

irishtheatre

MAGAZINE

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Finding its feet:
**International Dance
Festival Ireland**
goes annual

Is there life after
Rattlebag?



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SATURDAY 10 - 6
SUNDAY 12 - 4



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REVIEWER

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Operatic fantasies

THE ACHIEVEMENT OF INTERNATIONAL Dance Festival Ireland (IDFI) in establishing itself so quickly demonstrates what a handful of very determined people can do. One thought continually prompted by the success of IDFI is: if it can be done for dance, why not for opera? A biennial international opera festival would provide Irish opera artists and composers with the opportunities here that they crave; would give audiences an awareness of the dynamism and ambition of current international work, and allow the three main opera companies - Wexford, Opera Ireland and Opera Theatre Company - to pool their resources in a mutually beneficial way. It may sound far-fetched, but that's what people said to Catherine Nunes ...

One advantage the dance festival had from the outset was the security of being funded for three years. The difference between that happy situa-

One thought continually prompted by the success of IDFI is: if it can be done for dance, why not for opera?

tion and limping along from year to year need hardly be spelled out, but we do, just in case.

In the midst of the thought-provoking programme curated by Rose Parkinson for Theatre Forum's annual conference this month, a 'soapbox' presentation by Fergal

McGrath of Druid stood out. He called on the assembled group of performing arts practitioners to campaign to the Arts Council for a return to funding arts organisations on a multi-annual basis, proposing that this strate-

gy be resumed, with a limited number of companies, from next year - albeit in a more transparent and flexible way than was the case the last time. We publish an edited version of his speech on Page 16.

Comments on this, and on anything else in the issue, may be sent to editor@irishtheatremagazine.ie.

- Helen Meany

Don't touch that dial

Amid the criticism of RTÉ's decision to drop *Rattlebag*, there has been little debate about how, when and where the arts should be discussed, writes **PETER CRAWLEY**.

ALMOST EXACTLY A YEAR BEFORE RTÉ RADIO 1 DECIDED to drop *Rattlebag* from its afternoon schedule, the literary critic and scholar John Carey made an appearance on the show. He was there to tease out a pertinent and thorny question: what good are the arts? That question has been implicit in the clamour surrounding the decision by the Head of Radio 1, Ana Leddy, to axe the long-running programme, together with John Kelly's music show, *Mystery Train*. (Concerns about slipping John Creedon's broadcasts to a much later slot have been considerably more muted). So far, the termination of *Rattlebag* in September and plans to replace it with a different, hour-long arts show at 11p.m. have been pilloried in a series of letters printed in the *Irish Times*. The substance of those letters criticises RTÉ's policies, but their general tone seems to suggest the arts themselves are under attack.

When it comes to *Rattlebag*, the only wide-ranging magazine programme for arts discussion on RTÉ, Leddy's intentions have been opposed on two main grounds: first, that in ridding the airwaves of the programme (and increasing the airtime afforded to the phone-in, *Liveline*) RTÉ is hastening our cultural and intellectual deterioration. Or, as the letters put it, it is "dumbing down". Secondly, the national broadcaster is charged with dis-



honouring its responsibility to "nurture and contribute to Ireland's rich cultural life", a remit expressed in its recurring and now ironic jingle, "RTÉ – supporting the arts".

One letter to the *Irish Times*, signed by almost sixty arts practitioners, cited – apparently without irony – RTÉ's stated responsibility to "help to create the future, and not simply respond to it". Whether or not it is possible to respond to the future has come under little scrutiny, and such arguments have seemed nebulous. Leddy's explanations hardly appear more rigorous. Broadcasting an arts show after 11 p.m., she said, "gives us the freedom to explore the arts in an edgy, more experimental way".

None of this, however, has yet prompted the question: what good is *Rattlebag*? Gráinne Humphreys, Assistant Director of the Irish Film Institute and a regular contributor to *Rattlebag's* reviews, can see it from both sides: from

a position of arts advocacy and from that of honouring the demands of radio.

"As someone actively involved in putting together programmes [of film], I know that the vast majority of the time, art house cinema is not covered in the same way as mainstream cinema. By its very nature, it's specialist and restricted to the borders of the media. So, from that point of view, it's a shame." And, from the point of the view of the arts – and especially their marketing and PR partners – *Rattlebag's* absence may also threaten general access to the arts.

With its brief segments and hurried analysis, *Rattlebag* was usually generous with soft quotes for a theatre publicist: "It is really good" goes the programme's appraisal in the quote for the Abbey's *A Month in the Country*. Yet, although arts specialists tend to dismiss the programme as dilettantish, they may now regret losing the most popular forum in which their concerns

could receive even a rushed airing. Humphreys thinks that the show definitely brought new audiences to the IFI, although she recognises the arts sector's frustrations with the magazine format. "There were a lot of people who felt it wasn't extreme or in-depth enough. Its eclectic nature seemed to [annoy specialists], but it entertained a broader audience. They didn't turn off."

In fact, though, they did. 150,000 listeners is a boon for the arts, but it's not impressive for radio: (*Liveline*, immediately preceding *Rattlebag* in the schedule, has more than twice as many listeners) and RTÉ is fighting the relatively new competition of Today FM and Newstalk 106. The decision to replace *Rattlebag* with the popular broadcaster Derek Mooney suggests a station that is watching its figures.

A new general arts show begins in September on Radio 1 in the graveyard slot of 11p.m. Meanwhile, hopes abound that the arts and their audience will, somehow, survive. Interested parties, of course, will always seem reactionary when it comes to change. A better argument still awaits about how, when and where the arts are best discussed. Decrying Ana Leddy's decision seems as hollow and conservative as the age-old imperative of the worried DJ: Don't touch that dial.

DESIGNS ON PRAGUE

IRISH THEATRE HAS BEEN CHARACTERISED

as literary since Irish playwrights first set off for Drury Lane. But recently the emphasis on the writer, text and actor has shifted towards an understanding of a theatre piece as a total work of art (thanks, Wagner). Its impact is created as much by the composite images of set design, lighting, costumes, music and choreography as by actors delivering lines.

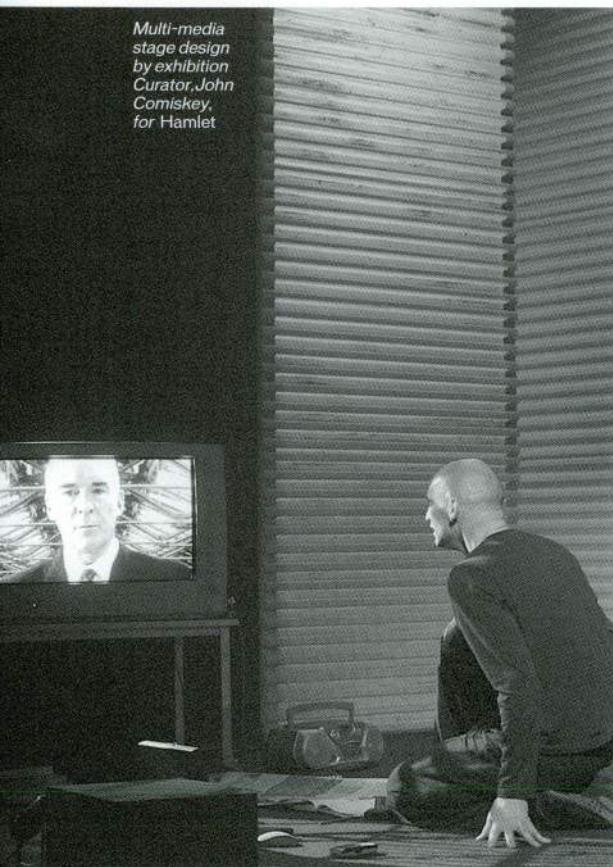
This imagery will be celebrated in the autumn, in a National Exhibition of Design for Performance, to coincide with Dublin Theatre Festival. A selection of the best stage design in Ireland from the past five years will be displayed in Dublin from 27 Sept. – 14 Oct. (venue to be confirmed) in preparation for an international exhibition in the Czech Republic in June 2007. Next year's Quadrennial Exhibition in Prague will showcase design work from 58 countries.

Designs submitted will include set, lighting, costumes, props, masks, puppets, furniture, video and sound design, as well as theatre architecture. They will be selected by a voluntary committee chaired by UCD's Cathy Leeney and including Phelim Donlon, Denis Looby, Colm Ó Briain, Lynne Parker and Enrique Cerconi. Joe Vanek was also involved in planning at the early stages, but, since his own stage designs are eligible for inclusion, has stepped down. Nobly, the exhibition's Curator, John Comiskey, has forgone the possibility of showing

his own work (such as his design for the Peacock's *Hamlet*, below). Funded by Culture Ireland (140,000) and the Arts Council (72,000), the event will be produced by Jane Daly for Theatre Shop. Companies interested in submitting should contact co-ordinator Lian Bell at 01-6704906.

The Prague Quadrennial Exhibition of Scenography and Theatre Architecture will be held from 14-24 June 2007.

Multi-media stage design by exhibition Curator John Comiskey, for Hamlet



GALWAY RALLIES TO THE CALL

LAST NOVEMBER, MICHAEL DISKIN of Galway's Town Hall Theatre caused a stir. Writing in the *Galway Advertiser*, he bemoaned the state of the arts in the west. "There is no 'theatre scene' in Galway," he wrote, "no company of older actors to learn from, no mid-scale companies to aspire to, no obvious career path, no through-going professional training, still no proper Fringe at the Galway Arts Festival".

Add to this the concern about the relationship of Druid and Macnas to the local community, and things seemed decidedly gloomy west of the Shannon.

Eight months on, there's a new air of optimism in the city, with the launch of Paul Fahy's first programme as Galway Arts Festival (GAF) director, an exciting autumn programme at the Town Hall, and the development of Project 06, a festival for local work, which runs in tandem with GAF. Project 06 has the potential to be the most significant of these developments, since it will present over 160 musical and theatrical events – responding positively to the concerns voiced by Diskin and others, and giving local talent a chance to show what it can do. But the

idea has proven controversial, with its relationship to the GAF generating lots of discussion.

The organisers of Project 06 state that they support the Arts Festival, but that "there are problems with the Galway component" of its programme. Demanding a "fair chance" to be part of "Galway's celebration of the arts", the organisers reject suggestions that their festival is a Fringe, stating that using such a tag would "compound the marginalisation of locally based artists".

Interestingly, the GAF 2006 programme is headlined by a new version of *Ubu Roi* by (local) writer Vincent Woods, directed by (local) designer Monica Frawley, and includes three local contributions: a site-specific work by Catastrophe; the revival of An Taidhbhearc's terrific *Cré Na Cille*, and a welcome return to the streets of Galway of Macnas.

After all this, the Town Hall will present the first Irish production of Martin McDonagh's *Lieutenant of Inishmore*, directed by Andrew Flynn, in August. Druid originally passed on the opportunity to stage it, due to its controversial treatment of Irish terrorism – much to McDonagh's disgust. It will be followed by Druid's production of Stuart Carolan's *Empress of India*, a new play from the author of *Defender of the Faith*.

Reports by Peter Crawley, Helen Meany and Patrick Lonergan.

Those who can, do

Writing his new play for the Gaiety School of Acting's graduation show, literary manager **GAVIN KOSTICK** finds that he has to forget the dramaturgical advice he offers to other playwrights, and remember how to dream.

RIIGHT NOW I SHOULD BE LASHING into a final draught of *Olive Skin, Blood Mouth*, due first thing tomorrow morning. If I don't get it in, the wrath of Patrick Sutton awaits. Writing this play - adaptations from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, set in post-invasion Iraq - I'm reflecting on how my writing process has changed, given that over the last five years I've shifted from being solely a playwright to being Literary Officer with Fishamble and running playwriting courses. Yet I can't really get into the subtler issues without starting with a howl of anguish that the huge issue is time, goddamit.

The main reason I haven't written as many full-length plays as I might have is nothing to do with philosophical issues, but to do with classic juggling of a home life with kids and working in the arts.

But I certainly have wondered whether the quantity of teaching I'm doing is negatively affecting my writing. Bluntly, the answer is: not that much. Sometimes I fear that people assume that if an artist turns to teaching, it is a kind of failure, and conversely that if a person teaches but is not successfully productive artisti-

cally, then he or she is something of a quack.

I remind myself of the following: it is perfectly possible to be a good artist and a good teacher, a good artist and a bad teacher, a bad artist and a good teacher, and also to be bad at both. I suffer the occasional anxieties: is what I'm teaching genuinely valid or just an enjoyable way of spending two hours? Or: because of the teaching, is my writing more consciously "rule-bound" than it should be?



Playwriting is a combination of the irrational/visionary and pragmatic craft. Teaching, by its nature, tends towards the pragmatic and discursive end of things, so I spend a lot of time early on in playwriting courses, and in my work with other playwrights, encouraging and developing the writer's visionary qualities.

In writing *Olive Skin, Blood Mouth*, I have noticed that I have been a bit quick to rationalize what I'm doing in words, rather than dream it. So I spend a bit of

time letting go of the need to make sense of what I'm doing, in the hope that when I'm finished, I can extract some good lessons.

When things are going well, the two parts, creating and teaching, act as a dialectic. Things that I learn by actually doing challenge what I teach and then are brought into my classes, and stuff that we discuss in the groups comes back into the creative process. Handily, the one thing I am not, is threatened by the talent of others.

Part of my interest in teaching writing is not so much teaching at all, but finding ways in which people can develop differently and beyond what I myself might do. It's not like the brilliant maths teacher, who is ultimately defeated by the prize pupil who cracks the equation first. It's more a hope that by pushing and probing, people might find ways to create their own dramatic territory.

I'm looking for the students and the writers I work with to be different from, or better than me. Did I mention that Gary Duggan received the Stewart Parker Award for Fishamble's production of *Monged*? I'm bloody delighted about working with him on that and don't feel that jealousy bone twinging.

