Brecht's work is so rarely staged, and why writers who actively engage with his legacy remain little known. Given these stakes, what form might commitment in the theatre credibly take?

For an answer we would do well refer to the work of Kay Adshead, who has been putting invisible people on our mental maps since 1987, and blazed into this reviewer's consciousness with *The Bogus Woman* (Edinburgh Fringe and The Bush Theatre London, 2000/2001), an angry, scrupulous account of the asylum system in the UK. It was most impressive — as is *Lady Chill*, *Lady Wad*, *Lady Lurve*, *Lady God* — for ostensibly un-Brechtian qualities: an economical, ringing verse every bit equal to the violence it describes, and a mixing of genres and registers all the while in that verse.

*Lady Chill*, *Lady Wad*, *Lady Lurve*, *Lady God* is part of the BT/International Connections programme, run by the Royal National Theatre (RNT) in London, in which a number of leading playwrights are commissioned to write plays for young people; youth theatres choose one of the plays to produce, are adjudicated, and the chosen productions are then performed at the RNT. *Lady Chill*.... is not fugitive agit-prop looking for a home in youth theatre. Or not exactly. As have other commissions, notably Gina Moxley's *Dog House*, the play has a stake in the direction society takes. Does it co-opt the youth actor to that end? To the degree it makes space for the youth actor to feel and think, no.

*Lady Chill*.... deals with girl-gangs, specifically with the bonding of the four Ladies — "We're looking for respect" — in an environment where boy-gangs have

intimidated for so long. The mixing of genres is reckless, as well it might for a youth clientele. We have the public face of youth culture — hip-hop, the fashion catwalk, MTV, Spike Lee-esque 'hood posturings and drug-taking rituals — set against domestic, realist scenes. The split in each



**GIRL POWER:** Lady Chill...

of the lead character's names — Lady Chill/Carly, Lady Wad/Emma, Lady Lurve/Julie, Lady God/Faith — follows through the undercutting of youth culture with realism. If we must talk politics, it is the undercutting of the image by which girl-gangs know themselves with a bigger picture by which they might know themselves better.

And if we must talk Brecht we should

refer to the *Lehrstücke*, then judge the youth actor for what they've learned above some standard of excellence. Adshead challenges the youth actor to face up to the writing and defies her/him not to learn in the process. It is the strength of Geraldine O'Neill's direction for Activate Youth Theatre that she makes room for the challenge to take place. The Pussy Sirens, groupies for the boy-gang in opposition to the four "Ladies", tantalise with their rapping — "Clap your hands while we shimmy shimmy shimmy, while the boys in the crowd go gimme gimme gimme" — Fiona Hegarty, Julie O'Leary, and Laura Burke ironise it deliciously. The boy gang out-hip-hops Eminem, the boy actors having to represent rape once they dare threaten rape in their lyrics. When Lady Lurve is told that Lady God is unconscious after shooting up, she doesn't panic, she laughs, and the challenge to laugh points to a politics similar to what Brecht would have *Baal* serve: represent the antisocial at the very least to know it.

The four Ladies drive the play, the actors having to find an unforced public pose, then investigate the distance to it by a commitment to the realist scenes. Julie (Marie-Therese Quirke) gives up her child to its likely father in a scene rewriting Bond's *Saved*. Emma (Clare McCarthy) must acknowledge a baglady as her grandaunt. Carly (Cheryl Murphy) turns her back on competitive swimming. Faith (Christina Coniry) asks her probable mother Piety if she loves her, and met with silence, immediately shoots up. The girl-gang more than compensates these losses, and becomes a positive identity. The production opts for a Cork dialect, the writing for a general, broadly English, urban location; with references to canals and condom factories the cast as a whole seem hesitant to acknowledge this as a representation of

their home city, but a commendable balance between giving them support and responsibility is struck by the professional crew.

The death of one of the gang at the close sees the surviving 'hood members conclude not its tragedy but its needlessness, and cast and audience participating in this "tale of sisterhood" are forced to examine "sisterhood" in broader, more galvanising terms than the girl-gang affords. Co-opted or confronted? For my money, confronted, with Adshead's play proving seriously fun — and Activate's production one of which the RNT, if there is justice, will take note.

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*Thomas Conway is a freelance director currently working with Corcadorca.*

#### **LEAVING** by Philip Osment

Quare Hawks Theatre Company,  
in association with  
the Garage Theatre Monaghan

On tour; reviewed on 11th May 2002 at  
the Riverside Theatre, Coleraine

BY UNA KEALY

*LEAVING* TELLS THE STORY OF A COUNTY Monaghan family that suffers the terrible impact of suicide. The structure of the play is non-linear: after a brief duologue between Paddy (Brendan Laird) and Una (Deirdre Monaghan), in which they reveal that one of their two sons is dead, the actions flashes back to the previous Christmas holidays. Noel (O'Donoghue), Paddy and Una's youngest son, has arrived home from college in Dublin and his anguished existentialism seems in stark contrast to the machismo of his brother Sean (Conan Sweeny). While Noel is interested in music and literature, Sean's life revolves around working, drinking, shagging, and brawling. Act One explores

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the family dynamic, and the play of relationships suggests that it is Noel who was the subject of Paddy and Una's opening duologue. However, prior to the interval this illusion is broken when Paddy informs Una that Sean has hung himself in the chicken shed. Act Two deals with the damaging effect that Sean's suicide has upon his fiancée and family. The writing and performance of this second act becomes much more poetic and symbolic with Sean's character reappearing to haunt the stage and his family. The play's ends as each character, including Sean's

somewhat forced and the characters more as vehicles for the scenarios than fully rounded characters. Noel is set up as a "red herring" victim, and Osment emphasises the younger brother's sexual anxieties and hints at possible educational difficulties to increase the audience's sense of shock and disbelief that, of the brothers, it was Sean who was in fact suffering a deeper and more terrible torment. However true-to-life this shock may be, the concentration on Noel in Act One left one feeling that the suicide and Noel's response to it were somewhat out of char-



**TROUBLED BROTHERS:** Sweeny and O'Donoghue in *Leaving*

ghost, finds release from the guilt, bitterness, anger and sorrow that the act of suicide has left in its wake.

The amount of research that went into *Leaving* is tangible, though the down-side of this is that the writing comes across, at times, as slightly "worthy," the story

acter, a problem that could have been resolved with more elaboration of Sean's unbalanced mental and emotional state during that first act.

Director Liam Halligan, set designer Marcus Costello, and composer Denis Clohessy worked together to complement

Osment's non-linear structure and poetic dialogue. The atmosphere of the play was enhanced by Clohessy's poignant score, filled with the lonely resonance of an acoustic guitar. Costello used video and projected images, both moving and still, to convey the sense of isolation, bleakness and the occasional flashes of beauty in the rural landscape of County Monaghan. The dominant image used was that of a single oak in monochrome: Beckettian in its winter dress, stark and naked, the image reflected the family's joyless struggle through the dark days leading up to and following Sean's death. However, despite the bleakness of the images, Costello cleverly managed to suggest an ambiguous bleak beauty, reminiscent of Patrick Kavanagh's images of Monaghan's frost-hard but somehow loveable stony grey soil. As the play concluded, the image of the bare tree gave way to one of it in full summer colour, symbolising the healing of the family's guilt over Sean's death. The production's final image was one of hope as a shower of red petals covered the stage with a vibrant colour that counteracted the grey tones that had up to that point dominated the stage.

Costello's simple set consisted of a circle of sand enclosing a table and four chairs, lit predominantly with a pale white/grey light; the actors used the space outside the sand circle to sit while not performing. The cast worked well together, although they sometimes seemed to struggle with the shift from prose to poetic dialogue. Conan Sweeny gave a strong performance capturing a powerful energy, anger, and frustration which he allowed to dissipate as his character's soul found its release in Act Two.

In this collaboration Osment, Quare Hawks, and the Garage Theatre aimed to create a production that was involving

and challenging. In some ways they may have tried too hard, resulting in the production that seemed, at times, overly didactic, with reportage, direct address, and songs jarring with the script's poetic symbolism. There were, however, memorable moments of thought-provoking theatre, and it is obvious that Quare Hawks is working hard and taking risks to produce new and interesting theatre that resonates with their audiences.

#### **LOST SONG by Lisa Tierney-Keogh**

Draiocht Studio, Blanchardstown

30 April-11 May 2002; reviewed 10 May

BY BELINDA MCKEON

WHEN A YOUNG FEMALE PLAYWRIGHT storms the stage with rage and venom, pitting characters against one another physically and psychologically, within spitting distance of her audience, comparisons to the searing voice of Sarah Kane ask to be made. Lisa Tierney-Keogh's second play certainly makes such a demand, blasting forth a story of loss and revenge which has actors Ginevra Benedetti and Una Kavanagh screaming and kicking their way through one relentless hour of theatre. Crazed with grief at the impending death of her boyfriend Ben, Jude (Benedetti) has kidnapped Lee (Kavanagh), Ben's best friend and the driver in the car crash in which he suffered mortal injuries. Jude holds Lee as a bound and gagged prisoner in a warehouse, as Ben's last hours on life support tick past.

In Jude, the playwright has produced a credible study of the irrational extremes to which even the blandest and most respectable of individuals can be driven by circumstance; in her victim, Lee, a glimpse of tortuous self-loathing; and in the onstage violence (skilfully choreographed by director Louise Drumm), an

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explosion of psychopathic hatred. This is Kane territory, no doubt, but here the comparisons end, for better and for worse. The play may ride on the sheer kinetic energy of Jude's anger, but arguably only because there is nothing else upon which to establish itself; for a long time, as the characters hurl back and forth the same accusations and demands in a repetitive frenzy, *Lost Song* seems grounded by shallow plotting,

is, and why it is to be avoided.

Combined with Marie Tierney's suitably grim set design — the squalid, inhuman interior of the warehouse, its tiny, filthy window opening onto a world we cannot see — the spectacle of these two despairing characters staring one another down, locked together in the aftermath of catastrophe nods more than once in a Beckettian direction. But the stark-



**FACING HER ACCUSER:** Una Kavanagh in *Lost Song*

and throughout, a tendency towards unimaginative expression grates on the nerves. Tierney-Keogh's vision is bold, and her characters well-drawn, but too often she writes as if she lacks a conception of what dramatic or linguistic cliché

ness of their predicament is marred by a weakness for melodramatic exclamations; Tierney-Keogh's characters are most affecting when they are allowed to vent their grief openly, austere, rather than straining towards hackneyed

metaphors of darkness and silence.

The idea for *Lost Song* came in two parts, Tierney-Keogh writes in a programme note; what was originally a fictional situation was intruded upon by real-life events which propelled the play to completion. The juxtaposition of the fabricated and the factual, the imagined and the real is always a difficult trick to master, and this young writer is still moving towards the desired coherence. As the piece stands, this dualism is largely unresolved; the problem being that, in the light of the characters' almost metaphysical meditations on suffering and fury, on love and friendship, moments of realistic description jut out like unhammered nails. The story of the party at which Ben and Jude first met is vivid, and carefully composed, ticking off all the routine features of a wild student night, but it lacks life beyond those trusty images, so that what is intended as comedy falls flat.

However, the force which drives this play is not anger, or grief, or mindless violence; it is not senselessness or despair, or the depravity of human life. And in this it stands out as an interesting departure from the Kane genre of stage brutality; Tierney-Keogh has created an existential conundrum of her own, and, for all its flaws, *Lost Song* pursues it with intelligence, consistence, and, finally, poignancy. Jude hurts Lee because she wants her to know how her own pain feels; Lee tells her side to try and make Jude understand her agony. Neither of their efforts can fully succeed. This playwright's song is the painful subjectivity of human experience, the impossibility of sharing pain, or of lifting it away from another; by moving out of their grasp, into a coma, Ben has made both characters unbearably conscious of how vast is the chasm between friends, between lovers. "Every bit of suffering I

have is inside me, and you can't reach it," says Lee. And, as predictable as may be the revelation, in the closing lines, of Jude's pregnancy, yet it represents a perfect resolution of the play's central theme, and the signal for an end to the siege; for people grow with, and within, one another, and need human closeness for their survival, despite the great spaces that gape between minds.

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*Belinda McKeon is a freelance journalist and critic, currently completing an M.Litt thesis in philosophy.*

#### **LOVERS AT VERSAILLES**

**by Bernard Farrell**

The Abbey Theatre

1 Mar.-4 May 2002; reviewed 6 March

**BY SUSAN CONLEY**

Poor Annabelle Sullivan: the drab older daughter of Stephen and Clarabelle Sullivan, sister to the vivacious and sparky Isobel, and sister-in-law to the laddish Tony, is quite obviously heading into the depths of dementia. Her father's death from a tumble into the basement of the family shop was the direct result of Alzheimer's disease, and it is quite clear that Anna is going down the same dark road.

At least, that's the opinion of her overbearing battleaxe of a mother, and battleaxe-in-training sister. Didn't they know what was best for her? Hadn't they orchestrated her relationship with David, local carpenter and all-around regular chap — and hadn't they both contributed to the sabotage of Anna's wedding when it became glaringly apparent that the (at the time) 30-year-old was about to escape the nest of co-dependent vipers that masquerades as the Sullivan family? And would the potentially-demented, dried-up, dependable spinster of (now) 40 dare

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leave said vipers behind in a bid to grasp what she had squandered all those years ago, when David returns from his successful life in Finland to try to steal her away once more?

Among the many melodramatic and farcical events that Bernard Farrell's slice-of-bourgeois-life asks the audience members to take on board, perhaps the most confusing, galling, and outrageous element is Anna's character. As our protagonist — she is, after all, the keeper of the structure of the text, the conduit through which the memories of the Sullivans unfold in flashback — it was she with whom we are asked and intended to identify, to sympathise with, and to cheer for. As played by the young and lovely Tina Kelleher, we are also asked to believe that

in 2002, in modern-day Dublin, a woman in the prime of her life would actually stomach not only the behaviour of her loathsome relations, but allow them to continue to bully, patronise, and mock her shamelessly. We are asked to believe that this is so — and we are also asked to find this funny.

Only people deep in the mire of denial could find this atrocious family remotely amusing; anyone with a sliver of awareness would have to be outraged by the obvious demonisation of the female figures in this seemingly anodyne "domestic comedy." Add to Annabelle's ills the fact that she is not a true woman as denoted by Farrell — she is an honorary male, as voiceless and infantilised as are her father Stephen and her brother-in-law Tony. As a



**THE COFFIN-MAKER NEXT DOOR:** Barnes and Brennan in *Lovers at Versailles*

female castrata, she is even deprived of the right to penis envy — unlike her mother and sister, each as superb an example of negative animus as any Jungian would hope to see. Anna has absolutely no agency whatsoever, and when she does manage to get up the welly to put on her coat and walk out the door at the end of the play, it is only through the interference of Harriet, her father's former mistress, in an utterly laughable and absurd intervention. Her life entirely arranged by outside forces, loving and unloving, one has absolutely, positively no confidence that she won't make a bollocks of her new life in Finland.

The only character who comes out smelling like a rose is Stephen himself, lovable middle-aged, failing aul' Stephen, whose love for his daughter is his only saving grace, and really the only reason that we like him — it is far too much work for us to be the only people pulling for the main character. He is full of jokes, and is slightly doddery and utterly passive, engendering fondness in Anna and scorn in his wife and youngest daughter. Anna's fondness for him extends to her willing belief — unless she really is as stupid as the play insists she is — that the endless, clandestine stream of blue envelopes that cross the countertop of his shop are the result of a platonic relationship with an aged widow... when in fact they are the evidence that Stephen is conducting an extramarital affair with the aforementioned Harriet. Adultery, it seems, is an issue Farrell is willing to whitewash, and hasn't he set up our sympathy for Stephen's deceptive act by creating such an unsympathetic wife? This man — blustering, dotty and unreliable — is the only one to whom Anna can turn, emotionally blackmailed by Clara on the morning of her wedding, he whom she begs for help

in deciding whether to go through with it or not, and he who, in his spastic impotence, commits the deepest betrayal: for despite all his love and affection, his own immaturity makes it impossible for him to direct her down the path to adulthood, damning her to suffocate in the bosom of her kin.

The only saving grace of the debacle — directed by Mark Lambert with uneven pacing and superficial characterizations — was Joe Vanek's set, which beautifully incorporated the Sullivan's fully functional shop into the family home gracefully and ingeniously; the only thrilling moment of the evening came when the light behind the scrim revealed the shop in all its minutely observed glory.

Utterly unbelievable, appallingly trite, and shockingly smug, *Lovers at Versailles* fulfilled one service to the theatre-going community: it provided the audience with such a outrageous bunch of maladjusted freaks that one couldn't help but go home feeling better about oneself.

#### **MACBETH by William Shakespeare**

Second Age Theatre Company  
On tour; reviewed 28th February at the  
Olympia Theatre, Dublin

BY NICK COSTELLO

LONGER AGO THAN I CARE TO REMEMBER, I did the Leaving Cert. One of the few redeeming features of our curriculum was that the Shakespeare text for that year was *Macbeth*. Here was something you could get your teeth into, something with the lot: sexual intrigue, murder, deception, tyranny, and a few mad witches thrown in for good measure. Even better, it wasn't set in some poker-hole English court: these were wild Scots with more than a passing resemblance (in my imagination at least) to the early Irish chieftains. I read *Macbeth* as



**WHEN SHALL WE FIVE MEET AGAIN?** Macbeth

a sort of sexually voracious Cúchulainn — or perhaps the tragically human Boromir in *The Lord of The Rings*, de rigueur 18-year-old boy reading back then.

That year we even went to a RSC production of *Macbeth* in Stratford, a trip which featured the predictable trips to the Tudor McDonalds; incidents with hotel stairs and a bottle of vodka; and attempts to meet up with some girls from Raheny, inappropriately billeted in a place called "Virginia Lodge." Mostly though, there was the production. Miles though we seemed from the stage, even the most cynical among us was riveted, particularly as Sinéad Cusack played Lady Macbeth with intense power and charisma. The experi-

ence stayed with us for weeks afterward, and, crucially, kept the play clear in our heads for the June exams.

Even these few years later, it is clear to me that the production stayed with us because of the craft and care involved in making it. It was well cast, well directed, well played, and well designed. The story was told in a straightforward manner and was elevated by some particularly fine performances. The company did not describe itself as gearing productions towards younger people, though there was a high proportion of younger people there. I offer these points to create a contrast with the recent Second Age

production of *Macbeth*, which eschewed these good principles and as a result created an uneven, mawkish, and confused piece of theatre.

The Olympia Theatre was close to full on the last night of this run, largely with school groups and a smattering of bemused and finally laughing-out-loud adults. Alan Stanford's production was coarse and overfussed, with an excessive use of entrances and exits that make the stage look like a comedy revue half the time; there was a distinct Jeeves and Wooster, "What Ho" quality. Like many school productions, this one went out of its way to physically illustrate the sexual jokes of the Porter's speech whenever possible, a mechanism which leavens the play as a whole and introduces a necessary buffoon, but in this particular scheme seems calculated to keep the rugger buggers in the back rows happy.

The set, by Ciara O'Donnell, was a bare floor with a lit back wall and a raked ramp down the centre of the stage towards the audience. It was a space which gave nothing to and said nothing about the action. Paul O'Neill's lighting design used a palette of subtle tones that were very badly served by the erratic lighting operation; several cues appeared to be completely missed – unacceptable for a play that is so much about light and darkness. Léonore McDonagh's silver and black padded tunics coats and crowns for male costumes looked like they might have come from *Lost in Space* and the women's simple dresses simply seemed out of place. Trevor Knight supplied the overwhelming, West-End-style musical accompaniment.

Casting and performance were uneven. Des Braiden was a believeable and terrible victim as Duncan, and

David O'Meara provided a disturbingly sexy Banquo. Robert Price's Macbeth was energetic, in a stadium rock concert sort of way, but was no more menacing than someone trying to steal your lunch money. Niamh Linehan's Lady Macbeth was more confused than scheming, and we just didn't care by the time she really turns on the fireworks with her imaginary bloodstain. Brendan Laird's Macduff was a very secondary presence on stage.

The ultimate test for a piece produced for schools, I suppose, is how the schools reacted. Things started to go wrong shortly after the interval on the night I attended: kids text-messaged each other across the auditorium and the actors started to lose focus (in fairness they were in the home straight). Things turned into horseplay and laugh-out-loud hilarity when we were confronted with the spectacle of an embarrassed cast moving a symbolically runic Birnam wood to Dunsinane in the manner of a Michael Jackson video circa 1988.