Olive Skin, Blood Mouth by Gavin Kostick runs at Project, Dublin until 24 June.

opening nights

TANYA DEAN marks your diaries for the months ahead

Tall Tales Theatre Company's **MELODY** by Deirdre Kinahan will run at lunchtime at Bewley's Café Theatre, Dublin, from 11 June - 22 July.

BLUE/ORANGE by Joe Penhall plays at the Peacock Theatre, Dublin, from 16 June - 15 July.

The City Theatre Dublin's production of **SISTERS** by Declan Hassett plays at the Civic Theatre, Tallaght from 19 June - 1 July.

Fitzgerald's Park in Cork hosts Corcadourca's **THE TEMPEST** by William Shakespeare from 22 June - 1 July.

Everyman Palace Theatre, Cork, presents Boomerang Theatre Company/with Cork Midsummer Festival's production of Enda Walsh's **CHAT-ROOM** from 26 - 29 June.

Once Off Productions present a double-bill of site-specific theatre from 27 June - 1 July in the Cork Midsummer Festival: **THE TRAIN SHOW** (devised by Playgroup) on board the Cork-Cobh commuter train, and **DRIVE-BY** by Tom Swift at the Docklands.

Throughout July and August, Siamsa

Tíre National Folk Theatre of Ireland, Tralee, presents **SAN AM FADÓ - A YEAR'S CYCLE OF LIVING AND WORKING THE LAND**.

PurpleHeart Theatre Company presents Logan Brown's **HOW TO ACT AROUND COPS** at Mill Theatre, Dundrum Town Centre from 3 - 15 July.

From 4 July - 3 September, The New Theatre, Dublin will present **THE TAI-LOR AND ANSTY** by Eric Cross (adapted for stage by P.J. O'Connor) at the Gougane Barra Theatre by the Lake, Macroom, Co. Cork.

Making Strange Theatre Company in association with Focus Theatre presents **HEDWIG AND THE ANGRY INCH** by John Cameron Mitchell at Project, Dublin from 4 - 15 July.

Siamsa Tíre National Folk Theatre presents **CLANN LIR - AN ETERNAL TALE OF EVIL AND SALVATION** from 6 - 31 July.

From 8 July - 9 September, the Abbey Theatre revives **THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST** by Oscar Wilde.

Skylight Productions presents **TWELVE**

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- 5th & 6th October 13th annual Conference and Networking Event. A chance to network with international producers and presenters. Spaces are limited, please book online from Mid-July
- November CINARS Platform Montreal - promoting Irish theatre and dance companies at this key arts market and conference
- January 2007 APAP Conference, Showcase & Arts Market, New York - continuing to build the profile of Irish theatre and dance at one of the world's most established networking events
- Spring 2007 publication of the 4th edition of The Irish Theatre Handbook

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ANGRY MEN by Reginald Rose at the Everyman Palace Theatre, Cork, from 12 - 22 July.

From 13 - 16 July, Fishamble presents **WHEREABOUTS**, a series of short site-specific plays in various locations throughout Temple Bar, Dublin.

Barabbas's new show, **HAIRDRESSER IN THE HOUSE** runs at the Bank of Ireland Theatre, NUIG, as part of the Galway Arts Festival from 25 - 30 July.

Project Arts Centre, Dublin hosts Focus Theatre's **MOTHER TERESA IS DEAD** by Helen Edmondson from 8 - 26 August.

HEDY LAMARR AND THE EASTER RISING

(written and performed by Michael James Ford) premieres at Bewley's Café Theatre, Dublin, from 15 August - 9 September.

Dubbeljoint will be touring Gary Mitchell's new play **REMNANTS OF FEAR** from 21 August - 9 September.

THE LIEUTENANT OF INISHMORE by Martin McDonagh will play at the Town Hall Theatre, Galway from 18 August - 2 September, then tours to Cork Opera House from 5 - 9 September, and Millennium Forum, Derry from 12 - 16 September.

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entrances & exits

TANYA DEAN notes movements behind the scenes in Irish theatre

GRAEME FARROW (pictured) has been appointed Director of the 2006 Belfast Festival at Queen's. He has worked with the festival since 1999 in a variety of roles and replaces **STELLA HALL** who is now Creative Director of the Newcastle-Gateshead Initiative... **JOHN O'BRIEN** has taken over as Manager at the Riverbank Arts Centre in Newbridge. He replaces **MARCELLA BANNON**, who is now Director of Droichead Arts Centre in Drogheda.

CLAUDIA WOOLGAR, a former Artistic Director of Kilkenny Arts Festival, has been appointed director of The Source, the new arts centre in Thurles opening in June ... Upstate Theatre Project in Drogheda has appointed **HUGH O'REILLY** as Company Manager. This is a new position.

The Association of Professional Dancers in Ireland has appointed **PAUL JOHNSON** as Chief Executive. For the past three years, Paul was Artists' Services Manager with the Arts Council.



DENIS CONWAY has been appointed Artistic Director of Ouroboros Theatre. He replaces **WENDY DEMPSEY** who has joined the Dublin Fringe Festival as General Manager, replacing **ORLA DUNNE...** **PAULA MCFETRIDGE** has left the Lyric Theatre, Belfast, to join Kabosh Theatre Company as the new Artistic Director.

PADDY MC LAUGHLIN has left Opera Theatre Company, after five years as its Technical Director, to work as a freelance production manager and lighting designer in opera and theatre.

SITUATIONS VACANT

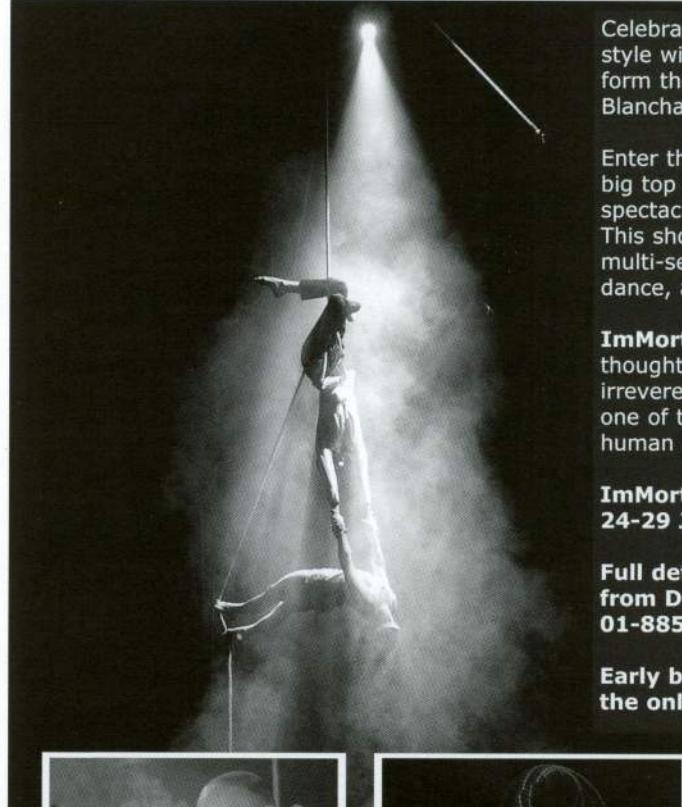
The Abbey Theatre is seeking a new Theatre Manager, Box Office and Sales Manager, and Press and Marketing Manager.

Dublin Fringe Festival is looking for a Production Manager.

The National Association of Youth Drama is seeking a new Drama Officer and a new Research and Development Officer.

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THE IRISH TIMES

BRITISH COUNCIL
Ireland

sounding board

Thanks to the Abbey's new funding arrangement, multi-annual funding is back on the agenda for all arts organisations, argues **FERGAL McGRATH**, Managing Director of Druid Theatre Company.

IT'S NOT OFTEN IN LIFE that the right thing to do is the strategically clever and blindingly obvious thing to do. And it isn't always that all client categories of the Arts Council are at one in their view of a funding strategy. But in the case of multi-annual funding (MAF), all of the above are true and it's easy to see why.

The current annual funding cycle creates enormous difficulties for many arts organisations in terms of artistic, financial and strategic planning. And we are increasingly – and frustratingly – out of step with our international colleagues in our inability to plan for the medium and long term.

In recent years, arts organisations have been notified of their annual revenue grant in December, which is shockingly late for planning a programme of activity commencing in January. The situation was exacerbated this year when grant decisions were not announced until late January.

MAF would allow organisations adopt and implement three to five-year programmes of activity, enabling them to plan effectively, to enter into



longer term commitments with artists, and in many cases attract additional resources – all ensuring more efficient management of scarce resources and better value for money for the public purse. It's a no-brainer, really.

We're all aware of the lessons learned from the previous MAF: there was no scope for open application, lack of clarity about why certain companies were brought into MAF and no publicly accessible way of judging the success of such agreements. Perhaps a new MAF structure might (a) be an open application, with all Council clients free to apply, and (b) have more transparent evaluation procedures. Previously MAF was thought of as an award for excellence and experience, but a revised MAF structure should include opportunities for new companies, to ensure equal opportunities for emerging talent.

Whatever happens, the funding structures - MAF, annual revenue funding and production funding - should be kept fluid. And there shouldn't be a sense of any permanent entitlement.



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Choreographer and performer Nigel Charnock
(UK) at this year's dance festival

Coming of age

After three years as a biennial event, International Dance Festival Ireland is to become a yearly feature of the arts calendar. **MICHAEL SEAVER** assesses its achievements so far, as well as its influence on Irish dance companies and audiences.

THERE WERE DIFFERENT EXPECTATIONS BACK THEN. Sitting alongside Catherine Nunes during a forum about the future of the New Music/New Dance Festival in 1994, I daydreamed out loud - and Nunes spoke more practically - about how the festival could be expanded to include international practitioners and become a vital part of the slowly evolving dance infrastructure. The dance community reacted defensively. New Music/New Dance provided one of the few opportunities for many to perform and they were not prepared to hand it over to outsiders.

These days dancers don't feel as threatened by outside companies and thinking has matured along with the dance ecology, which now includes International Dance Festival Ireland (IDFI). Its Artistic director, Catherine Nunes, nurtured the idea of a festival through other forums, a feasibility study and then three years of dialogue with the Arts Council. It was a protracted but rigorous

process. "Some good, hard questions were asked," Gaye Tanham, former Dance Officer with the Arts Council, told the *Irish Times* in 2001, "but there is genuine excitement about the festival's plans.

There was also a little uneasiness about some of the festival's claims of audience development. Although hoopla and spin are all part of the publicist's armoury, IDFI is prone to overstating its case.

Companies from Rambert Dance Company to Ultima Vez. But as a stand-alone dance festival, IDFI has been able to make a statement on dance terms, rather than providing another option for theatre audiences. The inaugural festival in 2002 launched with Merce Cunningham at the Abbey. It was a bold statement and signalled an intent: not only was dance going to inhabit the cultural consciousness proudly (via the Abbey stage) but also excellently, in the form of the most famous avant-garde choreographer.

At the first festival's programme launch at the River Club, chairperson Fiach Mac Conghail was at pains to acknowledge organisers of previous smaller-scale dance festivals in Dublin and Wexford, indicating an awareness of the perception that the festival had been parachuted in from nowhere. "The only benchmark is quality," Nunes had told the *Irish Times* a few months before that launch. "I'm already talking to some Irish companies. These companies already have an audience and what I'm interested in is them trying something different, and helping them develop an audience in other ways."

That first programme featured works by two Irish choreographers who were on the festival's board, as well as work by an associated company. Accusations of cronyism were muttered, although, to be fair, all of the works deserved their place in the festival.

There was also uneasiness at some of the festival's claims of audience development. Although hoopla and spin are all part of the publicist's armoury, IDFI is prone to overstating its case. "The repercussions will be unimaginable for Irish cultural life," predicted Nunes at the announcement of the Arts Council's support for International Dance Festival Ireland. In this year's programme, in April 2006, she credited the two previous IDFI festivals (and last year's production of DV8's *Just for Show*) with spawning Irish audiences' "newfound and ex-

Providing opportunities for Irish audiences to see international performing arts practitioners has almost always been left to festivals. Until relatively recently, the Dublin Theatre Festival was alone in presenting large-scale dance productions, featuring com-



VSPRS performed by Les Ballets C. De La B. from Belgium to the score of Monteverdi's *Vespers*

uberant appreciation of dance". She added: "The primary aim of the festival must be to bring contemporary dance to the forefront of the Irish creative imagination. I trust that we have achieved this [in the first two festivals]."

While the festival has certainly added to the general profile of dance, with headline acts such as Merce Cunningham and Mark Morris performing at the Abbey accompanied by high-profile media campaigns, it is difficult to ascertain to what extent three festivals in six years have developed audiences for dance. IDFI's audiences have certainly grown since 2002, but how much does this growth transfer to other dance events in the period between festivals? Will those who come to Mark Morris at the Abbey during the festival go to Rex Levitates at the Project? Some companies feel they are sustaining audiences throughout the year rather than having the big splash event every two years. When IDFI becomes an annual event in 2008, there will be more of a sense of continuity between festivals, and achieve-

ments in audience development will become more tangible.

But is there too much attention paid to audience building? In a funding culture of box ticking and performance indicators there is pressure to contribute transparently to the greater good, which probably explains those bold claims of bringing contemporary dance to the forefront of the Irish creative imagination. Isn't it enough to offer Irish audiences the best of international dance? Does the festival need to prove that it is making life better for indigenous companies by providing them with audiences?

IDFI has the advantage of asserting its identity without competition from other producers. This year's programme choices indicate that this freedom – and responsibility – sits more comfortably than before.

Workshops in filming dance were offered in the first two festivals, leading to four films commissioned for this year's festival and shown on RTÉ1 and in Meeting House Square. These and other ancillary activities such as dance criticism, dance-for-children and visual art/dance collaborations are also filling important lacunae in the dance infrastructure in less obvious but just as important ways.

There was also a clearer programming strand in this year's festival. The first two festivals featured some repeats of programmes by Dance Umbrella in London. In 2004 *Both Sitting Duet* (Jonathan Burrows and Mattio Fargion), *Once* (Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker), *Le Temps Du Repli* (Josef Nadj), *In Bella Copia* (Déjà Donné), and Stephen Petronio's programme had all appeared at Dance Umbrella the previous year. In addition, *Rain* (Rosas) featured in Dance Umbrella 2002 and Mark Morris is a regular participant.