The biggest problem with this *Macbeth* was that it smacked of condescension. This is a powerful play, and its presence on the curriculum for the Leaving Certificate is a compelling reason to produce it at an appropriate point in the academic year. But there is no reason to assume that 18-year-olds will not "get" a fully-fledged, uncompromising production with high artistic standards. It would give them the opportunity to respond to a high-quality living text for their exams, and possibly even encourage them to go to the theatre in their adult lives. This is not something that was achieved by this production.

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*Nick Costello is a freelance writer.*

# opinions & reviews

**McCOOL XXL by Paul Boyd**

Big Telly Theatre Company in association  
with the Lyric Theatre, Belfast  
On tour; reviewed 22nd March 2002  
at the Lyric BY PAUL DEVLIN

HOW DO YOU ATTRACT YOUNGER audiences into the theatre? Do you update the popular legend of Finn McCool by turning it into a contemporary musical, throw in some magic, and choreograph the whole thing like an S-Club 7 video? If you're Belfast's Lyric Theatre, and you're depending on Big Telly Theatre Company to plant those younger bums on seats for you, then the answer is yes, that's exactly what you do. On the night I saw *McCool XXL*, however, there was barely a handful of people, young or otherwise, in the audience.

Such a poor attendance was perhaps all the more disappointing because of the scale and ambition of this project. With an original script and musical score from Paul Boyd, theatrical illusions designed by Paul McEneaney, film footage shot by Mark Hill, and an impressive sound design provided by Patrick Dalgety, the entire event had a sense of grandness, imaginative intent, and possibility. The realisation of this interesting concept on stage was however and regrettably, a flawed and bland theatrical experience.

The problems with this production lay to a large extent in Boyd's weak, unimaginative, and reductionist retelling of the original myth. Boyd's attempt to abridge the mythology diluted the original legend to such an extent that any trace of the mythic disappeared beneath the drama's accelerated, formulaic, episodic format. The play suffered badly from a lack of any genuine characterisation and drew too heavily on the stock types of popular musical theatre – evil Fagan-like villains,

innocent starry-eyed lovers, and sassy blues-singing nymphs. This approach — clichéd rather than archetypal — left Boyd's characters struggling within the narrow confines of two dimensions and never fully engaged the audience's empathy or interest.

Structurally Boyd's play followed a predictable pattern. Ensemble songs drove the narrative, introductory numbers signalled the arrival of someone new, while individual or duet-based ballads allowed for at least some exposition of character. The play's patchy, piecemeal version of the life of McCool — in which Finn, abandoned at birth, raised by two old hags, emerges as the country's leading sportsman/warrior, is tempted by fame, but eventually takes his rightful seat as leader of the Fianna — undermined the drama's central moral dilemma. Finn's rejection of fame and glory in favour of assuming the responsibility of leadership was never truly fleshed out. In Boyd's summarised version Finn's indecisiveness is limited to a couple of songs that fail to create any believable feeling of internal struggle. Without this narrative core, the production taken as a whole had the effect being little more than an assembly of disparate elements — songs, dance, special effects — that didn't gel together in a unified process of storytelling.

Zoë Seaton's direction of Boyd's script was largely confident and precise. However, at those points in the production where non-actor-driven stagecraft came into play (in moments reminiscent of earlier theatrical trickery offered by companies such as *Shibboleth*) it had a tendency to become somewhat mistimed. In particular, Seaton's direction of a puppet-based scene, where Finn dives into a lake to catch a giant fish, was miscalculated. Although Seaton was careful to establish

tenuous links between such interludes and the ongoing action, the sheer length of an episode like this one placed it outside the framework of the actual story being told; it felt as if it was presented more for its own sake than as a means of extending and elaborating upon the central narrative. An exception was Seaton's extremely well-managed direction of a clever sequence towards the end of the play. By using a large film screen hung above and over a large banquet table, in a scene in which McCool claims his place at the head of the Fianna, and by projecting footage of the actors in various roles arriving at the banquet, Seaton was able to almost double the size of her cast onstage, in a very entertaining manner. Here Seaton successfully orchestrated spectacle that advanced the story and extended the physical restrictions of her small cast in an

interesting and effective way.

In spite of the numerous problems with this production, the cast of *McCool XXL* was consistently strong. Brenda Brooks and Rachel Tucker emerged as the troupe's most powerful singers, while Mary McNally's petite physique belied the strength and vigour of her dance capabilities. John Ryan relished the opportunity to play a simplistic villain and suitably hammed it up as much and as often as he could. Kevin Hynes, though a talented all-rounder, in his role as Finn McCool was less assured and struggled to make a convincing transformation from Finn the boy to Finn the legendary figure of Irish folklore.

While I admire the ambitions of those who would salvage the ancient tales of Ireland from academic obscurity, the repackaging of these myths in user-friendly, infe-



PETER NASH

#### MYTHOLOGY ROCKS! *McCool XXL*

# opinions & overviews

rior West End cellophane, for my money smacks of deceit. It feels like Ribenna masquerading as wine, and suggests younger theatregoers don't have the capability to engage with complex situations and characters. This is a mistake. Younger audiences don't differ from older audiences in their desire for good storytelling. Both "target" groups hope for theatre that will speak to them and will be relevant to their lives. By reducing the story of Finn to the simplest form of moral fable, *McCool XXL* lacked any sense of the heroic, of the legendary, of Irishness. Strange, because, in the words of the production's signature tune, "That's how he became mythology!"

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Paul Devlin is a Belfast-based writer.

## MISTERMAN by Enda Walsh and PORTIA COUGHLAN by Marina Carr

The Irish Arts Centre

and Todo con Nada, New York City

*Misterman* reviewed 23 January 2002

and *Portia Coughlan* reviewed 7 April

BY JACK BYER

NEW YORK-BASED PRODUCTIONS OF young Irish writers are rare, and thus the off-Broadway premieres of Enda Walsh's *Misterman* and Marina Carr's *Portia Coughlan* are welcome and noteworthy. Both plays probe the dark recesses of the minds of characters who are unable to make the transition from childhood to an adult world which appears nightmarish to them. Thomas McGill, the young protagonist of *Misterman*, longs to escape, to sit beside God the Father and also his own daddy in Heaven, and to thereby circumvent adulthood. The title character in Carr's brooding tragedy longs to join her deceased brother under the sea, in a Country of the Young, where the demands of marriage and

motherhood can not reach her.

Thomas' divinely-inspired mission (as he sees it) is to save the town of Inishfree from sin, greed, and evil. But Inishfree doesn't want saving, and certainly not by nutty Tom, who is the butt of the town's jokes. "You're a walking saint, Tommy!" says Eamon Moran with a wink. Yet Tom tries to enlist Eamon as a follower, and goes completely round the bend when he sees that Eamon possesses a picture of a nude woman — surely a sign of the devil himself. Of course, Thomas' fanatical mission fails, and he ultimately torches the town. In the course of this boldly-theatrical 50-minute, one-man play, Thomas (George Heslin) moves through Inishfree, stopping at various places in the town — to visit his Daddy's grave, to buy his Mammy Jammy Dodgers, to eat cheese-cake at Mrs. Cleary's café. Each of these stops is a kind of Station of the Cross in Thomas' inexorable passage into madness.

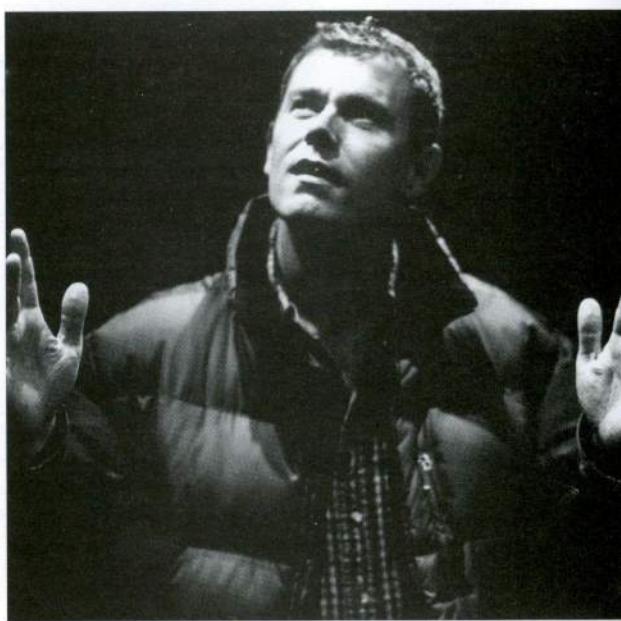
Walsh's writing is so lyrically brutal and David DeBeck's direction so nuanced that we are enticed into Tom's way of seeing. We often don't know whether to laugh or be appalled by Tom's behaviour. In the scene where he explains to Mrs. O'Donnell why he kicked her dog to death, we can't help but be sickly impressed by his logic: "But in fairness it was either my boots or the vet's gun! It made little difference! The poor doggy didn't have a bright future once he bit me, now be honest, did he?"

The central event of the play — Tom's murder of a woman he idealised as his "angel" — is not revealed until the end. By then, we have been convinced that for Tom, carnal desires and heavenly purity are an impossible combination and can in some way understand that he might need to destroy such anomaly through annihilation. Tom carries a tape recorder every-

where, which provides the ambient sounds for his various stoppages — the sounds of traffic, crowds, a dog barking, rain, a river — even, presumably, the creation of the universe. The device entices us into Tom's strange reality. It is enigmatic, perhaps representing how disconnected Tom is from those real-life phenomena; perhaps indicating his need to control reality by turning it conveniently on and off. Perhaps it is even part of a re-enactment he is conducting from within his jail cell or asylum, an ambiguity advanced by Suzanne Wang's undefined institutional setting — grimy, white tile walls and tiled floor, with a man's suit hanging mysteriously in a window-like recess. Zachary Williamson's expertly-layered sound design and Sean Farrell's evocative lighting add to the sense of mystery. Heslin moves gracefully between multiple roles, changing characters in mid-sentence without missing a beat. He manages to capture Thomas' fearful loneliness and pain, which is, of course, essential if Thomas is to be more than a freak and the play more than a exercise in sensationalism.