There is a clearer sense of the aesthetic that is attractive to Nunes as Artistic Director. The fact that IDFI is developing an ongoing relationship with Jérôme Bel is indicative of the type of work – concept over steps - that might underpin future festivals. Nigel Charnock, John Jasperse, Raimond Hoghe, Alain Platel who all visited this year are other examples of possible directions.

The festival has exceeded what many expected, and these days there is more openness in the dance community than twelve years ago. Although the name isn't exactly catchy, and it's more a Dublin festival than an Irish one, IDFI has the advantage of asserting its identity without competition from other producers. This year's programme choices indicate that this freedom – and responsibility – sits more comfortably than before.

Michael Seaver is a dance writer and critic with the Irish Times.



Montalvo-Hervieu's ON DANSE

Motion pictures

SEONA Mac REAMOINN moves with the constantly shifting styles, rhythms and perspectives of this year's festival.

WAYS OF SEEING: THAT'S WHAT THE BEST FESTIVALS should offer, engaging us at different tempos, creating an immediate response or a delayed reaction. Deborah Jowitt, the distinguished US dance critic who contributed to this year's International Dance Festival Ireland through a lecture, a critics' forum and a dance writing workshop (all part of Critical Voices 3), alluded to that precise aspect of engaging with dance. As she commented on the overall programme of the festival, she talked about the different ways "of getting into the viewing" and the varied levels of intensity with which our bodies and minds respond to dance.

This year's festival allowed us myriad perspectives, building on the previous two events to create a festival that was as important for how we experienced it as for what was on offer. We were not only entertained, enthralled or surprised, but through the diversity of the dance we also learned about the varied direc-

tions in which the art form may travel and began to develop our own contexts for the range of performances.

In the first week of the festival, the opening shows at the Abbey were not the headlining names of Merce Cunningham or Mark Morris as in the past, but a trio of less familiar but excellent companies: Les Ballet C de la B from Belgium, Shen Wei, China/USA and Montalvo Hervieu

from France. They were distinctive from each other in style and content and so began that process of seeing in different ways and learning about performance and how choreographers choose to communicate their art.

Les Ballets C de la B's *Vsprs*, situated firmly in the European dance theatre tradition, challenged us by choosing the uncomfortable theme of mental illness, simulating the physical manifestations of disturbed minds and mixing this with religious imagery. But choreographer Alain Platel also chose to make as strong an impact as possible through reworking Monteverdi's *Vespers* and including ten musicians and a singer on stage. This raised the pitch to operatic heights and left us disturbed but perhaps more human.

Tchaikovsky's score for *Swan Lake* was the starting point for another highly theatrical work: Raimund Hoghe's radical but respectful homage to the classic ballet. His staging was slow, precise and delicate, creating small but perfectly formed images. Hoghe as choreographer and dancer deployed his own physical imperfection (he has a severe curvature of the spine) to challenge our concepts of beauty and human vulnerability. He also succeeded in emphasising the haunting impact of the ballet by creating an equally haunting new work.

Slow or delicate are not words we could use for two other festival events that were high octane in style and impact, in the sheer exuberance of Montalvo Hervieu and the effervescent Nigel Charnock. Here we saw performances with dancers who engaged with their audience full-on. They seemed aware of all of the alternative attractions of the twenty-first century and incorporated them into their work in order to command our focus on dance. The French company used technology with colourful, magical animation and video dance to complement their celebratory dancers, while the highly energetic and accomplished Nigel Charnock (UK) presented his lethal cocktail of stand-up comedy, song, dance, vaudeville and iconoclastic musings - all delivered at breakneck speed. Here were bodies in motion demanding immediate response.

PRONE, presented by the John Jasperse Company
from the USA, inviting audience participation.



The CHARLES LINEHAN COMPANY presented workshops as well as performances at the festival.

The pace slowed down almost to a full stop when the Charles Linehan Company from Britain took to the stage. Their abstract movement, where dancers made contact with one another more than with the viewer, drew on another

sensibility and forced us as audiences to adapt and to appreciate sound, space and movement stripped down to essentials.

Shen Wei's Chinese origins were brought to the dance gestures and movement in both pieces, with wonderful images of folding bodies bent over imaginary fields of rice.

But, in truth, we had been prepared. The opening performance of the Shen Wei Company at the Abbey had lulled us into a different rhythm. Their version of *The Rite of Spring* was also shorn of all ornamentation, and even reference to the fertility rite, as it concentrated on the pulse and syncopation of Stravinsky's score. Wei's Chinese origins were brought to the dance gesture and movement in both pieces shown at the festival with wonderful images of folding bodies bent over imaginary fields of rice, and a slow ceremonial air that showed us another way to watch the dance. That other way was taken

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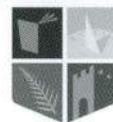
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literally by John Jasperse when he and his company of dancers presented their work, *Prone*, subverting the role of dancer and audience. It was not the performers who were lying still on the floor of the stage, but members of the audience who were horizontal, seeing the dancers leap over them or incline into them. When too intimate, they could alternatively watch both themselves and

the performers through some of the overhanging mirrored screens.

As Ó Neachtain's languid hard shoe shuffle gathered rhythm and speed, there was a stillness and grace that seemed to emanate from his whole body. Purity in motion.

specific work was set in Temple Bar Studios, where viewers and dancers exchanged an upstairs-downstairs routine, bringing many new perspectives.

One of the most innovative ways of viewing in this year's festival was through "Dance on the Box", a new festival collaboration with RTÉ that brought the eye of the camera to dance. Of the four original five-minute dance films screened, the two most successful connections were those made between Fearghus Ó Conchubhair and film-maker Dearbhla Walsh, and between choreographer John Scott and film-maker Steve Woods. Here again we watched the configuration of movements in space. Interestingly, both dance-makers, clearly undaunted, chose very large arenas as their canvas, despite choreographing for a small screen. Ó Conchubhair brought physical movement of an unexpected kind to Croke Park and Scott cleverly patterned his dance moves in a modern glass office space.

The festival closed with an exciting take on exhibition and exposition as a Connemara sean nós dancer teamed up with a Caribbean tap dancer. Seosamh Ó Neachtain and Tamango.came together with their own musical collaborators. The French Guianan tap virtuoso revelled in the percussive speed of his exhilarating performance, the display inseparable from the rest. Ó Neachtain revelled equally, but as his languid hard shoe shuffle gathered perfect rhythm and speed, there was a stillness and grace that seemed to emanate from his whole body. Purity in motion.

It seemed at that moment that, beginning with the symmetry and radiance of Merce Cunningham four years ago, the dance festival and its audience together had found their feet.



Seona MacReamoinn is a dance writer and critic living in Dublin.



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*Bradford Louryk in Christine Jorgensen Reveals,
staged by Splinter Group Productions (USA)*

The politics of desire

Is gay theatre the same as queer theatre? Is identity politics more important than art? Watching two weeks of performances at the third International Dublin Gay Theatre Festival and listening to the surrounding debates, **FINTAN WALSH** gets a few things straight.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY WILL ST LEGER

EVER SINCE OEDIPUS SLEPT WITH HIS MOTHER, performance has been inherently queer. When the infamous king killed his father and cuckolded his marital bed, Oedipus's disturbance of sexual and social norms unleashed a plague upon Thebes that resulted in his expulsion. Although Oedipus's literal crime was incest, his symbolic one was the queering of social norms. If we accept that the western theatrical canon is haunted by the actions of Oedipus, then we should also acknowledge that it is haunted by its queer foundations. Not queer in the sense that homosexuality, cross-dressing and masquerading feature at every curtain rise (although they do feature heavily), but queer insofar as performance is chiefly concerned with the problem of managing desire: the conflict between what individuals say they want, what they really want, and what society demands. In varying degrees, performance makes manifest all these permutations and circulations of feeling, both on the surface and latent. No matter what the intentions of a playwright, an institution, or a production; no matter even the existence of elements of homophobia and misogyny, it is desire that triumphs in performance, as the slippery magic between actors and spectators that resists rigidity, closure, "straightness".

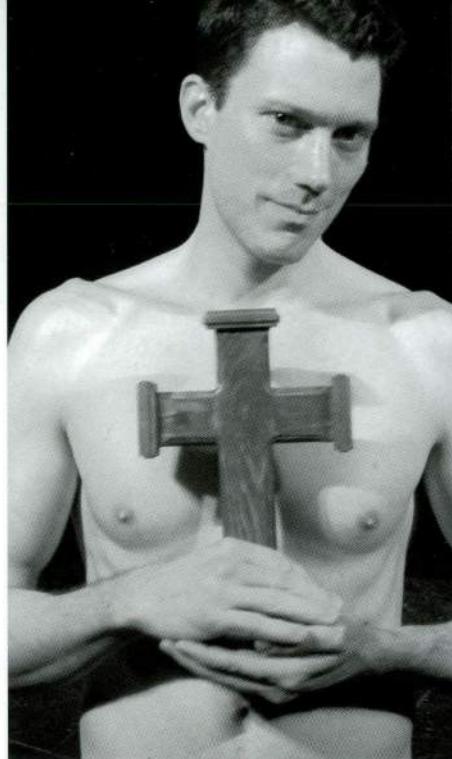
Those already sensitive to theatre's queer allure may have been surprised three years ago, when Dublin launched its first international gay theatre festival. In a city that already hosts well established theatre and fringe festivals, you'd be forgiven for fearing a case of two's company, three's a crowd. But there are cru-

cial distinctions to be made between the queer aspect of theatre and gay theatre: gay theatre is concerned above all with gay identity politics. While I write as a theatre supporter and as a gay rights supporter, these are two distinct fields and their merger poses a critical difficulty: should we judge the festival on performances or politics? The obvious answer is to address both, but by virtue of its "gay" designation, the political dimension seems more important than the theatrical one, and any straightforward critique of individual performances would not do justice to the cultural importance and potential of the festival.

Brian Merriman, its Artistic Director, emphasises this political priority: "The festival is political – so is theatre. It's a courageous and innovative visibility project. It will inform, educate, liberate and entertain." Indeed, visibility seems to be a key objective of the festival, and was one of the words uttered at a number of discussions during the two-week festival, often followed up by talks on partnership rights, the assumption being that visibility equals political clout. Yet the theory that what's visible is powerful is questionable. All too often, gay representation commodifies and fetishises its subject, and fears about this may have been prompted by the sight of

arch gay commodity Oscar Wilde chewing a carnation on banners and programmes during this festival. Yet, while these concerns are real, surely any effort towards social equality should be given a chance.

In a bid to resist claims of exclusivity, one of the festival's slogans was "don't attend because it is gay theatre – attend because it is good theatre". Generous as this invitation is, the act of naming is an exclusionary one. You can't attach the word "gay" to a festival and expect homophobic policy-makers to line up in the front rows. If such people do not listen, then gay people will continue to talk to themselves, and the goals that the festival strives for will not be achieved. All that will be





Oh Holy Allen Ginsburg: Charles Manson: Where Are You? and Somewhere in Between

achieved is visibility, but most likely of the "Graham Norton, entertaining at a distance" kind. As the distinguished academic Alan Sinfield pointed out during the festival's inaugural academic conference, there is no queer subversion or gay advancement without engaging with the opposition. Despite the expressed intentions of the organising committee, there is a danger that the act of naming plays as "gay" and the process of making a festival with those plays forecloses the possibility of real engagement because it seems either to privatise the event or exoticise it.

These anxieties are largely bound up with issues of timing. In terms of gay rights, Ireland is an interesting case, since it has never had a radical gay and lesbian moment. There have been legal watersheds, drag shows, pageants, arts festivals, and Pride festivals, but nothing comparable to Stonewall in the USA, for example. These critical moments seem to organically produce art forms, centres, and organisations that definitively identify themselves as gay. This is a necessary act of naming because it validates an excluded group and launches marginal experience onto the dominant stage. Further, in this climactic release there is a willingness to speak and be spoken for, and a general consensus on how to do so.

In the absence of this gay and lesbian defining moment, gay issues in Ireland chiefly entered dominant public consciousness through legal debate and academic critique. Although dramatist Frank McGuinness has been staging gay characters

for decades, upsetting restrictive notions of national identity, homosexuality has rarely been addressed in reviews of McGuinness's work, according to critic David Cregan. So it's not that queerness or homosexuality have been absent on the Irish

stage, rather that they have been negatively imagined, poorly received or ignored. The truth is that culturally we have skirted around gay experience and, on the whole, gay lives have been silently led.

Gay lives are so diverse now that many gay people will be wary of an event that claims to speak to and for them, an age-old problem of "community" dynamics. Not all gay people like the Eurovision; not all gay people like drag.

A key question that this gay theatre festival raises is whether

or not the event is timely, or too late. Although gay people may still share goals, these are different to the goals of visibility and recognition that characterise a national "coming out". Gay lives are so diverse now that many gay people will be wary of an event that claims to speak to and for them, an age-old problem of "community" dynamics. Not all gay people like the Eurovision, not all gay people like drag, not all gay people are suicidal.

Yes, these themes did appear at this year's festival, as well as less obvious issues such as homelessness, gay youth, and transgendered lives. There was comedy, tragedy, high camp, and musical performance, with companies travelling from the USA, the UK, Canada, Israel and South Africa. Irish work featured heavily too from new and old companies, writers, and performers.

In the first week, Dublin based company Three Wise Women staged a new play, *The Drowning Room*, by Verity-Alicia Mavenawitz at Andrew's Lane Theatre. Young Seán Roche has been beaten to death for wearing "poncy boots". His family and friends meet on stage, one year on, to scatter his ashes. Though a valid plot premise, the production was let down by the fact that actors sat in a circle mourning throughout, speaking about the past, rather than doing anything in the present. There is a difference between theatre performance and storytelling. A more successful piece of writing came from Ursula Rani Sarma, whose play *The Spider Men* was produced by Kildare Youth Theatre at The Teachers' Club. This is a short piece about growing up and the anxiety and confusion experienced by teenagers over a range of issues, including sexuality. Well acted, this production added age diversity to the festival, although it did suffer from sloppy ensemble movement on a notoriously claustrophobic stage.