Portia Coughlan is another character who is trapped in a claustrophobic, inbred world of festering secrets and rancorous gossip. So, she listens obsessively to the angelic voice of her twin brother Gabriel, who drowned 15 years earlier. They shared a soul, she believes, and it went into the river with him — leaving her "to float on the world as if I were a ball of flotsam." Without Gabriel, Portia's life is meaning-

less. She has joyless affairs which she flaunts before her husband. She drinks heavily, and she neglects her children, out of fear that she will harm them. Her behaviour shocks us, and yet her fierce honesty and the rawness of her passion ultimately engage our sympathy and admiration. As we encounter Portia's dysfunctional family, questions arise about her loveless marriage, about the hatred



**THE ONE THAT GOT AWAY:** Misterman

between her paternal grandmother and her mother's side of the family, and, most importantly, about Gabriel's death, and Portia's apparently incestuous relationship with him.

Aaron Beall has staged Carr's tale in one of the sleaziest venues in New York: the former Show World, a porn palace at

the corner of Eighth Avenue and 42nd Street. This gaudy 99-seat space (one of Show World's garishly red, black, and silver-diamonded "go-go" rooms) might have worked well for another play, but the sideshow décor is jarringly at odds with the elegiac text. Moreover, Beall inflicts a heavy-handed musical commentary on the play. Jim Morrison's "When the Music's Over", with lyrics about "turning off the lights," is used to open and close the play. The late Jeff Buckley's voice is used for Gabriel's, and at one point, he sings, "Stay with me under the waves tonight." (The fact that Buckley drowned at age 30 in the Mississippi presumably adding another ironic layer of meaning).

Beall, perhaps too absorbed with his soundtrack, seems to have neglected his actors. Mercedes McAndrew's performance as Portia has intensity, but it lacks the variety, shape, and nuance that attentive direction could have assured. Portia's morbid preoccupation with Gabriel is evident, but her desperate struggle to resist his call is lost. McAndrews is often so strident that her words, in a space with terrible acoustics, are often unintelligible. No care is taken, incidentally, with a Midlands accent. The cast seems an able one, but you never quite believe that they share a gnarled, embittered history or that there is any subtext beneath their words.

One thing is made abundantly clear, however. New York needs to hear voices like Walsh and Carr. These authors do not pander to an audience. They have created characters of a depth found in Greek tragedy — filled with anger, fear, passion, death, and darkness. Their stories are portrayed without sociological or psychoanalytic apology, in a language that is lyrical and unsentimental, and that resonates in an age and place that

seeks a new understanding of tragedy.

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Jack Byer is a Pennsylvania-based academic and critic.

## OBSERVE THE SONS OF ULSTER MARCHING TOWARDS THE SOMME

by Frank McGuinness

Huntington Theatre Company and Broadway in Boston/Clear Channel Entertainment

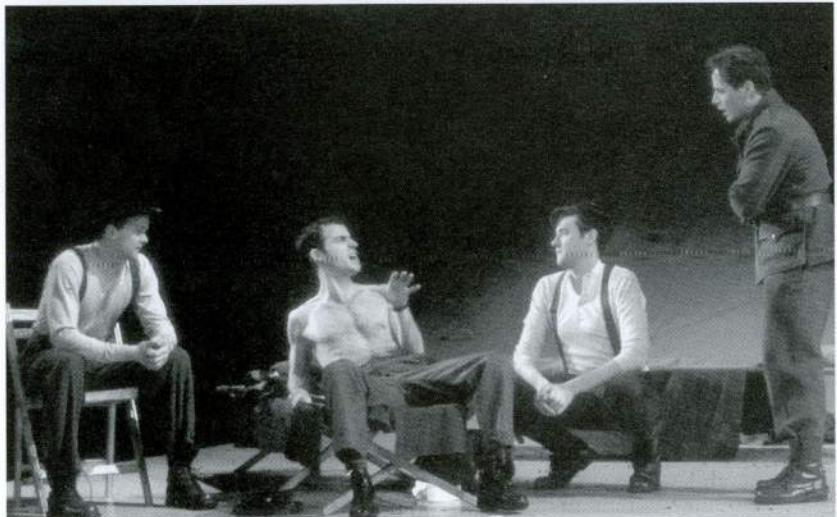
The Wilbur Theatre, Boston

30 March-5 May, 2002; reviewed April 21

BY SCOTT T. CUMMINGS

AFTER TOM MURPHY, FRANK MCGUINNESS is the most neglected contemporary Irish playwright in the USA. In the wake of the Martin McDonagh craze, American producers have been searching all the harder for commercial Irish scripts, and the untapped plays of McGuinness are an admirable, if unlikely, place to look. The recent Huntington Theatre Company production of *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme*, featuring a pair of young Hollywood phenoms and co-produced by a national show-biz corporation, would seem to have one eye on moving to New York. Unfortunately, it lacks the snap, crackle, and pop to make it there.

When McGuinness' play premiered at the Abbey in 1985, Irish audiences were challenged, if not shocked, by its sympathetic portrait of Ulster unionism. Seventeen years later and a wide, wide ocean away, the play depends more squarely on its intrinsic merits. Less now an exercise in Imagining the Other, it becomes more a tale of male bonding (in the best sense of that overused phrase), one which integrates homoerotic energies with love of country and fear of death in the forging of a group identity. While the play's specific historical concerns cannot be dismissed,



**PARTY OF FOUR:** Observe the Sons of Ulster...

its theatrical power today stems more from its general depiction of life during wartime for eight fighting men.

The war at hand, of course, is WWI, and the fighting men all come from the 36th Ulster Division, which on 1 July, 1916 rose out of trenches on the Western Front to face near-certain death in the Battle of the Somme. McGuinness configures *Observe the Sons of Ulster...* as a memory play by bracketing the action with appearances by the elder Kenneth Pyper, who looks back in anger and curses God as the only one of his buddies to survive that fateful day. He yields the stage to his younger self, an upper-crust bloke and failed artist with a death wish. War is to be his means of suicide, but his experience of his devout and dedicated fellows will restore in him a will to live and a faith that will not be denied.

Functionally, the play has three acts. We meet the men as they first meet each other

in a makeshift training barracks, arriving by ones and twos from the four corners of the six counties. Friendships take shape; tensions erupt. Next, five months later, they are home on leave but unable to leave the war behind. In four intercut scenes, we see the battle-scarred men in pairs as they visit four symbolic Ulster locales. Finally, we watch them at dawn on the day of the Battle of the Somme; as they summon the courage to fight, we recognize the redemptive power of the brotherhood they share, first as sons of Ulster willing to die for their country and then as men willing to die for each other.

Justin Theroux, who made a splash in David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive*, plays the central role of the younger Pyper with a combination of brio and nuance. He is part dandy and part depressive, crisscrossing the line between impish charm and provocative madness in com-

# opinions & overviews

pelling fashion. At the play's climax, when called upon to lead his fellows in a patriotic prayer, Theroux's Pyper does so more in grief than in fighting spirit, a confusing choice which makes the final battle cry of "Ulster! Ulster!" a bit unconvincing. Still, his accomplished performance leads the rest of the balanced ensemble cast, whose Northern Irish accents are good enough and light enough not to be distracting. Jason Butler Harner is especially impressive in the role of David Craig, whose love for Pyper is the key to his transformation. Beloved by fans of TV's *Party of Five*, Scott Wolf fares well as the Coleraine baker John Millen.

Director Nicholas Martin orchestrates the action so that what starts out as an uneasy camaradie between the men evolves into a true brotherly trust, but the mounting fear of death which should fuel this transition was weak and intangible in the Sunday evening performance I attended. That fear needs to be formidable, so that when they finally don their helmets and scale the sweeping curved wall of Alexander Dodge's stunning green set, their resolve to face death together is heroic and tragic and chilling. That sense of danger and sacrifice was far less genuine or grave compared to Martin's original staging of the play, with nearly the same cast, at the Williamstown Theatre Festival in August 2001. Even though the Huntington production seems to have lost its edge, it represents McGuinness well enough to give Boston audiences a decent, and at moments impressive, look at one of his most important plays.

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A freelance theater critic and arts journalist, Scott T. Cummings teaches and directs plays in the Theater Department of Boston College.

## OISÍN by Siamsa Tíre

On tour; reviewed 12 March 2001 at the

Town Hall Theatre, Galway

BY FIÖNNUALA GALLAGHER

### MYTHS AND LEGENDS ARE BACK.

It's official. What's more, they're being made contemporary. These first days of the 21st century have seen Paul Mercier updating *Diarmuid and Gráinne* for Passion Machine; Declan Gorman turning *The Táin* into a contemporary yarn involving Foot and Mouth and government corruption in *Epic*; and Mary Elizabeth Burke Kennedy's retelling of the tales of four notorious Irish folk heroines in *Women in Arms* revived by Storytellers. Siamsa Tíre, in contrast, does not claim to be modernising the folktale. By creating new folk theatre presentations, they set out to reflect Ireland's great wealth of music, dance, and folklore. The steps are sean-nós, the music is traditional, and the song is in Irish. Everything you witness is brought to you live, including the music. There are no multi-media effects. Everyone on stage has been trained in the unique Siamsa style. This production of *Oisín*, which toured the country in the beginning of the year, will also play in rep at Siamsa's Tralee headquarters, The National Folk Theatre of Ireland, from June until October.

"Is fada mé a chuala ceoil" is a phrase much repeated in the opening scene of *Oisín*. Roughly translated as "It's a long time since I heard music," it sounds like a mission statement. Directed by Oliver Hurley and using the talents of three designers, Ben Hennessy (set), Leonore McDonagh (costume), and Jimmy McDonnell (lighting), Siamsa Tíre have produced an epic dream, in the realm of fantasy, staying absolutely faithful to the story.



#### DREAMING OF TÍR NA NÓG: *Oisín*

Oisín is the son of Fionn Mac Cumhail and a young warrior with the Fianna. He falls under the spell of Niamh of the golden hair, a magical creature from Tir na nOg, the land of the ever-young. He leaves the Fianna with Niamh on her white horse. Together they travel under the sea to reach the land of Tir na nOg. Much later, he is homesick and longs to see Ireland again. Niamh gives him her white horse to return but warns him not to set foot on Irish ground. He falls from the horse and becomes an ancient man in a much-changed land. This ancient story receives a simplistic telling here. A visual and aural delight, it stops short of having an emotional impact.

The opening scene is a long sequence involving the daily routine of the Fianna. Seven young men start tapping out a rhythm with wooden sticks on the floor, while two girls play bodhráns. The stage is filled with rainbow colours. The Fianna are dressed in soft materials and fur, in

lilacs and purples, with rust-coloured dancing shoes. The girls are in red and grey with sparkly red shoes. A chorus of girls surrounds the men who dance sean-nós style in perfect synchronicity. Complete with a wild boar upon a spit, the happy life of the Fianna is enacted to the strains of a traditional flute. The music is sweet and melodic, nostalgic, and the presentation a little too pristine. All the men are well-scrubbed and clean-shaven, all the women long-haired smiling beauties. Niamh appears and woos Oisín easily. There is nothing dramatic.

The stage has raised rostra at the back. Two large boulders, decorated with Celtic designs, sit on the aprons to the left and the right downstage. They serve to extend the playing area beyond the proscenium arch. The production was clearly designed to overlap into the auditorium where possible, to weave a web of magic around the audience. What a pity then that the musicians, a key source of life in the show, were

# opinions & overviews

hidden in the pit and not seen until the final bows. At one point Oisín spiritedly fired his stick at one of the boulders where it stuck, vibrating with energy. This theatrical surprise brought everything alive. More surprises were needed.

Most of the performance involves the underwater journey to Tír na nÓg and later, the journey back. Here, the production shone. Seaweed fell from bars, upstage and downstage, hanging in blue and green fronds creating an underworld effect. A chorus of sea-creatures writhed, shimmied and crawled along the sea-bed, fronds of blue-green strips of cloth hung over the edge of the proscenium arch stage. The lighting was a magical green. The dance was abstract, very unusual for an Irish-dancing number: it was like stretching exercises turned into dance movements, with excellent use of the floor. This dreamworld was alive with eerie whale sounds, fish and shell-like shapes. Here the production grounded itself as a dance piece.

There is no tension in the production until, terribly homesick and losing his strength in Tír na nÓg, Oisín emits a belly roar. This is a pivotal point of the drama that could be made bigger. In a dream, he returns to the Fianna, who sing beautiful vocal harmonies. The Fianna begin to pick up the rhythm; they surround Oisín while dancing, their steps becoming more truncated, more animated. His return journey to Ireland is set to strange discordant music, the tension finally rising. His underwater voyage is beset with crashes and thunderous waves. Back in Ireland, Oisín falls and changes into a very old man to crashing drums. This tale resembles a religious pageant. It is inevitable and the drama occurs at the end. The music needed to build earlier; the story needed more highs and lows.

Siamsa Tíre has talented performers and a definite style. The solo female singer, an ethereal, sensual creature with a stirring voice was underused and remained apart from the action. The actor playing Oisín did portray some complexity of feeling but Niamh remained a two-dimensional, magical figure. Siamsa Tíre needs to harness their energy to create a powerful story, one that provokes a reaction. At present this show is too nice. The group pictures were pleasing and the music easy on the ear. But I was not challenged to think of Oisín in a new light, nor did I apply the story to my own life. I was simply asked to sit back and enjoy a visual and aural rendering of a tale involving two worlds, ancient and magical. As it was the show received a standing ovation. It was entertaining but not memorable.

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Fionnuala Gallagher is a director and actor with dhá éan theatre company, currently completing an MA in theatre at NUIG.

## OTHELLO by William Shakespeare

The Loose End Studio,  
Civic Theatre, Tallaght

16 April-11 May 2002; reviewed 18 April  
BY JAMIE TANNER

STAGING A SHAKESPEAREAN TRAGEDY can be a lot like politics in this country: some backstabbing, a few fancy speeches and, especially in the run up to an election, the odd emotional bout of cursing and spitting. But, if you are an audience member embarking on an evening of Shakespeare, you hope with fearful anticipation that the similarities end there. Why? Because Irish politics can be incredibly boring. As I write this, it looks doubtful that our election will trigger the heartfelt political activism seen in France's nationwide call to arms to hold back the right



**THE FACES OF TRAGEDY:** Othello

wing extremist Le Pen. It was surprising that we even saw a debate between the main contenders. Now I ask you, where is the fun in that? Is the best I can hope for a custard pie or two? Much better to drag myself away from *Prime Time* and view one of the Bard's finest works. But unfortunately, the Civic's production of *Othello* bore more resemblance to our country's politics than I had hoped.

Michael Noonan recently accused Bertie Ahern of trying to win an election with a few pretty posters. I would make a similar allegation with respect to the poster/programme that I received upon arrival at the Civic. A simple black and white photograph shows Othello (J.J. Rolle) flanked on either shoulder by Desdemona (Isabel Claffey) and Iago (Mark Wale). To all appearances, everything looked in order. Desdemona looked sufficiently virtuous to capture the heart of the Moor, Iago sufficiently crafty to sour their relationship and Othello, towering half a

foot above the two, looked every bit the mighty warrior general. However, with Othello's entrance onto the stage, the audience was forced to reach for their programmes and double take as Iago towered nearly two feet above the Moor! Dressed in black military uniform, the diminutive Rolle stomped around like a child throwing a tantrum while Iago floated round the stage with about as much hidden menace as a puppy. This wasn't helped by the fact that Iago's signature bad guy soliloquies behind Othello's back were delivered with the same moon-faced joviality as the lines to his face. Between the two, they managed to turn one of the Bard's more complicated relationships into Shakespearean Laurel and Hardy.

For most of the cast it was acting by numbers, but they weren't paying too much attention to keeping inside the lines. Most of them fell into the first trap of delivering all of their lines at near full emotional volume and there were few

signs of subtle interpretation. Anger was accompanied by the beating of chests, grief by falling to one's knees in despair and hatching a plot was pacing up and down while stroking one's goatee. The second Shakespearean *faux pas* was the little attention paid to iambic pentameter. In particular, Rolle's and Wale's speeches were delivered like nursery rhymes on caffeine pills and this makes it very hard for an audience to follow the story as it unfolds. The standard of acting was highlighted by the presence of Ciaran Reilly in the role of Cassio, who did his job admirably.

Unfortunately the audience could not even look elsewhere in the production for their money's worth. The lighting design was remarkably flat and unimaginative with a choice between daytime, nighttime or a mixture of the two. With the inclusion of a fight director in the programme, I held out hope for some well-choreographed duels, but alas, invisible swords and pantomime death throes were the order of the day.

Of course, the director is ultimately responsible for everything in a production. John Delaney's direction was rudderless and unimaginative from start to finish. This may seem harsh, but judging from the expressions on the faces of the sixth-year students opposite me, I feel justified in leveling this criticism. This year, *Othello* is the only Shakespearean drama on the Leaving Cert. syllabus. Many past productions of Shakespeare's most famous plays have been staged in order to cash in on the market of bored teenagers who are herded along by their teachers. "Wonderful!" the parents cry, and I would agree, as long as they are presented with a very high standard of production. On the other hand, if you are going to put on Shakespeare with a minimum of effort,

safe in the knowledge that you have assured ticket sales to defenceless students, you can expect the harshest of criticism from this corner. The look on the faces of those students said quite plainly, "First and last time," and if I were to judge Shakespeare from this one production, I would agree. At the end of the night, I dragged myself out of the Civic and went home to the warm glow of RTÉ's election campaign coverage.

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*Jamie Tanner is a filmmaker from Dublin who has an MA in film production and a BA in drama and theatre studies.*

## OUT OF THAT CHILDHOOD COUNTRY

**by John and Tommy McArdle**

Bare Bodkin Theatre Company

On tour; reviewed on 19 March at the Pavilion Theatre, Dun Laoghaire

BY SARA KEATING

PATRICK KAVANAGH'S POETRY HAS always leaned itself to dramatic interpretation. In their groundbreaking 1983 stage adaptation of *The Great Hunger*, director Patrick Mason, writer Tom MacIntyre, and actor Tom Hickey dismissed naturalism as inadequate for representing the chaos of 1940s Ireland, and used an imagistic fusion of poetry, mime, and improvisation to render the fragmented existence portrayed in the poem. Conall Morrison's 1997 stage adaptation of Kavanagh's novel *Tarry Flynn* used similarly innovative theatrical techniques to re-imagine 1930's rural Ireland in theatrical terms. In *Out of That Childhood Country*, however, John and Tommy McArdle do not seek to adapt or re-interpret Kavanagh's poetry, but to present it in its oldest, simplest form, reviving the figure of the poet, with all the historic authority associated with the bardic tradition. In doing so, they strip

theatre of its trappings and focus instead on its two most essential components, the performer and the spectator, reminding us of theatre's most basic, ritualistic function: that of simple storytelling. "The thing that



**HAVE YOU SEEN THIS MAN?** *The McArdles searching for the Childhood Country*

I find missing in my life," Kavanagh once said, "is action. There are not enough plots." He never relied on his work to tell stories of his life or document his adventures. He used his poetry, rather, to evoke moods or moments, but these moods and moments need translation in order to work dramatically. Our mutual awareness

of the fact that theatre is being performed, as opposed to a poetry reading being enacted, is just not enough to convince us that *Out of That Childhood Country* is in fact a theatrical event.

Devised and performed by the McArdle brothers, *Out of That Childhood Country* uses extracts from Kavanagh's large body of semi-autobiographical poetry and his two novels to chronicle his journey from an impoverished rural childhood in County Monaghan to an impoverished adulthood as a poet in Dublin. The McArdles play poet, chorus, and a plethora of other characters, swapping roles to hold our attention and vividly bringing some of Kavanagh's more hazily evoked characters to a more concrete existence. Taking in along the way Kavanagh's recollections of religious and social ritual, the McArdles manage to give us a portrait of one of Ireland's mythic poets in both his nascence and his prime, and a glimpse of a closed, oppressive society that is also fading into the past.

It is the social anachronism of the world presented on stage, however, that is one of the production's problems. The harshness of this world is not critiqued, or imbued with any modern relevance. The tone of the performance never veers from fond nostalgia, which undermines hard historical fact and the poetry itself. This only serves to perpetuate backward, rural cliché, and to alienate younger members of the audience. Such members were few and far between the night I attended, however; and the older generation seemed happy to have a romanticised portrait of a past time presented to them.

If this world is sentimentalised, however, it is nothing compared to the way the production glamorises Patrick Kavanagh the man, who becomes a dead hero rising to comfort us with his lyrical poetry.