An even more successful production came from DAYMS in the form of Emma Donoghue's *I Know My Own Heart*. This acclaimed play about the lesbian heiress

Anne Lister who challenged Regency expectations of women was directed by Clare McQuaid, featuring accomplished performances by Sarah Barragh, Mira Noltenius and Lynda Gough. Dublin-based Biscuits for Breakfast staged a soap opera, *Gay and Confused*, by Patrick Walshe at The George nightclub. Although a novel idea that involved staging short episodes each night during the festival, this ultimately unfolded into a bizarre, wandering venture best viewed with a drink close by.

Outside of Ireland, New York based Splinter Group presented *Christine Jorgensen Reveals*, a piece which embodied the only recorded interview of America's first famous transsexual, Christine Jorgenson. Although actor Bradford Louryk lip-syncs with amazing precision, one wonders why he did so when he could use his own voice? Although lip-syncing theoretically destabilises gender positions in drag performance, there is a loss of theatricality here since the dialogue is so rich. The piece was a double-bill with *All Alone* from Post Script Theatre, London, a play which sees a man use the Internet to lure women into his flat only to sexually abuse and kill them. With naked men spitting and masturbating on stage, and a woman spewing blood, this piece had all the subtlety of a car crash.

The festival ended with a Gala performance at Temple Bar Music Centre, where scenes from various productions in the festival, and some unrelated to it, were staged. Memorable performances included a scene from Randolph SD's production of Lorca's *The Public* (reviewed elsewhere in this magazine), and a captivating reading by Mark O'Halloran of Neil Watkins' hard-hitting *A Cure for Homosexuality*, a work first staged at the festival in 2005 that seamlessly fuses politics and theatricality.

The International Dublin Gay Theatre Festival raises a lot of difficult but important questions. If we grant it an experimental licence and space to grow, and accept that it cannot be all things to all people, where do we locate its value now? At this early stage, I suggest that it is more interesting as a cultural event, alongside Alternative Miss Ireland and Pride, for example, than as a theatrical one. As such, it is an important arena through which gay issues and gay experience might be affirmed in a national and international context. If it is to gain credibility as a theatre festival on a par with others, then performance quality will have to improve, but maintaining the balance of art with politics is no easy task. If the festival's political objectives are met in coming years, it will be interesting to see how the festival maintains its relationship to mainstream and fringe festivals. Ironically, one imagines that the ultimate objective would be for there to be no need for a gay theatre festival at all.

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



Loss and recovery

Documenting the ephemeral arts of dance and physical theatre has always been problematic. As a new book charts the development of dance and movement in Ireland, **MICHAEL SEAVER** extracts some threads connecting past to present.

THE HISTORY OF IRISH DANCE AND physical theatre is made up of a few threads of individual practice. It does not provide rich pickings for the historian, but there is enough material to form a warp so that the historian can create a weft.

Irish Moves: An Illustrated History of Dance and Physical Theatre in Ireland emerged from journalist Deirdre Mulrooney's RTÉ radio series *Nice Moves*, whose five programmes of interviews have been expanded into eight chapters. However, transcribed interviews don't coalesce into a history of dance and physical theatre in Ireland. It's not just that the choice of interviewees offers a limited range of opinions (there were more than nine people responsible for the "evolution of Ireland's contemporary dance

landscape"). It's that we miss the historian's intervention in analysing and creating a narrative from the primary sources. After her introduction, which meanders through varying manifestations of the Irish body, on and off stage, Mulrooney makes an early exit on page 22 of this 295-page collection - "I thought it wise to leave the speculation to people best positioned to know" - which is a pity.

The lack of critical mass, referred to throughout, makes an intervention from a historian all the more necessary as we are left to infer our own connections. One aspect that emerges is how dependent dance schools or

companies have been on the individuals who founded them. The Abbey School of Ballet lasted only a few years after the departure to London of

**IRISH MOVES:
AN ILLUSTRATED HISTORY
OF DANCE AND PHYSICAL
THEATRE IN IRELAND
BY DEIRDRE MULROONEY**
Liffey Press, 2006

Ninette de Valois, as was the case with Erina Brady's school. This constant regeneration led to what Mary Brady, former director of the Institute for Choreography and Dance (absent from this book), called the culture of loss and recovery.

Former *Sunday Tribune* dance critic Diana Theodores (also absent) wrote in 1996 that "eighteen dance companies, four 'national academies' of dance training, a host of dance forums, conferences, schools programmes, mini-festivals and performance projects, arts funding policies, a national dance magazine, and a national dance council all went through birth, burial, and/or reincarnation during the life of my dance column [from 1984-92]."

This culture of loss and recovery still prevails today. Last year, in an interview with choreographer Michael Keegan Dolan, the *Guardian* re-invented history with a headline: "Ireland finally has a modern dance scene - thanks to one anarchic choreographer" (February 23, 2005). Earlier this year the Arts Council discontinued funding to the Institute for Choreography and Dance in Cork and then invited tenders for other or-

Earlier this year the Arts Council discontinued funding to the Institute for Choreography and Dance in Cork and then invited tenders for other organisations to supply its programme... But this instability has also nourished a culture of possibility.

ganisations to supply its programme.

But this instability has also nourished a culture of possibility. The Abbey School of Ballet (1920s), Erina Brady's school (1940s), Joan Davis's Dublin Contemporary Dance Theatre (1970s) as well as others unmentioned

in the book – Mary Brady's NOW in Belfast, Kalichi's Liberation Dance Workshop, and Cathy O'Kennedy's Movement Month – grew from the belief that anyone could be a dancer. Non-dancers didn't exist and there were no hang-ups about the need for years of training or

impeccable technique. Dance was democratising and there was a spirit of subversion about these dancers, of going against the grain, performing for the hell of it. And could the fact that eighteen companies emerged in Diana Theodores' eight-year tenure as dance critic be seen positively, as evidence of a vibrant dance culture, however unstable?

A by-product of this culture is the lack of a sense of repertory in Irish dance. There is a constant desire to create new work, and choreographers rarely revisit old work. Certainly, nobody considered dance worthy of documentation, as lament-

ed in *Irish Moves*, but this includes the practitioners themselves. Being a pioneer in dance or physical theatre has often been worn like a badge of honour, and within an underdeveloped culture there is often the pressure to be "the first". Joan Davis didn't know about the work of Erina Brady thirty years previously, but would that knowledge have lessened her struggle to establish a contemporary dance company? Is it easier to forge a new path than draw on the past? These are questions now facing those dancers and choreographers who are drawing influence from both traditional and contemporary practice, such as Colin Dunne and Jean Butler.

Most disappointing is the chapter on physical theatre, where the individual voices of Raymond Keane, Patrick Mason and Gina Moxley only discuss their own work, without reference to a larger body of work. This is all the more ironic since they all lament how the voice is isolated from the physical body in Irish theatre.

It all leads to the unpalatable question: can we trust these voices to provide a history? Each of the interviewees has their own version of dance or theatre history and of their own significance within it. Of course, any history of an art should express the intention of the artist, but it should also cast an objective critical eye on the result of their creative action.

Irish Moves is in desperate need of a

more critical eye. It's not just the typos (such as DV8's Lloyd "New-som", listed in the index as "New-some"), or the factual inaccuracies that slipped past the editor (the Arts Council didn't cut funding to all companies in 1989; dance is also on the drama syllabus at Trinity College Dublin and DIT, and Fluxusdance is based in Kildare not Wexford). Some statements made by the artists are left unchallenged and the author makes some unlikely comparisons ("Similar to ballet legend Mikhail Baryshnikov, Joanna [Banks] now brings her wealth of experience to the contemporary dance world via John Scott's Irish Modern Dance Theatre").

Yet important gaps are plugged. Since the Abbey ignored dance during its centenary celebrations, the first-hand accounts of the Abbey School of Ballet are significant. Erina Brady's position of importance has been secured, and an extract from the late Jacqueline Robinson's unpublished *Modern Dance in Dublin in the 1940s* is now thankfully in print.

In her introduction, Mulrooney suggests that with a burgeoning dance scene there is enough material for an *Irish Moves 2*. Perhaps, but first there remains plenty of analysis and contextualisation to be eked out of this volume.



Michael Seaver is a dance writer and critic with the Irish Times

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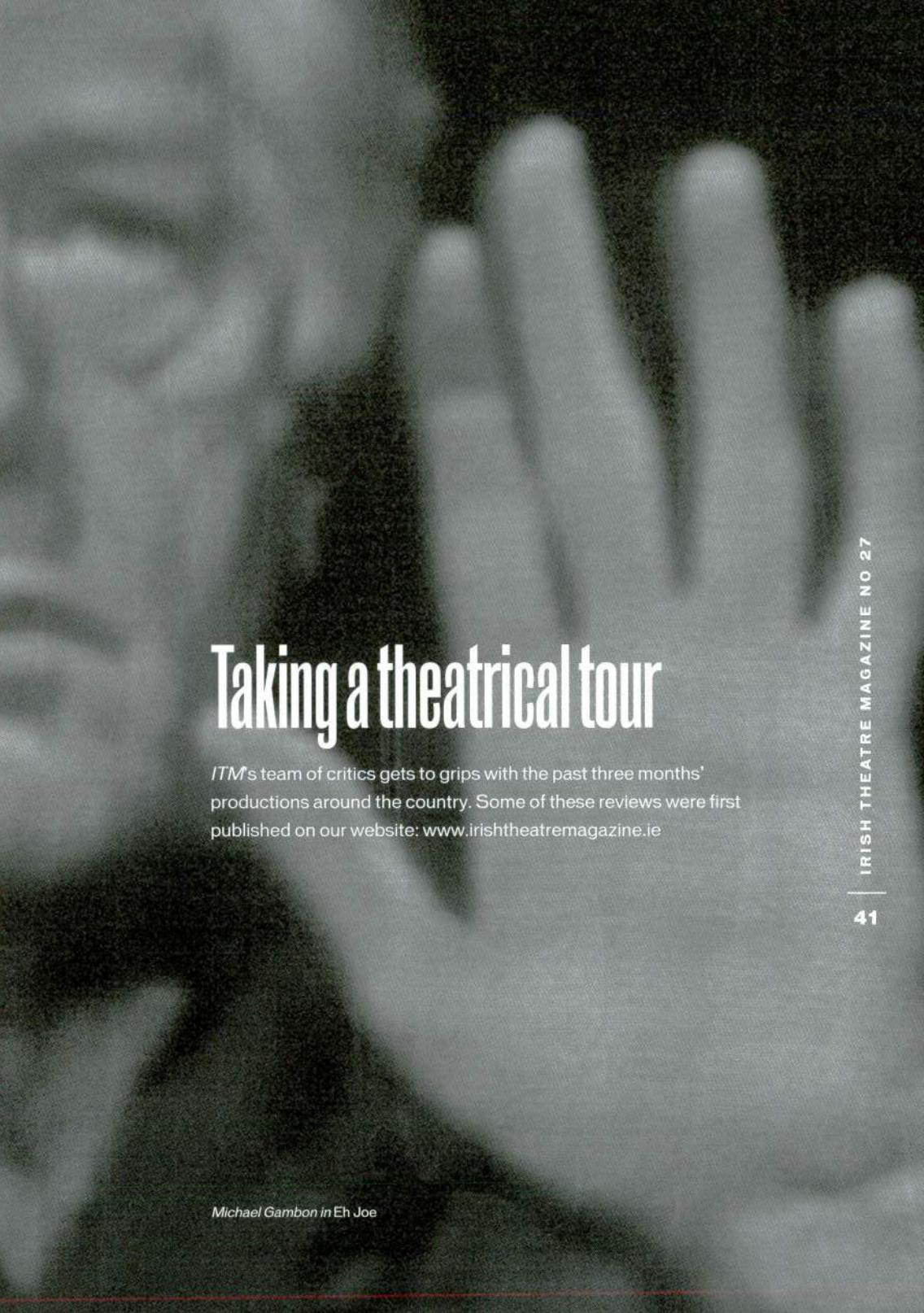
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A dark, moody photograph of Michael Gambon in a theatrical production of 'Eh Joe'. He is wearing a dark suit and tie, looking slightly to his left with a serious expression. The lighting is dramatic, casting deep shadows and highlighting the contours of his face and shoulders.

Taking a theatrical tour

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

Backing into the Future

Irish theatre is often accused of being obsessed with the past – with religion, the land, the country kitchen. Is this continuing focus on historical events and canonical texts commemoration or stagnation? Our critics give their verdicts.

THE TAMING OF THE SHREW

by William Shakespeare

Rough Magic Theatre Company
at Project Arts Centre
Directed by Lynne Parker
With Malcolm Adams, Pauline McLynn, Rory Keenan, Peter Daly, Darragh Kelly,
Rory Nolan, Owen Roe
6–25 March 2006. Reviewed 23 March

BY PETER CRAWLEY

LYNNE PARKER HAS AN ALARMING tendency to worry you with her outlandish ideas and then silence objections with their smooth execution; like a party guest who threatens to whip the tablecloth out from under the cutlery, then startles her doubters with a flawless sleight of hand. That is pretty much the sensation produced by her production of the *Taming of the Shrew*. Shakespeare's play isn't really the problem (although, in its merrily chauvinistic way, it is deeply problematic), but the worrying pre-publicity flyers that portrayed Owen Roe and Pauline McLynn as fright-wigged Irish culchies, circa 1970, with a winking promise of "gombeen chic"

to come, could have curdled the most hopeful expectations. So what a surprise it is when Parker whips the foundation of the play out from under its set pieces, leaving those elements spinning, but somehow more or less in their original position.