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Kavanagh's notoriety as an ill-tempered and often very unpleasant drunk is here glossed over by the creator-performers. His well-known parsimony is represented as thrift, his drunkenness as boisterous, and his bad-temperedness as the irascibility of a rogue. "A true poet" Kavanagh always maintained, with a mixture of modesty and arrogance, "is selfish and implacable," and if Kavanagh himself could admit his flaws so readily it is curious that others should be so eager to mask them with comedy.

The idea that poetry belongs only on the page is a recent phenomenon that arose out of the rapid growth of print culture in the late 19th century, and it is in the McArdle brothers' noble attempt to rejuvenate the tradition of poetry as performance that the strength of this production lies. But although they are fine raconteurs, reciting poetry with a passion and conviction that breathes life into the words, it is essentially the poetry and not the telling that brings Kavanagh to life. "Unless the clay is in the mouth the singers' singing is useless," run the famous lines from *The Great Hunger* and while this may seem unnecessarily cruel, it is no reflection on the quality of the McArdles' talents. It is just that by relying so heavily on Kavanagh's actual texts, they have compromised their theatrical ambition: poetry is not drama and it is essentially only Kavanagh's voice that we hear.

## SENSES

by Rex Levitates and Maiden Voyage

On tour; reviewed 6 March, 2002 at Project, Dublin BY CHRISTINE MADDEN

OH, THE TEMPTATIONS WHEN REVIEWING a piece called *Senses*. So many clichéd idioms clamour for statement; the intellect strains to keep the swarm of truly awful

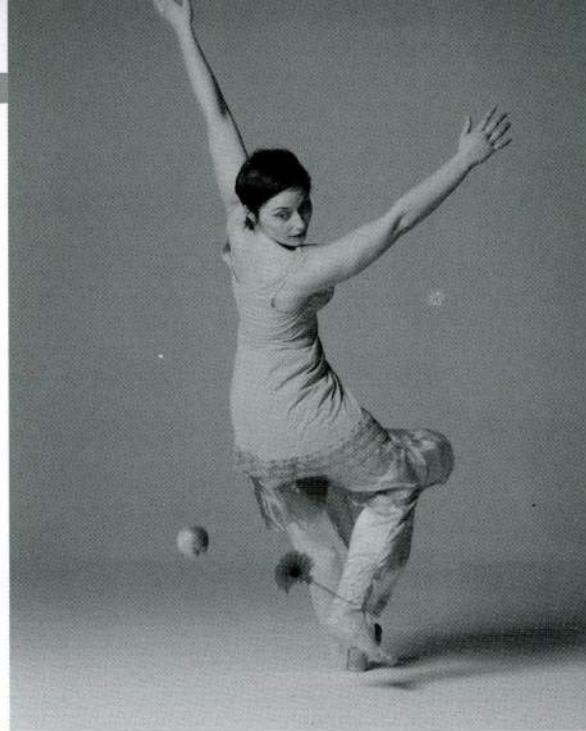
puns at bay. But restraint is necessary, as dance companies Rex Levitates and Maiden Voyage strove to create a spectacle beyond hackneyed interpretation.

Art of the 19th century influenced this piece, and in fact there was something distinctly pre-Raphaelite about the basic visual impact of *Senses*. The stage had the feel of a courtyard in an Italian palazzo, with covered pathways to the right and left like a Renaissance garden. Clad in white, flowing costumes, the dancers moved on and off stage from these architectural bowers.

The production didn't highlight the five physical senses so much as the senses more difficult to explain and catalogue: rhythm, timing, intuition — a "sense" of things. Nevertheless, *Senses* expanded, experimented with, and challenged the sense humans rely upon most: sight. In conceiving this piece, choreographer Liz Roche created a symbiotic relationship between dance and visual art that additionally introduced an element of improvisation to each performance. As though in an installation, artist Sabine Dargent, obscured from vision behind screens functioning as backdrops, lay in wait for her cue from the dancers. After some ten minutes of flowing and harmonious movement, Dargent drew silhouettes literally behind the scenes, almost as if the dancers' alter egos or shadow selves had materialised to join them on stage.

The drawings then developed a life of their own. One drawn sitting figure underwent a nightmarish transformation when a large bird's head sprouted atop its form. It looked like some kind of archetypal or mythical beast, and felt threatening in that same deep place in the abdomen where dance is sensed.

This changed the timbre of the piece. The dancers jolted on stage, movement jagged; the energy of the piece intensified,



#### LIFTING OFF: *Senses*

as though the dancers had been galvanised. The dancers conducted rather than created this energy, as they passed it on from one to the next like an electric current. In the presence of this new, irrational tableau, they had perhaps reached sensory overload, an indication that, given confusing, unstable conditions, the senses could turn and work deceptively, destructively.

The collaboration between dancer and backdrop continued, as another dancer allowed her moving finger to write, a line following it obediently as though hypnotised. It gained its freedom, however, and the audience watched expectantly, the silence ruffled only by the bubble of water, as the line developed into a tree.

During a lull in bodily movement, in which the dancers retired to the shade on

either side of the stage, a still, spoken element was introduced. One dancer placed her hands rhythmically over the eyes, ears, and head of another, seated, while repeating an incantation on angles of vision; a third echoed the spoken phrases. Here we were talking about sight instead of using it. This element seemed at variance with the rest of the programme; the shift felt uncomfortable. The inclusion of words, which require different processing and response, and stimulate not the senses but the left-brained intellect, was perhaps an attempt to bring

home a point, but it didn't sit well in this very optical piece.

Behind a solo embodying confusion, indecision, and exhaustion, elliptical shapes appeared, leaves transformed into eyes — a mirror image, perhaps, of the staring eyes of the audience, the dancer therefore surrounded. The eyes subsequently became fish, with gurgling, flowing water back-lit at the close of the piece providing their environment. The artist, in effect, played the fifth dancer. She had the dubious advantage of physical invisibility; her creative subconscious, however, took centre stage. A family project of sorts — involving also Liz Roche's sister Jenny as one of the dancers, and brother Denis, who composed the music — *Senses* was a fascinating study of how we absorb,

process and interpret perceptions, and how we react to the fluid and constant change of this data. As with the dancers, so also the piece as a whole seemed unusually not to generate its own energy, but transferred it from dancer to dancer, from dancer to illustration to dancer. The piece drew its vitality from being the carrier, rather than the source of an invigorating force. Although a greater sense of primal energy emanating from the dancers and their interaction would have been welcome, it might also have been beside the point, and substantially altered the message of the piece. It was a lively experiment exploring how we absorb stimuli from the physical and non-physical worlds using the interplay between two mercurial media.

### SPINSTREN by half/angel

The Granary Theatre, Cork  
March 30, 2002; reviewed

BY MATTHEW CAUSEY

HALF/ANGEL IS THE ARTISTIC COLLABORATION of choreographer and writer Jools Gilson-Ellis and composer and new media artist, Richard Povall, dedicated to the convergence of dance, theatre, performance, installation, and screen-based interactive work. Together as half/angel they have created a series of adventurous pieces at a variety of important research centres including STEIM in The Netherlands, Firkin Crane in Cork, Dartington College of Arts in the UK, and the Banff Centre for the Arts in Canada. They describe their performance work as "visual theatre," suggesting both the difficulty of locating and naming the new aesthetics of performance and technology, and perhaps, the problem of identifying and articulating the company's own artistic concerns within a dance work like the company's

most recent piece, *Spinstren*.

Gilson-Ellis and Povall state on their website (<http://www.halfangel.ie>) that they are concerned with "creating and manipulating poetic space through the mediation of live technologies, building both performance and installation spaces." *Spinstren* exhibits some markers of live and interactive technologies such as wireless headset microphones, yet it seems a more traditional dance piece than the company's earlier work such as *mouthplace* (1997), *The Secret Project* (1998), and *The Desire Project* (2000). *Spinstren* is less preoccupied with new media and more focused on the problems of dance and the ideas of the source texts.

Extending the metaphor of spinning, the work weaves together a series of narratives drawn from myth and fairy tales (Athena and Arachne, Sleeping Beauty), with two women characters, Carla and a magical Spinstren, whose identities are involved with spinning. Episodic in structure, with individual scenes operating autonomously, yet constructed to build the total effect of the work, the piece is a quiet meditation on the ways in which some women build their world through body (dance) and craft (spinning). The images of these characters and stories are expanded into danced and spoken word scenarios by three dancer/actors.

As the work stands the narrative exchanges of myth, fairytale, and craftsmanship do not excite much dramatic interest. The multiple stories work together structurally through metaphor and image, but achieve little traction to sustain a thematic line or engage the audience. Unlike the web of a spider, the individual strands fail to construct a useful web, which might catch the mind of the spectator. Additionally, it is disappointing that these threads are not drawn out in any



**SPIDERY:** Spinstren

clear manner toward half/angel's stated interests of interactivity, new media, and digital culture. The text fails to draw the disparate narratives together in a compelling manner and the performance fails to capitalise on the company's previous aesthetic strategies.

The three dancers, Gilson-Ellis, Cindy Cummings (an engaging and energetic dancer, who has gained notoriety for her own dance and technology collaborations with Todd Winkler of MediaLab Europe) and Jane Kellaghan, perform the choreography with fine control and a beautiful veracity. They earn the status of "double

threat" given their abilities to handle both the dancing and acting with equal skill. The dancer/actors maintain a focus and charisma, which rises above the problems of the work's conceptual nature and makes for an engaging and enjoyable performance.

It is interesting to note, given half/angel's interests in complex new technologies, that some of the more arresting moments of the piece lay in the application of some of the oldest and simplest of technologies: spinning wheels and spinning tops. Cummings' *pas de deux* with a spinning wheel transforms the gesture of craftsmanship to suggest multiple metaphors and puns including "the thread of life" and "spinning a yarn." Midway through the work, a dancer moves center-stage, flings her arms outward letting loose a red top that spins across the stage with grace and precision. Later the dancers let loose smaller finger tops in a colorful line of inanimate performers. The pathos delivered by the simple act of a top reaching its peak and slowly, but inevitably, collapsing to the stage is representative of the possible powers of machines (simple and complex) in performance with humans. However, these brief moments of "old technology" are not nearly enough to hold the audience or to extend half/angel's unique and challenging exploration of new media performance. Regrettably, there is some awkwardness in the use of technology with an overly sibilant voice-over and the headset mics, which malfunctioned when the dancers rolled upon them. In the end, the text of *Spinstren* lacks a potent narrative or set of events that would sustain an audience's interest, and, just as troubling, half/angel's previously unique and valuable aesthetic of new media performance is under-utilised.