The place is not quite 16th century Italy, and not entirely the advertised "wheeler-dealer" rural Ireland: Monica Frawley's richly garish designs and the unaltered references of the text suggest we are somewhere between the two. And though Shakespeare's comedy is set among an urbane milieu of merchants, traders, and scholars, whose schemes to procure a wife will lure the occasional country-bumpkin in over his head – here that society is flipped. Now the countryside is home ground; the city folk are the outsiders.

With such themes of division established, it only seems natural to stage the production in the traverse. The stage is measured out in vile green linoleum, dotted with wooden tables and overflowing ashtrays. By the time Barry McGovern emerges, unrecog-

Pauline McLynn and Owen Roe in The Taming of the Shrew



nisable behind bottle-end spectacles and the grey rigidity of his patriarch, Baptista Minola, things become still more amusing, and intriguing.

Here comes Lucentio, rakish in the form of Tadhg Murphy, his eyes set on Simone Kirby's deceptively fair and pure Bianca, while his servants – Rory Keenan's scholarly Tranio and Peter Daly's jittery Biondello – assist. On hobbles a lively and agitated toupé, beneath which resides the rest of Darragh Kelly's character, Gremio, also competing for Bianca with Rory Nolan's oleaginous suitor Hortensio.

Of course, Bianca's hand is not hers to give, and will only become available once the titular shrew, McLynn's sourpuss Katherina, is successfully wed. Who could be man enough for that job? Only Roe's Petruchio, boorish in manners, unfussy in matters of the heart, and never more encouraged than by the prospect of changing a few things about Katherine; namely her personality, her wilfulness, her name, or, in short, her.

There are those who will look at this cast and say that it's quite an ensemble, but in fact each individual role is so brilliantly, considerately cast – right down to the stone cut features of Malcolm Adams' Grumio, whom he plays as a Eunuch passing surreal comment on the witless players of a sex comedy – that the acting begins to feel competitive: here another nervous tic, there another silly

walk. The humour involves even more one-upmanship. Shakespeare's play, in which characters may transform themselves (with mixed results) through disguise, leaves its words just as slippery in their meaning. The pace of the lines skitters around, but the words at play usually send contemporary readers skittering off to their Cliff Notes. Is it any wonder that Parker compensates with more readily understood sight gags and broad physical comedy, as when Tranio is brought face to groin with Lucenti? Still, in this imaginative and playful production even bawdy filips seem significant: the delirious action of Parker's stage becomes a form of sexual game play. Just as characters may loosen their social status, pretending to be above or below their station, so even gender begin to seem porous: sex too is all about role play.

When the text's original politics cannot be ignored, does the production choose to cop out? However you reconceive the context, Kate will still be bludgeoned into obeisance. At her husband's command, she will call the sun the moon, and – Jackie Onassis outfit or no – in this version she still comes to Petruchio in the final scene when summoned. McLynn finds a way to give these final acts of subservience an ironic spin, but such manoeuvres – whether knowing winks or reckless kisses – feel like last-minute impositions, to spare Shake-

peare from our modern blushes.

But Shakespeare was a man of his time. If his early comedies lack our political conscience, they are at least genuine in their chauvinism. Rough Magic's treatment of him is sharply intelligent and hugely enjoyable, and in the alchemy it performs with gombeen chic, quite simply inspired. But, whatever his real feelings about sexual politics, in matters of controversy it seems the bard must be brought to heel. If he meant what he wrote, this was always going to require some ironic subversion; the shaming of the true.

Peter Crawley is News Editor of this magazine.

THE CROCK OF GOLD by James Stephens

Storytellers Theatre Company/Civic Theatre

Adapted and Directed by Fiona Buffini

With Ronan Conlon, Carrie Crowley,

Bosco Hogan, Aidan Turner.

On tour, 14 March – 20 May 2006.

Reviewed 4 April at Everyman Palace, Cork

BY ALANNAH HOPKIN

JAMES STEPHENS' *THE CROCK OF GOLD* is not an obvious candidate for theatrical adaptation, with its blend of fantasy, philosophy, slapstick, and social comedy. But this is a Storytellers production, and that company specialises in dramatising works of fiction. Flagging this adaptation as "a unique blend of humour, sensuality

and satire, for an adult audience", their production focuses on the battle between Reason and Emotion, and touches on issues of gender, law, religion, and politics.

It opens in a kind of Celtic twilight, with the downstage area serving as the home of a philosopher (Bosco Hogan), his wife Thin Woman (Carrie Crowley), and two "children" – grown-ups dressed as turn-of-the-century picture-book schoolchildren

Seamas and Brigid (Vincent Higgins and Karen Scully). This compact, versatile set by Kathy Strachan consists of two levels, created by a ramp of wooden wattle-like slats, which crosses the stage from left to right. A red velvet sofa is embedded into it stage right, counterbalanced by a square trapdoor stage left. The upper level of a ramp is used chiefly for outdoor scenes. The backdrop is effectively transformed by clever lighting into twilight, moonlight, and dark blue, West of Ireland skies, enhanced by imaginative use of back-projections.

An energetic cast of eight doubles up in thirty roles, but the direction lacks pace. It is a grave fault in such a wordy play that exchanges of dialogue often stumble along with great gaps between responses. The action, when it comes, is a welcome relief from this excess of speech, indicating that perhaps the dramatisation itself was not radical enough to counteract the novel's leisurely progress. And in



Carrie Crowley, Karen Scully, Vincent Higgins and Bosco Hogan in *The Crock of Gold*

spite of Hogan's spirited performance as The Philosopher, I found the arguments he presented stale and unstimulating.

The costumes, also designed by Strachan, add to these problems. Crowley as Thin Woman has an unflattering, constricting costume, which perhaps explains why over-emphatic hand gestures mar an otherwise confident performance. Pan (Aidan Turner) has cute little horns on his head, and is presented bare-chested in fake leather trousers with studs and fringe down the legs, like a singer in a heavy metal band. It is hard to tell whether his dance with a shepherdess (choreographed by Emma O'Kane) is a pastiche of erotic dancing – or if it is just bad. The rival god from the Celtic pantheon, Aengus Óg (played with zest by Ronan Conlon), wears a cheap white suit with no shirt, and has long

hair, like a sleazy lounge lizard. Worst of all are the leprechauns, with their obviously rubberised "bald" heads, and fake beards.

The play asks interesting questions about such issues as the relative merits of paganism and Christianity. But I reacted strongly against seeing those themes discussed by a cast of ill-costumed grotesques. Rather than being carried along by what I was watching, I found myself reduced to spotting references to the rest of the Irish canon: echoes of Synge and Lady Gregory, and moments of farce prescient of Flann O'Brien's comic masterpiece *The Third Policeman*.

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

OPERATION EASTER by Donal O'Kelly

Calypso Productions at Kilmainham Gaol

Directed by Bairbre Ni Chaoimh

With Ruaidhri Conroy, Phelim Drew, Luke

Griffin, Solomon Ijigade, Tom Murphy,

Mary Murray, Donal O'Kelly, Arthur Riordan

24 April – 20 May 2006

Reviewed 15 May

BY HEATHER JOHNSON

IT IS NOT OFTEN THAT A PLAY ABOUT a crucial moment in history can be staged precisely where that moment occurred. Dramatising the story of the days leading up to the 1916 Easter Rising, this production finds its optimal set in Kilmainham Gaol, where many of the architects of the Rising were ultimately shot by the British. Owing to the fact that most Irish theatregoers are already familiar with the "plot" of this drama (particularly given the ninetieth anniversary this year), the sequence of the action comes as no surprise. Therefore the impact of this play rests largely on the location, the play's interpretative slant on factual events, and the freshness of O'Kelly's idiom.

The script gives prominence to authentic speeches and documents such as personal letters, the Proclamation, and the rebels' surrender note. The production can thus give the impression of being an educational museum tour: indeed, a large group of secondary school students remained engaged throughout the ninety min-

utes, which stands to the credit of director Bairbre Ní Chaoimh's energetic pace. Staging the play in Kilmainham also has a powerful effect. Robert Ballagh's minimal set design respects a place already cold and impersonal. Military-grey boxes are moved around to form speakers' platforms, a market stall, a bed. The large tricolour and union jack, alternately hung from the railings above the main hall, provide colour, and comment simply about the shift in power at the moment of surrender. Availing of the narrow walkway outside cells on the jail's second level, Ní Chaoimh chooses this appropriately confined space for the scene in which the rebels have finally been cornered. Lively exchanges up there, however, are not always clearly audible below, the building's acoustics being less than ideal. Despite this, Denis Clohessy manages to capitalise on the echoing location in his use of acapella music. Bach sung at Plunkett's prison marriage to Grace Gifford, after he is sentenced to death, provides an affecting moment. Actor Solomon Ijigade's impressive singing voice ranged from joyful to tender. The music really lifts the production and corresponds to the breadth of O'Kelly's emotional canvas.

Playing these passionate men in their days of crisis (and telling their individual stories that led them to this point), the actors are generally



Tom Murphy, Mary Murray and Phelim Drew in Operation Easter

good, though an imbalance exists in the portrayal of the four leaders. Ruaidhri Conroy is miscast as Joseph Plunkett, his performance, petrified and listless by turns, all the more noticeable in contrast to the others' strengths. Donal O'Kelly as Tom Clarke is utterly persuasive as a man consumed with political conviction, while Arthur Riordan (James Connolly) and Luke Griffin (Patrick Pearse) contribute similarly sound performances. Phelim Drew, in a variety of roles, upholds his reputation for exemplary delivery. With Tom Murphy, he expertly provides much of the play's humour. As the sole actress in the production, Mary Murray rises to the challenge of playing all six of the female roles, which prove significant in terms of the play's structure and interpretative emphasis. As the play

begins, a woman in contemporary Dublin discovers she is stuck in an alternative historical period. This whimsical device of "historyanalysis" proves highly entertaining as disparate items are magically "exorcised" from the patient's head. The play ends with James Connolly's widow pointing to a dead foetus in a bedside bucket (a clangy symbol for the abortive rebellion). While these two women may provide a certain symmetry, and the inclusion of a programme note on the role of women in 1916 may suggest O'Kelly's sensitivity to this aspect of events, one cannot escape the play's focus on burly militarism.

The lively opening, set in today's multicultural Moore Street, seems to promise a new perspective on the story of the Rising, yet we never re-

turn to this dramatic frame. Similarly, from the historyanalysis scene comes the heartening suggestion that the play might take a refreshingly irreverent look at the totemic events of 1916. Instead the quasi-feminist ending aims at pathos. Neither of these weaknesses detracts from the pleasure generated by O'Kelly's trademark sense of rhythm and of the marvellous. His language is inventive, poetic, animated, although lines delivered by the actors as a chorus sometimes result in rather earnest shouting at the audience. Regardless, this remains an informative, finely-researched play about individual sacrifice and political power struggles of lasting consequence.

Heather Johnson lectures in English at IADT, Dublin.

THE YEAR OF THE HIKER by John B Keane

Druid Theatre Company

Directed by Garry Hynes

With Garret Lombard, Aaron Monaghan,

Eamonn Morrissey, Marie Mullen, Catherine

Walsh

On tour 9 May – 17 June 2006

Reviewed 9 May at the Town Hall Theatre Galway

BY ADRIAN FRAZIER

IN HIS DESIGN FRANCIS O'CONNOR goes surprisingly modernist for this John B Keane kitchen set. In the back wall, from stage right to centre, a long three-foot-high window space is

cut—a bungalow by le Corbusier! Alongside the programme's epigraph from Beckett, this works to draw Keane into a high-art, modernist context.

The space beyond the window is variously lit, to show storm and calm, dawn and dusk and night, a downpour of mist, and always the speedily-coasting clouds of the West, as projected through the film work of Jon Driscoll (a new member of the Druid production team). It signifies the dreamy allure of the world beyond the cottage walls: the campfires, the hobos and the floozies, the race-meetings and matches, the ports with ships heading to different lands - so ominous to the women around the hearth and so attractive to the hiker that he hasn't come home for twenty years.

The itinerant man, although peripheral to Irish society, is central to its drama: *The Shaughraun*, *Shadow of the Glen*, *The Fiddler's House*, even *Juno and the Paycock*. Keane's hiker is not a tinker, just a vagrant who, by abandoning them, brings shame upon wife, sister-in-law, two sons, and daughter. As the play opens, the family is preparing for the wedding of Kate: she's not simply marrying, but marrying a doctor, a social step up for the Laceys. They just hope "Hiker Lacey" won't show up to spoil the day. And of course he does.

Eamon Morrissey comes home to die costumed in the great-coat, hob-

nailed boots, floppy hat, sleeveless vest of the nineteenth century tramp, and talking with a lilting philosophical poetry like a character from the Literary Revival. This is at once incongruous and appropriate. Writing in 1963, Keane stood between one age that was dying and another being born, and he makes them converse. The hiker's children are dressed in leisurewear and talk in derisive, youth-culture colloquialisms. The breach between present and past is accentuated by Aaron Monaghan's cheekily contemporary portrayal of Simey Lacey, veterinarian student, who cocks a snook at everything, and says again and again to the hiker, as if speaking for all scangers to all ould fellas, "You're not my father!"

The plot offers, as a play for an amateur drama society should, a big scene for each character. All are denunciations. Father is guilty, guilty, guilty. Sister-in-law Freda (a great invention by Catherine Walsh) kicks his sick, exhausted body, throws his walking-stick out the door, and drags him by the heels across the length of the kitchen floor. The scene in which he is slapped around by his oldest son was dropped, only to make more effective the later stomach-punch he gets from Simey. When the hiker tries to get his wife Mary (Marie Mullen) to stop darning a sock and listen to his plea for forgiveness, she rises—and rises—and rises in denunciation:

"All I want is to see you dead... You that scorned my womanhood."

Inevitably, all this abuse of the father wins the audience's sympathy, and sets up a truly powerful melodramatic reversal. After the hiker tells the sister-in-law (originally, the cuckoo in the nest of the marriage) that he never loved her, only her sister Mary, Freda screams weepingly, "You did, you did, you did, You kissed me, you kissed me, you kissed me", and sleepwalks to his greatcoat on the hook, to embrace it, like a memory of the man.

And in the final scene of Christian reconciliation (here Garret Lombard comes into his own as Joe Lacey), the son crosses in stages the width of the kitchen toward his father, as he reveals in one unblocked emotion after another that the real pain of his boyhood wasn't, as he has been claiming, that the hiker abandoned his mother, but that he didn't take his five-year-old son with him, even if it was only to die by a roadside, because that is all the boy had dreamed of thereafter—freely wandering. For a final tableau, father and son together gaze, with their backs to the audience, at clouds coasting across the sky beyond the cottage window.

No accident that this is a great production. Garry Hynes directs.

Adrian Frazier is Director of the MA in Drama & Theatre Studies, and the MA in Writing, at NUI Galway.'



Eamon Morrissey in *The Year of the Hiker*

Studying the Classics

Many theatre companies – especially the newer ones – are attracted to the classics, setting out either to celebrate or re-imagine them. Such productions often give rise to questions about actors' technical skills - and whether audiences need yet another production of Pinter or Wilde. Here's a recent crop.

THE PUBLIC

By Federico García Lorca

Randolph SD The Company, Project, Dublin

Directed by Wayne Jordan

with Caoimhín Ó Conghaile, Stephen O'Rourke,

Megan Riordan, Joe Roch

11-22 April 2006. Reviewed 19 April

BY SUSAN CONLEY

SITTING ALONE IN A SPOTLIGHT, a director opens the hallowed doors of his theatre and allows himself to be challenged artistically, and in that challenge, risks losing control of his world. Perceived as a great unruly herd of horses, the public run roughshod over the illusions built painstakingly by the director and his company, and each time they appear to have mounted a successful defence against the herd mentality, it all falls apart.

Described by the martyred Spanish playwright as "a poem to be booed at", *The Public* is Lorca's surrealistic attempt to challenge the authority of a director, a challenge put directly to him by that great unwashed mass of uninformed opinion, the audience.

Such a challenge to authority, given the author's biography, can't but be a metaphor for a greater, more dangerous defiance of power. What makes this piece an example of Impossible Theatre, a label of Lorca's own devising, is not so much its unstageability—although here, this issue presents itself through the difficulty the cast have in mastering the poetic language—as the fact that the play asks us to believe the impossible. It suggests not so much that the public has an opinion that runs counter to those of the artists, but that the artists are actually interested in, and open to, said opinion in the first place, much in the way, say, a dictator might be open to the ideas of his oppressed populace.

It's easy to see the attraction that such a work may hold for a young theatre company: unfettered by the strictures of A to B to C dramaturgy, there was a terrific opportunity to create and devise. Randolph SD The Company, under the direction of Wayne Jordan, do this to a certain extent: the design team, comprised of

DOIREANN WALLACE

Sinéad Wallace (lighting), Natasa Janikova (set) and Jessica Hilliard with Janikova (costume) fabricated a wonderfully evocative sense of the behind-the-scenes world of the theatrical milieu, and Jordan's staging, with the cast's precise execution of it, was oftentimes striking and inspired. A series of vignettes, which would appear to run the gamut of theatrical styles based perhaps on the director's oeuvre, vary in their ability to hold our attention. Certain of them leave behind lovely images—a rice paper lampshade that stands in for the moon, a couple of cowboys bedecked not by rhinestones but by fairy lights, a series of rolling frames guiding our eye around the stage—but others leave only an impatience with inade-



Megan Riordan, Caoimhín Ó Conghaile and Joe Roch in *The Public*

quate dramaturgical exploration: yes, it's surreal, but it does mean something... doesn't it?

The text, a verbose series of arias that swell towards no perceivable climax or resolution, does not appear to have been sufficiently interrogated. Whether or not it is a problem in the translation is impossible to know; what is apparent, however, is that the cast seem not to have any inner knowing of what they are meant to express. If the text is meant to express mental chaos, then they have succeeded, perhaps all too well. Despite its surrealism, it could be argued that, if as Lorca intended, this is a poem, then the symbolic use of language must in fact have some sort of meaning. Just because it's not on the

surface doesn't mean it isn't there.

Perhaps our best example of the use of poetry as theatrical language can be found in the works of Shakespeare, works that can be challenging to a practitioner not guided properly through the potentially deadly reefs of metre and meaning by a director who has navigated them successfully in the past. There is nothing more difficult to attend to than symbolic text poorly spoken: that is, spoken poorly in the sense that the words don't join up into meaning, that they seem to erupt individually out of the actor's mouth into the ether without giving the impression of belonging together as a thought or an idea. This was the elemental challenge at issue with Randolph SD The Company's production. There was no doubt that the cast were committed; whether they had comprehended is another matter. Each vignette had been meticulously blocked, and stylistically tended to, but one only rarely felt that the actors were in full control of their speeches. That the text came across only as a series of speeches is a serious issue, resulting less in a poem to be booed at than a poem to be shrugged at, poorly understood.

Whether or not Randolph SD The Company's own public were sufficiently pushed to feel tested, be enraptured, or become irritated by their production would be interesting to know, given the subject matter. Despite its surrealistic provenance, the

playwright did indeed have something concrete to say; this impulse is only partially satisfied by the production, an experience of style without sufficient notion of substance.

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

THE CARETAKER by Harold Pinter

Terrible Beauty Theatre Company,

Andrew's Lane Studio

Directed by Gary Egan

With Gary Egan, Vincent Fegan, Paul Kealyn

28 March – 22 April 2006. Reviewed 30 March

BY HARVEY O'BRIEN

THE MOST DISTURBING MOMENT in this production of *The Caretaker* comes near the conclusion, when brothers Mick (Egan) and Aston (Kealyn) share a smile. The two have spoken no words to each other in the course of the drama, in which Aston, seemingly for reasons of pure altruism, has offered the bedraggled derelict Davies (Fegan) lodgings at the brothers' rundown apartment building in West London. A strange sort of power game seems to be afoot, with the blustering, tormenting Mick needling the old man for being an intruder exactly as much as Aston treats him with uncommon courtesy. In this production, Davies himself seems as confused by this as the audience must be, given the absurdity of the situation in real-world terms. Though he

harangues and complains, manipulates and demands, and usually gets what he wants (more or less), Davies never seems in control, even when he thinks he is. When wielding a knife on both brothers at different times, there is never a sense that either man takes the threat very seriously. It seems a game to them, though the goals and outcomes are unclear.

Certainly, there is some kind of psychological binarism here, and the balance of power between the brothers does oscillate, but the audience is never sure what either man expects of this situation. The terrible smile comes shortly after an explosion of rage from Mick, in which he spells out his contempt for the would-be conniving interloper, breaking the tension by smashing a thrift-store Buddha against the wall and screaming that Davies is nothing more than an animal. Aston arrives, having already gently told Davies the night before that their living arrangement is not working out anymore and that he would like him to leave. He sees Davies, looks at his brother, who looks back: they smile. It is an infinitely creepy moment, and seems to last an age though it only takes a few seconds. In this smile the sense of creeping dread rises. A lurking horror or a terrible revelation seems about to rupture the fabric of the world. It doesn't, of course. Pinter pulls away from such obviousness.

He leaves us with the uncertainty of the lived experience.

Director Gary Egan (also Mick) seems entirely comfortable with Pinter's view that *The Caretaker* is "a very straightforward play", allowing this moment, along with those that precede and follow it, to speak directly to the audience of a world in which the symbolism and abstraction is left entirely up to us. Egan treats his characters and their world with a casual naturalism which makes every exchange of dialogue seem all the more frightening (and funny) for its simplicity. Unlike the rather weighted existentialism of Beckett, there really is a sense here that these characters are immersed in the everyday; that anything can or might happen, but that it probably won't. These are men full of dreams and intentions, ideas and aspirations, but they will never achieve closure - Godot will never come, but they won't have to repeat the action again: life will just go on.

Egan and Kealyn are terrific in this respect, conveying a sense of their characters as inscrutable and yet transparently human. Kealyn achieves a powerful weighty emptiness as Aston, speaking in simple, repetitive rhythms, answering simple questions with simple replies, and yet representing a massive physical presence, and suggesting a depth of humanity that is finally revealed in the signature monologue, where he tells

of his experience of electroshock therapy. Egan is full of clamorous menace as Mick, but also successfully conveys the sense of camaraderie which Davies mistakenly perceives in him as the balance of the tramp's loyalties begins to shift. Fegan has a rather more difficult task with Davies. He is more the seeming victim of some private game here than is usually the case, and the actor, complete with an Ulster accent deliberately selected by Egan to highlight the problematic of otherness at the heart of the play, seems a tad more desperate than is good for his character, and this shows in some forced mannerisms.

Harvey O'Brien teaches Film Studies in UCD and reviews theatre for culturevulture.net. He is the author of The Real Ireland: The Evolution of Ireland in Documentary Film (MUP, 2004)

THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY

by Oscar Wilde

Big Telly Theatre Company

Adapted and directed by Zoe Seaton

With Jamie Bower, Tom Edden, Leah Fells, Duncan Foster, Fiona Mettam, Paul Mundell, Patrick O'Donnell

On Tour 3 February – 11 March 2006

Reviewed 2 March, Theatre Royal, Waterford

BY UNA KEALY

THIS ADAPTATION OF OSCAR WILDE'S dark novella explores the eponymous Dorian Gray's (Patrick O'Don-

nell) descent from youthful Adonis to hideous grotesque, and considers how a single-minded obsession with physical beauty – without an accompanying sense of morality – can result in the destruction of innocence.

As the production opens, Basil Hallward (Bower) is putting the finishing touches to a portrait of Dorian Gray. He is visited by Lord Henry (Edden), who, seeing how Dorian's youth, beauty, and innocence have captured Hallward's imagination, immediately sets out to corrupt him. He succeeds easily, but the twist is that, despite the years that pass and the many heinous deeds that Dorian commits, his physical appearance remains unchanged. This is due to his terrible wish, magically realised, that his portrait will age while he himself remains young.

Seaton's central challenge is to adapt a weighty text into a viable theatrical script. She does this by employing a narrator / musician, and asking her actors to perform multiple roles amid numerous rapid scene changes. The characters of Lord Henry and Dorian could have shown more clearly their terrible journeys into lonely self-indulgence and utter depravity; but on the whole the cast gives a concentrated ensemble performance, with Leah Fells particularly engaging in her role as Sybil Vane, the young girl whom Dorian discards and destroys along the way. In his role of narra-



Tom Edden in The Picture of Dorian Gray

tor/musician, Duncan Foster adds atmosphere and momentum to the production, but his performance in a number of cameo roles causes problems: his status as narrator/musician separates him from the dynamics of the story, but his appearance as a character within the drama blurs the lines that Seaton had established.

The lighting and set design complement each other well, and explore the themes of the production. Conleth White's lighting scheme gradually dims, the bright wash of warm yellow in the opening scenes giving way to a murky atmosphere as the play came to its terrible conclusion. This

design demands precise timing and positioning from the cast and crew which unfortunately was not always achieved in the Theatre Royal, resulting in many of the scenes towards the end of the play appearing significantly underlit.

James Wood's set design consists of four rectangular frames which function both as entrances and exits and neatly contain the many short vignettes that punctuate the longer scenes. The frames are moved about by the actors and, although sometimes a little unwieldy in practice, the design works well, focussing the audiences' attention, creating light re-

lief when necessary, and providing a constant visual reminder of the picture which haunts Dorian.

This production offers an interesting technical challenge in terms of presenting the transformation of Dorian's portrait. An empty frame is presented in Act One while, in Act Two, the portrait becomes manifest, depicting a distorted and grotesque figure. The initial absence of the portrait is a disappointment, but once that absence has been established, it seems a bad idea to present it later: the image is out of keeping with the overall design of the production, and it needlessly breaks faith with the device that Seaton had already used. Similarly, Seaton employs a theatrical illusion to dispose of Hallward's murdered corpse. This takes time to set up and its effect proves humorous rather than sinister. The result is that the atmosphere of delinquency and disorientation that Seaton and her team had so successfully created in the scenes leading up to this moment was undermined. Elements of this production thus do not work as well as they might, but many others ably demonstrate why Big Telly have won a reputation for producing theatre that is exciting, vivid, and essentially theatrical.

Una Kealy has a PhD in theatre and works as a freelance Arts Manager in Waterford.

TWELFTH NIGHT by William Shakespeare

Classic Stage Ireland

Directed by Andy Hinds

With Hope Brown, Liam Hourican, Judith Roddy,

Stephen Kelly, Elaine O'Dea, David Ryan

On tour; reviewed at the

Civic Theatre, Tallaght on 21 March

BY DEREK WEST

THE NAME OF THE COMPANY AND ITS declared intention (to present "great world classics") promise much, but this production illustrates the challenges involved in fulfilling the remit more than it indicates how they can be mastered.

The choice of a play has to be justified by the casting, and here the levels of competence and the matching of actors with characters are uneven. Three performances stand out: Judith Roddy has lightness and energy in her portrayal of Viola; Liam Hourican plays Malvolio in Ulster Calvinist mode – a highly plausible and gripping interpretation; David Ryan brings integrity and a well articulated sense of sexual confusion to the minor role of Antonio. Given building blocks such as these, director Hinds should have had a formidable company.

With the remainder, however, the production drifts. Hope Brown, as a self-regarding, petulant Orsino, seems uneasy in the role; the lords of misrule form a heterogeneous bunch, bound together only by persistent high jinks which are humourless and



Elaine O'Dea and Lesa Thurman in Twelfth Night

irritating. There is a dourly alcoholic Sir Toby (Seamus Moran), a manured Feste (Simon Boyle), an Italian "momma" Maria (Lesa Thurman, struggling to make character and accent plausible), a foppish Sir Andrew (Thomas Farrell, with too many calculated quirks). The fun is not attractive and seems to have evolved from a collective uncertainty, both of direction and individual interpretation. Elaine O'Dea (Olivia) and Stephen Kelly (Sebastian) barely register.