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

# opinions & overviews

## SPRING AWAKENING

by Frank Wedekind, in a new version

by Ted Hughes

Galloglass Theatre Company

On tour; reviewed at the Pavilion Theatre,  
Dun Laoghaire, on 8 March 2002

BY BELINDA MCKEON

WHEN THE ROYAL SHAKESPEARE COMPANY commissioned Ted Hughes to write a version of Frank Wedekind's *Spring Awakening* in 1995, reaction centred less on the violent brilliance of the writing than on the work's enduring ability to shock, more than 100 years after its creation. With this came the implication that the play, a story of the clash of teenage sexual longing and a society which combined patriarchal morals with an oppressive educational system, still bore resonances in the late 20th century; that fundamentally, little had changed. Tortured boys like Wedekind's Melchior and Moritz were still going to reformatories and shooting themselves in the head, and misled girls like Wendla were still walking into pregnancy and dying of backstreet abortions, while their parents and their teachers dictated their lives. And with its new production of the play, Galloglass is now endeavouring to sound those resonances for another audience in another century, offering the play as "a sensitive evocation of adolescence raising topical issues for modern day Ireland."

Of course, terrible things still happen to teenagers as a result of oppression, repression, or both. But it is not because of this coincidence that *Spring Awakening* endures. This is a play set in 1890s Germany, pre-Freud, pre-Weimar, pre-modernism and the avant-garde. All of these shocks had yet to come as Wedekind wrote; yet their undercurrents are perfectly caught. Writing in 1891 Germany, Wedekind's achievement with *Spring*

*Awakening* was considerable, diving with astounding prescience into the pools of memory and illicit desire that would fixate Freud in ten years' time. Oedipal and incestuous longings are rife, as are suggestions that dreams contain truths unconfrontable in waking life. Most impressive, however, is Wedekind's anticipation of that sense of the uncanny which would not complete Freud's picture of the mind until two decades later. Moritz tells Melchior that "his explanations (of sex) sounded so strange. At the same time — so familiar. Like memories, somehow..."

What Wedekind captured was a sense of selfhood on the brink of invasion and collapse: of precarious identity, both personal and national. Only the trimmings of Theresia Guschlbauer's production venture towards this heart of the play. While the use of hideous, deformed face masks hint at the horrors that we know, from our perspective, to have followed the last days of Germany's 19th century elite, Moggie Douglas's set design, with its simple concept of a low walled enclosure, conveys the battle between conscious and unconscious life cleverly. Inside the boundaries, everyday actions, acts of restraint and repression, take place, whilst, from outside the boundaries, instincts, desires and the presence of the dead invade. An early scene in which Wendla and her friends pace and teeter atop this wall as they veer between fantasies of the future (how they will care for their children) and horror of the present (Martha's abuse at the hands of her father) works particularly well. Successful, too, is the incorporation of puppets by the Púca Puppet team: glimpsed through a misty screen at the rear of the stage, by turns children at play and caricatures of adults, like dream symbols, they make occasional interruptions, echoing the forces of memory and desire which



**WAKEY WAKEY:** Spring Awakening

drive and torment the characters.

Unfortunately, theirs are the most impressive performances. The combined erotic and poetic charge of Wedekind and Hughes seems to have soared over the heads of most of the cast, who, ill-equipped to tease out the intricate emotional layers of the play's many moments of anguish and confrontation, opt for the easiest route of uninspired melodrama. This is a serious flaw, because there is no doubt that Wedekind's greatest achievement in *Spring Awakening* was to portray the stratified depths and complexities of the human mind. With the exception of Abbie Spallen, who is lively and confident in the role of the brassy Ilsa, the actors show precious little evidence of having explored their characters, with Ewan Downie's portrayal of the suicidal Moritz as a likeable goon standing out as the greatest misjudgement. Intended moments of hilarity during a school council meeting, meanwhile, served only to irritate further. And were Susan McKeown's Celtic-sounding songs meant to highlight those Irish resonances? If so, they formed a soundtrack to a production

which went halfway to at once capturing the essence of this play and offering an intelligent revisionist stance upon it. The cast, however, went in the other direction.

#### **TWO PLAYS AFTER** by Brian Friel

The Gate Theatre

5 March - 20 April 2002; reviewed on  
7 March BY GERRY DUKES

THE ODD TITLE OF FRIEL'S NEW WORK is really a very efficient pun. The first, short play, *The Bear*, is a Friel "version" or rewrite of a play by Chekhov, while the second play, *Afterplay*, imagines two characters from separate Chekhov plays (Sonya Serebriakova from *Uncle Vanya* and Andrey Prozorov from *Three Sisters*) meeting each other in Moscow some twenty years after Chekhov's imagination had left them to their respective fates. Friel has already produced his own "versions" of both plays so he knows these characters intimately. In his programme note, Friel refers to himself as a godparent to these characters, a godfather who takes his responsibilities scrupulously.

Chekhov wrote *The Bear* when he was in his late 20s and it became an immediate commercial success, a steady source of income and a cause of continuing creative embarrassment — Chekhov knew he could do far better than this. Yeats knew these complicated feelings too and would only moan at the regrettable popularity of "The Lake Isle of Inishfree" and "Down by the Salley Gardens." *The Bear*, however, in Friel's version, is considerably more than "a piffling little Frenchified vaudeville" (Chekhov's phrase), and becomes a brusque comic exploration of some heavyweight themes.

Elena Ivanova Popova ("a young and attractive widow" — flawlessly played by Flora Montgomery) is still in elaborate

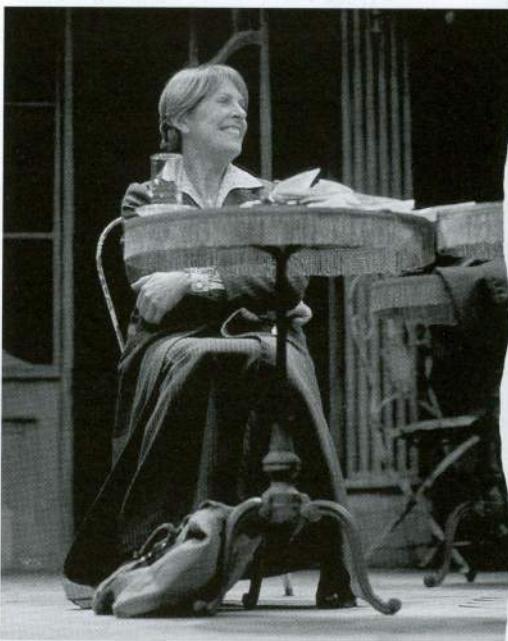
mourning for her faithless husband. Having buried him a year ago, Elena has decided to bury herself indoors in her house, wearing her black weeds with fortitude and demonstrating to her dead husband the strength and resolution of undying love and fidelity. Luka ("Elena's frail and ancient manservant" — a fittingly creaky performance by Eamon Morrissey, like a demented Thady Quirke with an uneasy conscience) tries unsuccessfully to breach the black armour of Elena's absurd mourning by suggesting she go outside to read — it is the hottest day of the summer — or by resuming some sort of social life.

Then Gregory Stepanovitch Smirnov ("mid-40s; very physical and very energetic; land-owner and ex-soldier" — another masterly performance by Stephen Brennan) bursts in to this rural mausoleum, raucously demanding overdue payment for a large delivery of hay ordered by the deceased. To his demand for immediate money, Smirnov — who is threatened with bankruptcy — soon bearishly adds calls for vodka, dinner, house-room and oats for his horses.

In a few precipitate and farcical steps the "bear" and the widow intensify their confrontation until the inevitable pair of duelling pistols is produced — self-respecting Russian households always had a brace lying about somewhere. At this moment of maximum threat and danger the action is reversed and a wonderfully directed glissade takes them to the final embrace, lit with soft effulgence by Mick Hughes. Farce it may be, but it is richly satisfying theatre.

*Afterplay* offers its own satisfactions but they are wintry, desolate and very human. The play is set in a run-down Moscow café in the early 1920s — Liz Ascroft's set breathes neglect and hopelessness — where the two characters meet for the sec-

ond night running. Sonya Serebriakova has spent her day trying to deal with the arcane bureaucracy of the ministry of agriculture and the impenetrabilities of the banks, in an effort to save her ailing, failing estate. Andrey Prozorov, a competent violinist, says he has been rehearsing *La Bohème* all day. This is not the truth nor even close to it, but it is a necessary crutch



WINTRY: Penelope Wilton in *Afterplay*

he uses to sustain his self-respect. They sit in this seedy café, sharing a bottle of vodka from Sonya's bag, and talking, talking and in the talking they gradually reveal themselves as they really are.

Friel sets his play in Moscow, that dreamily longed-for terminus for the desires of Chekhov's " provincials." This Moscow has

no consolations to offer, only penury, corrupt officialdom, and watery soup. It is merely a metaphor for disappointment. Life seemed to hold glorious promise and unlimited opportunity but delivered the quintessence of dust. Sonya and Andrey are whelmed in it, bypassed by history, floundering in the sea of disappointment. The performances of Penelope Wilton and John Hurt are not merely memorable, they are definitive. Longing and nostalgia, frustrated hopes and relentless damage are focused with robust and precise art.

Robin Lefèvre directs both plays with consummate alertness and attention. He is brisk and decisive where he needs to be and static where the stage moment needs a silence in which to discharge its lacerating meanings. Rarely has an author been better served by such a company of theatre practitioners.

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

#### **WHITE WOMAN STREET**

**by Sebastian Barry**

Meridian Theatre Company  
Everyman Palace Theatre, Cork  
21 February-2 March 2002;  
reviewed on 1 March BY PAUL MURPHY

SEBASTIAN BARRY'S *WHITE WOMAN STREET* is not an easy play to stage — it requires a strong visual imagination and a keen ear for dialogue. The recent Meridian production excelled in the former and failed in the latter.