Hesitancy is also reflected in the verse-speaking. Roddy, Ryan, and Hourican succeed in wholly inhabiting their lines; the others labour earnestly without conviction. A similar dissonance is evident in the mu-

sic: Andrew Synott's original composition is applied patchily, juxtaposed awkwardly with recorded 1920s music and catch songs.

The design (Anne-Marie Woods) remains tentative. A striking opening with hovering red balloon (the ominous sun?) and a brooding volcanic rock (Illyria?) above a bare-board rectangle disintegrates under stronger light: the balloon motif is pursued half-heartedly; the "shape" turns to a papier-mâché lump, fussily used for "business"; and only the playing-space remains effective. Her costumes seem purposelessly eclectic. Olivia and Maria are dressed in 1920s style. The comic characters are located vaguely – Sir Toby as music hall

"toff", Feste as street busker, Sir Andrew astray from a Restoration piece and Malvolio from *The Crucible*. Shakespeare offers endless design options, so effectively exploited recently in such productions as Selina Cartmell's *Titus Andronicus* and Lynne Parker's *The Taming of the Shrew*. Here the design lacks such confidence or consistency. Classic Stage Ireland (CSI) must take on board the new heights being reached by rival classic productions.

The underlying values of CSI are intelligent and provocative. Hinds' programme notes ponders the sexual and emotional confusion that runs through the play, untangled only when the couples are finally matched in conventional heterosexual order (though on the basis of their histories, those entrusted with the perpetuation of the human species won't necessarily make great partners or parents). This is a serious issue – worth pursuing – but to command full attention from its audience CSI must find far greater correspondence between its mission and production values. On this showing, the gap at present remains too wide.

Derek West retires shortly as Principal of Newpark Comprehensive, Dublin, and is head of "Creative Engagement" which encourages second-level schools to develop collaborations between artists, teachers and students.

DA by Hugh Leonard

The Association of Regional Theatres

(Northern Ireland)

Directed by Dan Gordon

With Michael Condron, Clive Geraghty,

Charles Lawson, Olivia Nash

On tour, reviewed at Everyman Palace, Cork,

15 March 2006

BY DIARMUID O'BRIEN

I'VE ALWAYS HAD A FONDNESS FOR the potent dramatic device of the ghost father, ever since I first saw *The Lion King* (and I suppose *Hamlet* as well, a few years on.) The stern, authoritative spectre whose words boom from beyond the grave to counsel the protagonist usually stirs him to high revenge. The title character of *Da* has no such mythic intentions for his adopted son – he's content enough just to prattle away from the armchair. Nevertheless, he serves as an often harsh but grudgingly affectionate tribute to a figure whose legacy we must rebel against and whose approval we will always seek. And remember: nowhere in the history of the troubled institution of father/son relationships is there one as intricate and precarious as that of the Irishman and his father (sadly, in most cases another Irishman).

While sieving through his old Dublin home after the funeral of his father, a successful emigrant writer Charlie (Charles Lawson) is intruded upon by various ghosts from his past.

These include his deceased mother, his 25 year old self, his childhood friend, and his first employer. In the last two cases, the still living counterparts call around to haunt him in the flesh as well. But by far the most demanding nuisance is Da (Clive Geraghty), a loudmouthed but weak-willed Polonius whose mediocre life story is strangely as compelling as King Hamlet's. He is deferent to his lowly "station" in life, never speaking up for himself, and lacking ambition and backbone. Yet he maintains a quiet pride in his dealings with his son. Obstinate a semi-autobiographical memorial of his own father, *Da* is perhaps the most successful of Hugh Leonard's plays. "My father I liked too," Leonard once assured us in an interview "but it was only after his death that I got to know him by writing the play."

Lawson brings a sardonic tone of disenchantment with his past and impatience with his family in a difficult role, since it is a shameless stand-in for the author himself. He serves well as our narrator but is foiled and upstaged at every turn by Geraghty, whose buffoonish yet ceaselessly likeable presence draws delight from the audience, as he embarrasses us as only a parent can. Similarly, Olivia Nash is terrifyingly spot-on in her smaller role as Charlie's mother, whose self-styled martyrdom and arsenal of guilt-seeking nags embody a

particular breed of Irish matriarch. Most of the play's famous, and very funny, one-liners are entrusted to the two parents, and they are wielded with precision.

As the Young Charlie, Michael Condron is clean-shaven and wide-eyed as he recoils in shame at the antics of his parents. Gerry Doherty brings baritone steadiness as Charlie's employer and father-figure, Mr. Drumm, and John Lovett is satisfying as Charlie's childhood friend Oliver. Julia Dearden and Emma Little, as the miserly widow of Da's employer and the object of Young Charlie's lust respectively, also leave an impression among this very strong cast.

Director Dan Gordon's experience as a performer allows him to infuse this production with a playful momentum. The humour and pathos is excellently and tenderly measured and it renders the scene where we witness Charlie's final memory of his senile father unexpectedly devastating. Conleth White's dynamic if somewhat unfocused set and lighting design evokes a timeless nostalgia for pre-economic boom Dublin, presenting us with a lived-in house that is suddenly eerily bare. As Charlie turns the key in its door for the last time, his Da follows him out – part of his identity, for better or worse.

Diarmuid O'Brien is a Galway-based writer and critic.

Thinking Global

These recent productions suggest a shift in our perspectives on international issues - on Ireland's place in the world, and on the growing influence of non-Irish cultures on our writing and stagecraft.

THE BACCHAE OF BAGHDAD

Abbey Theatre, Dublin

Adapted and directed by Conall Morrison

With Andrea Irvine, Ruth Negga, Robert O'Mahoney, Christopher Simpson,

4 March – 15 April 2006. Reviewed 11 March

BY DAVID BARNETT

ACCORDING TO THE NINETEENTH-century playwright Friedrich Hebbel, "in a good play, everyone is right" – that is, all sides should have an opportunity to state their case to the audience. Richard III, for example, may well be a murderous scoundrel but at least we get his side of the story. In *The Bacchae of Baghdad*, it's fairly obvious that one side will never be given a fair hearing.

The very title of the play creates expectations: connections between Euripides' play and the contemporary political situation in Iraq ferment in the mind and one wonders precisely what has been altered in this new version. By the end of the performance, one may conclude "not much", at least in terms of plotting and character. So, as in Euripides's original

tragedy, the god Dionysus appears with a chorus of ecstatic Bacchae, is seized and imprisoned by the ruler of Thebes, Pentheus, who later meets with a bloody end at the hands of his possessed mother Agave. The main changes are in the language: usages

Merinna Millsapp, Donna Niklaesen, Shereen Martineau, Ruth Negga, Mojisola Adebayo and Mary Healy in The Bacchae of Baghdad



are brought up to date, and there is mention of the Tigris and the Euphrates, Iraq's major rivers. There is however also reference to Euripides' Mount Cithaeron, which is firmly in Greece: the adaptation doesn't quite know whether it's in Baghdad or Thebes.

In the original *Bacchae*, Pentheus is presented as an obdurate but nonetheless credible antagonist to Dionysus. From the outset of the *Bacchae* of Baghdad, however, Pentheus' US military uniform marks him negatively. His arrogance and one-sidedness colour all his utterances, under-

mine any sense that he might be correct in his stance towards Dionysus, and portray him as a dogmatic fool, obsessed with his own authority. His addresses to the audience – a bid, I presume, to implicate the spectators in his rhetoric and attitudes – are rendered ineffectual by the loaded framing of the character: there is no space for complicity between the stage and the auditorium. Pentheus is easily pigeonholed, mocked, and rejected.

If Pentheus is nothing but a hollow opponent, then Dionysus and his *Bacchae* have to make their own position problematic if they are to give



the audience anything to think about. The god calls for complete submission to his rites, an all-encompassing act of self-effacement which brooks no opposition. The confrontation with such an extreme position is obviously provocative, and Dionysus seems to suggest Islamic fundamentalism: when captured by Pentheus, for example, he is dressed in the familiar orange-coloured boiler-suits one associates with the detainees of Guantanamo. A further problem is the portrayal of the Bacchae, whose performance is a little too well choreographed to give any sense of the truly Dionysian nature of their experience. Their dances instead moderate the extremes that the god demands and so don't confront the audience with a terribly potent challenge to its expectations. If anything, the women make their thrall to Dionysus seem like a rather enjoyable pastime – there is little to disturb and unsettle here. The six-woman chorus also tends to deliver its lines individually, with only the occasional chant in unison. A possible clash between US individualism and a writhing Bacchic collective does not take place.

The performances throughout are mainly declamatory with little dynamic modulation of delivery. This has a wearing effect, as almost everything is blasted out to the audience. The production itself is very tight and the actors have clearly been

closely directed. This, however, reflects badly on Morrison, as it suggests that the cast are carrying out his plans to the letter.

One has to ask just how political this "political theatre" might be. The political arises when we are invited to ask why this or that representation has been offered, when we have the space to probe the social, ideological, or historical forces involved. The flattened portrayals do little to interrogate the action of the scenes or their relationships to different contexts; they merely reduce complexity to a consumable product. My fear is that Morrison believes that by using recognisable contemporary images, he is engaging in some kind of meaningful debate on Iraq in the theatre. His failure to acknowledge the centrality of the audience in political theatre renders the topicality of the production little more than spectacle. It is difficult to divine precisely what Morrison is trying to do, other than to reinforce a fairly banal view of US foreign policy. Political theatre requires more than the payment of lip service to the burning issues of the day; it demands that the director takes his subject and the theatre seriously. Sadly, this was not the case in this production.

David Barnett is Lecturer in Drama at UCD and is the author of books on Heinrich Müller and Rainer Werner Fassbinder.

TRUE WEST by Sam Shepard

Peacock Theatre, Dublin

Directed by Jimmy Fay

With Declan Conlon and Aidan Kelly

28 March – 22 April 2006. Reviewed 18 April

BY FINTAN WALSH

THE DECISION TO STAGE SAM SHEPARD'S *True West* prior to Mark O'Rowe's *Howie the Rookie* at the Peacock is understandable, not simply because the latter also features Kelly and is directed by Fay. The poetic brutalism that characterises Shepard's style has inspired generations of writers, including contemporary Irish work. The traces of his interest in troubled, violent, and dislocated masculinity, often in the context of great social change, are palpable not only in the work of O'Rowe, but also in the writing of Martin McDonagh and Conor McPherson. The Peacock's programming might thus be seen as an effort to acknowledge Shepard's impact on current Irish practice. Although an interesting connection, one wonders in advance if it is necessary to stage Shepard's work to point this out.

Austin (Aidan Kelly) is an ivy-league schooled, successful screenwriter. Taking a break from his wife and children, he visits his mother's suburban home in Southern California to write while she holidays in Alaska. His stay is interrupted when wild brother Lee (Declan Conlon) blasts through the house like a hu-

man twister, fresh from a recent spate of fighting in the Mojave Desert. While Austin wants to work, his brother is intent on uprooting all that is grounded in the world he has entered. He drinks, brawls, and steals from the neighbourhood. Not satisfied with robbing toasters, Lee encroaches on his brother's identity by pitching a film concept to Hollywood producer Saul Kimmer (Emmet Bergin). Saul is keen and wants Austin to write the script. Uncomfortable with the role-reversal, Austin responds by drinking and stealing like his brother. It is not long before the men become indistinguishable, and this monstrous doubling forces the action to crisis.

Shepard's acclaimed and frequently staged play is an exploration of the tension between a wild, raw, uneducated world and a polished, sophisticated, intellectual one. As a reflection on the interaction of these co-existing dynamics in the "civilising" process, the play ultimately questions the authenticity of a "True West": is it one of cowboys, artists, or both? While these are the overarching ideas of the play, the opposing forces are embodied in and played out through brothers Lee and Austin. It is through them that Shepard uncovers the movement of libido in the construction of individuals and culture, and it is also through them that he points to the need for the careful management and sublimation of this ener-

Declan Conlon in True West



gy for civilisation to sustain itself. Freud told us, and Shepard shows us.

Fay directs this piece, having already done so at the Lyric in 2004, where Conlon also played Lee. In this Peacock staging, Ferdia Murphy's set design evokes picture-perfect domesticity, at least at the play's opening. In a split set comprising a living room and kitchen, built on an elevated stage with tiered seating on three sides, everything from the furniture to the plants aspires to realism. From the outset Kelly and Conlon fully occupy the space, but as the action progresses, they almost exceed it. At times this works well by confronting the audience head-on with the powerful emotion of sibling rivalry. When the tension is diffused, as it sometimes is, this excess appears poorly planned. On the night I attended spectators frequently laughed, even as the men thrashed objects off the stage and into the audience. This may have been due to an overstatement of comedy or embarrassment. However, it was not helped by the raised stage. At critical moments this open plan failed to affect the claustrophobia that is so central to the play. During one instance when Lee flung an object at the feet of three women who sat opposite, their laughter was more engaging to the audience than was the aggression. Aside from spatial design, perhaps more restraint should have been exercised with these outbursts. Although the pacing and

execution of violence is usually handled well in *True West*, its threat rather than its execution should stand out more. On another note, the cricket symphony which is supposed to evoke the isolation of setting, and to which the men refer, was inaudible.

These reservations aside, Conlon and Lee deliver charged, stellar performances that are exhausting even to watch. Bergin does well too, spreading cheese worthy of his role. Although Maria McDermottroe has a small part as the brother's mother who unexpectedly returns, her wandering American accent and exaggerated resignation are hard to swallow. Contemporary stagings of Shepard often leave one thinking that the work is less radical than the reputation. Despite some fine performances, this is the feeling we are left with here.

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

HYSTERIA by Terry Johnson

Directed by Loveday Ingram

With Rory Keenan, Darragh Kelly, Alison

McKenna, John Olahan

Project Arts Centre 10 May - 3 June

Reviewed 22 May

BY HEATHER JOHNSON

HYSTERIA IS AN IMAGINED HISTORY of Freud's later years, when the father of psychoanalysis began to ques-

tion his own theoretical conclusions. In treating Freud's reputation and several of his now discredited concepts, the play exhibits ambitions to be both clever and entertaining.