The setting is Ohio in the mid-west of the USA in 1916, a year which holds an obviously powerful resonance in Irish history and is enhanced by the fact that the protagonist Trooper O'Hara is an Irishman from Sligo. The main plot trajectory is classically cathartic, focusing on Trooper's

quest for redemption from the sins of his past life as a member of the forces which colonised America and slaughtered millions of indigenous people. Trooper's redemption depends on his return to the town of White Woman Street, home of the "famous whore, the only white woman for five hundred miles." Trooper is accompanied on his travels by characters from diverse racial backgrounds: Blakely, a fellow trooper, originally from Lincolnshire; Mo Mason from an Amish community in Ohio; Nathaniel Yeshov from Brooklyn, of a Russian father and Chinese mother; and James Miranda, from Tennessee, "black, about thirty or younger." The play reaches its finale when the team executes a gold robbery in which Trooper is fatally wounded and dies, with a clean conscience, after finally coming to terms with his colonial past.

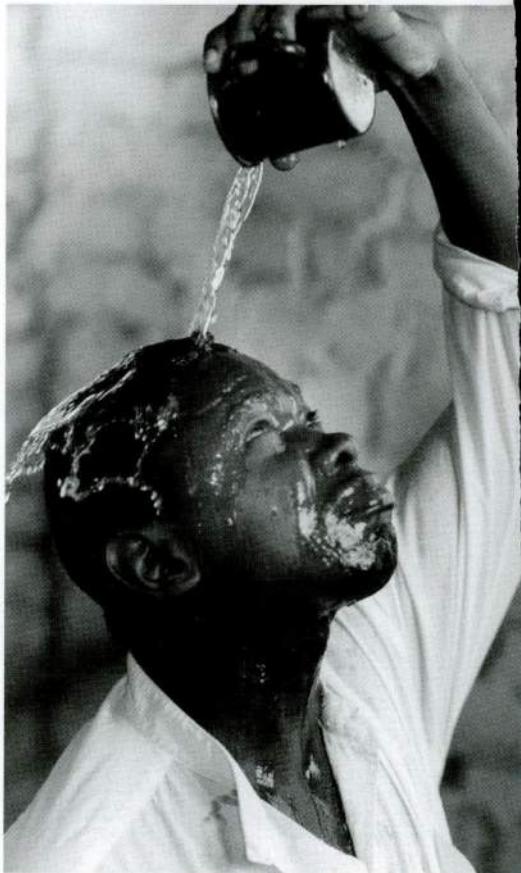
The primary strength of the production was the *mise en scène*, particularly the set design (credited to Meridian in the programme) which used saplings and copious amounts of wood-chippings to conjure the feeling of a savannah grassland. The costumes (designed by Monica Ennis) were also the products of meticulous attention to detail, which evoked a gritty wild-west feel. Scenes in which the actors simulated riding horses by lining up next to one another and bobbing up and down on their toes seemed silly at first (and provoked audience laughter), but on reflection little else could be done. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the production was the inspired use of film projection as a backdrop to provide multiple shifting scenes and environments. The filmic background helped to evoke something of the vastness of the American wilderness — an obvious challenge in any aesthetic medium, let alone a proscenium arch stage.

The play's dramatic tension lies in the

dialogue, as each character recounts details about their past. The storytelling aspect is the crux of the play and was severely diminished because many of the actors failed to deliver the distinctive accents required. The evident lack of voice coaching also resulted in poor projection to the extent that the audience could barely hear what the actors were saying. Michael James Ford's performance as Trooper made the character seem one-dimensional, his accent doing little to highlight the diasporic nature of Trooper's identity. Indeed Ford's accent was all too clearly English, sounding more Soho than Ohio, and he seemed unable to emphasise crucial lines with enough power to convince the audience of the real drama of Trooper's paradoxical subjectivity — at once a colonised subject under British rule while simultaneously a coloniser who "had an employment [...] to shoot Indians."

The representation of Clarke, the Native American from Virginia working as the whorehouse pimp, was probably the most offensive aspect of the production. The actor (Donncha Crowley) is well known for comic roles, which served to amplify the fact that the character was played for laughs, thereby nullifying the trauma inherent to that character's history. Indeed the dialogue, or rather the accent used to convey the dialogue, was once again the problem. Crowley sounded like the worst kind of "Injun" and played the character as an odious stereotype, whose pidgin English served to render Clarke an inconsequential buffoon, rather than a member of an ancient race decimated by the consolidation of European colonialism as the American nation state.

While issues like accent and projection may seem like minor aspects of a production, they are nonetheless crucial aspects of dramaturgy and are even more significant



**WATER OF LIFE:** White Woman Street

in this play. Sebastian Barry is a poet first and foremost, and the strength of his drama is the dialogue which is poetic, multi-layered and replete with subtle nuances. The performance ruined this in several ways: words were spoken too quickly, and were frequently muffled both by the speed of delivery and by the poor acoustics of the theatre. Barry's plays from

*Prayers of Sherkin* to *The Steward of Christendom* involve the representation of Irish history not as a single narrative but as a multiplicity of conflicting voices struggling to be heard. It is only when Barry's dialogue is clearly enunciated that audiences can fully appreciate the historical palimpsest which he deconstructs in his plays.

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Paul Murphy is lecturer in drama at Trinity College, Dublin.

### WOMEN IN ARMS

by Mary Elizabeth Burke-Kennedy

Storytellers Theatre Company in association with Cork Opera House  
On tour; reviewed at the Civic Theatre, Tallaght on 9 April 2002 BY SUSAN CONLEY

THE WONDER TALES OF THE ULSTER CYCLE are common knowledge insofar as they tell the story of Finn MacCumhail, home-grown Irish hero; the prowess of females in the stories is often dismissively reduced to the bits that have to do with Queen Maeve's friendly thighs. In most tellings, women are dangerous and accomplished only via their sexuality (not that that's a bad thing) but the ancient tales yield much more than that. Storytellers Theatre Company have chosen to foreground the experience of the female characters of the Northern cycle beyond, but not exclusive of, ideas of beauty and earthy indulgence, in order to present a more complex picture of not only of the women themselves, but also of their relationships to the men.

They do an extraordinary job of it. This is a stirring, superbly produced, emotionally moving, and oftentimes hilarious production of four tales taken from what is known as the Táin Bó Cuailnge (The Cattle Raid of Cuailnge). In revisiting these tales, Mary Elizabeth Burke-Kennedy rescues the female Celtic character from the sanitised

sation of the 19th century (via, among others, Lady Gregory). At the same time, by highlighting the genealogical thrust of the stories, she also provides insight into something quite basic about Irish dramatic literature, and even society: it's all about story, and all about who's your daddy.

Like any good series — be it a collection of novels, even a mini-series on television — the Ulster Cycle builds itself and its integrity through genealogy. Thus, we first meet Nessa, the eventual mother of Conchobar, King of Ulster, as a young girl, educated in a cloistered environment, living the life of the mind until the day she is brought by her father to the court of Fergus. This is the event that spins the cycle into motion, the consequences of which will be felt throughout each of the stories: as allegiances change, as the former victimised child grows into a powerful, manipulative woman, as Fergus is shunned from his own court, and Conchobar grows into manhood and begins to assert his own will.

Having skillfully robbed Fergus of his crown, Nessa ascends to the position of she who is feared, and in the story of Macha — forced by her bragging husband to race King Conchobar's prize horses, despite her advanced pregnancy — seamlessly assumes the role of "bad guy." Macha is victorious, but lays a curse on the men of Ulster: in the future, on the eve of battle, each and every warrior preparing for the fray would unwillingly feel the birth pangs of Macha, in all their force, rendering equally as helpless and vulnerable. Conchobar will face another loss at the hands of a woman, as his betrothed Deirdre (she of the Sorrows) forsakes him for his kinsman Naoise. Fergus, betrayed by Conchobar, defects to the court of Queen Maeve of Connacht, where a domestic quarrel between herself and her husband Ailill takes on national propor-



**BATTLE STATIONS:** *The cast of Women in Arms*

tions. Fergus is a pivotal member of the warring party that seeks to steal the Brown Bull of Cuailnge, only to be thwarted by Finn MacCumhail... but that's the start of another cycle of wonder tales.

All four stories are told briskly, with humour and heart, by a cast of seven actors who shine in many roles throughout the course of the evening. The four women and three men take on and discard varying levels of status as the tales require, with Cathy Belton, for example, alternating between the regal and ruthless Nessa and one of Macha's gormless but lovable adoptive sons, and Ciaran McIntyre alternatively the disgraced Fergus and the gormless but lovable Cruinnic, husband of Macha. Burke-Kennedy directs her own script with intelligence, and infuses the stories with the kind of brio that any seanacháí, of any age, worth her salt would do. If the epic quality of the piece is let down in any respect, it is in its set design:

Bláithín Sheeran's central, circular platform works very well to focus the action, yet its positioning — off centre, stage left — prevents a series of gripping stage pictures from unfolding. Flats placed at various distances from the platform allow the actors to disappear and change and fetch props, but fail to contribute to the delightful atmosphere that Burke-Kennedy has created.

The tales told are merciless, lusty, and reflect what was surely the vitally necessary hard-headed and -hearted approach of a race of people who lived at the whim of the elements and of their leaders. *Women in Arms* is told with a clarity that is sometimes lacking in the printed forms of the Ulster Cycle (although Thomas Kinsella's translation is superlative), and allows us to grasp quite readily the vital blood line that runs through the stories, a genealogical breadth of knowledge that is still an important part of Irish daily life.



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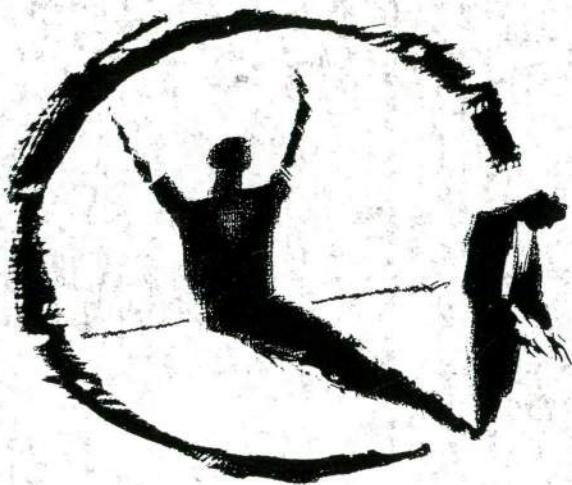
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