On a stormy night, a dishevelled woman called Jessica arrives at Freud's house. The next day Salvador Dali visits, as does Dr. Yahuda (the physician treating Freud's illness); both become caught up in slapstick misunderstandings about the presence of a young woman in Freud's private study, before we learn that Jessica is the daughter of one of his patients, come to accuse Freud of a misdiagnosis that resulted in her mother's death.

Johnson's decision to combine farce, period drama, and a serious engagement with Freudian psychoanalysis leads to mixed results. This b*spoke production relishes the popular and comic connotations of 'hysteria', which are highlighted by the play's farcical elements. Physical gags include a door-knocking routine and the male characters playfully swinging Jessica around the room on a rope.

Similarly, the dialogue contains countless puns: "You have no patients". "I have shown a great deal of patience". "No, patients". There are flashes of originality in other scenes, however, such as when Dali (played with camp gusto by Rory Keenan) wields a phallic statue, heading off

into mock combat with the line 'now it's personal'. This is not so much biography as Carry On Up the Unconscious for Freud.

This high farce, and the contemporary speech which peppers the script, seem at odds with Sabine D'Argent's wonderfully atmospheric set design of Freud's London studio, which is complemented by a 'period' piano score by Denis Clohessy. His sound design also helps to capture a wet winter's night in England, colouring the introduction of the weary and solitary figure of Freud. Kevin McFadden's lighting combines with sound and set to create the sense that we are witnessing the twilight months of the famous man's life.

Despite a few stumbles in delivery, Kelly manages to play Freud as both elderly genius and comic ham, and sidesteps one risk involved in depicting his character by sustaining a Germanic accent without exaggeration. The script itself flags the issue of authentic accents - to explain her presence in Freud's study, Jessica must pose as Dali's Russian wife - and while Kelly and Keenan's accents are consistent, John Olohan as Dr. Abraham Yahuda sounds more Irish than European Jew.

The production is most captivating in Alison McKenna's performance as the embittered Jessica, who re-enacts the consultations between Freud and her mother. Her principal scenes, at



John Olohan and Rory Keenan in *Hysteria*

times chilling, engage with the clinical definition of "hysteria", as her character "performs" hysterical symptoms, her body thrashing around in signs of psychological distress.

Personifying Freud's own repressed feelings about his past, the character of Jessica 'returns' to confront him about the damaging effects of psychoanalysis on her mother. As a feminist revision of Freud, the play points to a reductive 'use' of the female principle (and therefore of

women) in psychoanalysis. Johnson thus follows a general challenge to Freud as institution, which was well advanced by 1993 when the play premiered in London. It is a source of frustration that whenever the script does engage with intelligent and darker material, including revisions of Freud's most ground-breaking propositions about the mind, we are not given time to engage fully with these ideas, as the performance veers off into farce once again.

The caricatured representation of

Freud as cultural icon ultimately dominates Johnson's script. Freud is cleverly transformed into a surrealist image himself: bandaged head, arm up a Wellington boot draped in women's underwear, and propping up a snail-covered bicycle. Such scenes of playfulness lull the audience into a sense of comfort in order to heighten the shocking effects of the subsequent story of child sexual abuse. The script's return to humour seems a cynical attempt to package the challenging material as a vehicle of light entertainment.

The production is clearly attracted to the surrealist potential of Johnson's play and delivers arresting visual effects that are not always fully realised. For example, the structures of the set finally collapse, a metaphoric signal that Freud's mind is overcome with regret about past professional judgments. The design here is amusing: a clock 'melts' and familiar images from Dali's work appear in the background, figuring Freud's unconscious. Female figures in asylum uniforms (ostensibly patients who were misdiagnosed as cured) howl and paw at the patio doors. Unfortunately, the effect of the set's deconstruction is quickly and literally obscured by the use of stage smoke. This final mayhem is symptomatic of the production's preference for visual gags over the play's more harrowing content.

THE WAITING ROOM

Kabosh Theatre Company

Directed by Karl Wallace

Devised and performed by Will Irvine, Mary Jordan, Sonya Kelly, Antoinette Morelli, Olivia

Pouyanne, Karl Wallace

On tour, 20 March – 5 April 2006

Reviewed at the Waterside Theatre,

Derry on 5 April

BY LISA FITZPATRICK

THE AUDIENCE FOR KABOSH'S latest work, *The Waiting Room*, meet at a designated place at a set time, and are loaded onto buses and driven to a secret location. There is no programme and little advance information. On the journey, each person receives an envelope containing a different letter from one of the characters in the play. On the night I attended, director Karl Wallace distributed the letters as we travelled to the venue. They provoke the curiosity of the audience, and encourage each spectator to develop expectations about the characters that we are about to encounter. This individuality of experience is a characteristic of this show, which deliberately fractures the communal viewing experience and encourages the audience to create their own memories of the work.

The performance takes place in a hall in an empty military barracks on Derry's Waterside. The space has a raised, proscenium stage like a traditional school assembly-hall. The en-



Sonya Kelly in *The Waiting Room*

tire floor area is marked out into sections with white rehearsal tape, and each section is furnished to suggest a room in a house or, in one case, a bar. The audience moves around the hall during the show, gathering at the various sites, and occasionally breaking into smaller groups to encounter individual characters.

The actors travel incognito on the bus from the theatre, blending in with the crowd of spectators. When the audience enters the space, there is a pause to allow them to look around at the scene. Then the performance begins, with the first character revealing herself by pushing through the crowd, shouting in French, to post a letter.

The play is performed in both English and French, although the narrator always speaks English. He explains that this woman writes to her husband every day since he went away to war, but she never hears from him. Gradually, the inhabitants of this street of lost souls are identified. They include a publican and her small daughter; a woman who pretends to be paralysed so that her daughter will devote herself to her care; a woman who obsessively counts 22 objects over and over because her husband was 22 when he left; the woman who writes every day; the fruitarian, and M. Blownaparte, a very ancient bomb disposal

expert who is the only male left in the village. The performance takes time to establish the melancholy lives of the women, before introducing the dramatic catalyst: an airman who falls from the sky.

The performance quotes visually from the films *Dogville* and *Amelie* in its design and in one scene of the village meeting: here the whole community, including the spectators, decide what should happen to the airman. The involvement of the spectators at various points in the action is handled with unusual skill and sensitivity, providing those who wish to be more involved with opportunities to speak, and even to waltz with the performers, but never forcing uncomfortable contact.

The story has touches of magical realism, particularly in the transformation the airman brings to the lives of the villagers. One by one, they begin to imagine a life outside the routines of their small world. In the final magical scenes, small pieces of paper fall from the sky, bearing the message that the war is over, and that the villagers have lost. Together with the airman, they create a gigantic hot air balloon, and leave the village forever.

The Waiting Room was developed in association with the Old Museum Arts Centre, as part of a series of works putting theatre into public spaces. It is a site-specific work, initially performed in Belfast. The de-

mand that the show should tour seems to have come from the Arts Council of Northern Ireland. Happily, Kabosh found an ideal space to effect the transfer. The ghosts of the buildings' histories give the work a deeply moving quality, for despite the happy ending this is a poignant narrative, and a gentle rumination on grief, loss, and transcendence.

This was Karl Wallace's last production with Kabosh. Hopefully the company will continue to thrive under its new Artistic Director, Paula McFetridge, but *The Waiting Room* has left her with big shoes to fill.

Lisa Fitzpatrick lectures in Drama at the University of Ulster.

THE WALWORTH FARCE by Enda Walsh

Druid Theatre Company.

Directed by Mikel Murfi.

With Syan Blake, Denis Conway, Garret Lombard, Aaron Monaghan

On Tour, 20 March – 15 April 2006

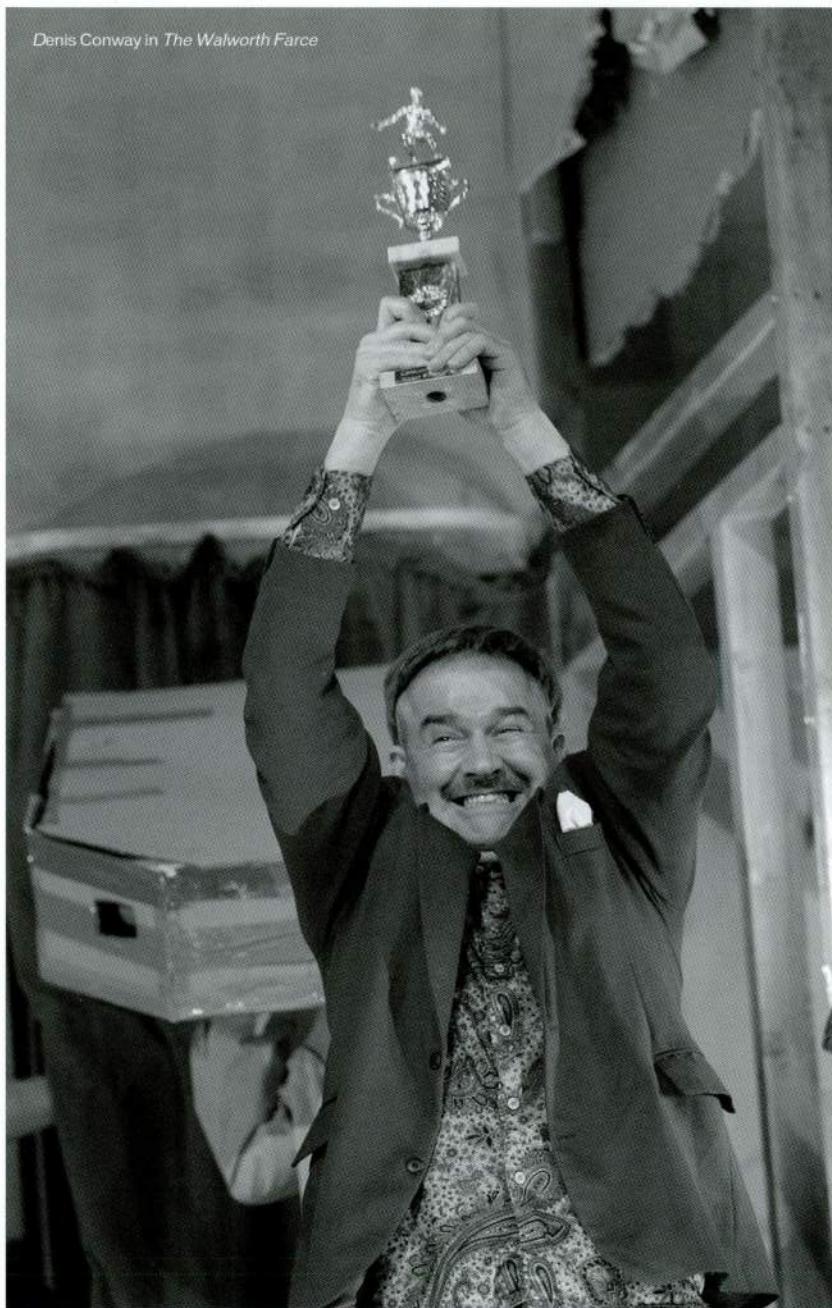
Reviewed at the Helix, Dublin on 8 April

BY BRIAN SINGLETON

ENDA WALSH'S NEW PLAY SEEMS inspired by "Absurdist" drama. It is a ritual re-enactment of stories borne out of trauma but played as farce, with the tragic hovering ominously over the ostensibly farcical action.

The play is set in a council flat on the Walworth Road in south London, where Cork-born emigrant Dinny has

Denis Conway in *The Walworth Farce*



trapped his two sons, Blake and Sean, in a daily ritual of re-enacting his memories of home. His stories idealise the homeland but also reveal its dark underbelly. Dinny plays himself, whereas his two sons play all the other characters: Sean takes on the male roles with various jackets and false moustaches, while Blake assumes the women's roles in a variety of wigs and frocks. And on the shelf is an acting trophy; Dinny has the sons believe that this is a competition for best actor (which he always wins, of course).

Initially, the re-enactment is hilarious: we easily slip into the farce and revel in the multiple role-playing. But when Sean makes the first of many mistakes in his performance, he receives an enormous whack on the head with a saucepan from Dinny. It is a moment that shocks us into the realisation that performing these stories with exactitude might be a matter of life and death.

Sean is the only one of the three who is permitted, or is willing, to leave the flat each morning, to shop in Tesco for props needed for Dinny's "play". But on this occasion he has come home with the wrong bag. He is followed by a black check-out girl, Hayley (Syan Blake), who naively wanders into this strange ritual and becomes imprisoned, literally, within it. Both her gender and her race are frightening markers of a potentially tragic outcome.

So ingrained is the ritual that the

outsider either has to be incorporated within the stories, or must be eliminated. Only Dinny (Denis Conway) has the power to decide. He limbers up for his "play" like an athlete possessed. Beside his chair there is a tape recorder and all the light switches for the flat, which only he controls. Conway gives a ferocious performance, flying into uncontrollable rages at times, while switching suddenly to moments of extreme tenderness. These mood-swings mirror the swift character changes necessitated by the farce. And at one moment of madness (when he squirts a washing-up liquid bottle on his face to make fake tears), we see how dangerous he is: he actually believes that this is a moment of acting genius, and that he will win the imaginary competition. His son Sean comes closest to having an awareness of reality. His retelling of a tender exchange between himself and Hayley was a moment of calm and beauty, skilfully handled by Aaron Monaghan.

But it is perhaps the character of Blake (Garret Lombard) that is the most "absurd", as his motivation to murder Dinny and be murdered in turn, did not have an apparent motivation. Perhaps the driving force behind the need to re-enact is so overpowering as to defy motivation. Perhaps it is the arrival of Hayley who comes from the real and sane world outside that prompts Blake to bring

the "farce" to a tragic end. Blake's action, however, is only the beginning of the end. Hayley escapes and leaves the door open for Sean. Sean hesitates for ages before closing it. So ingrained is the ritual in his head that he cannot escape it, or the flat.

Mikel Murfi directs this absurd "farce" as a theatre of horror, with a ferocious passion and intensity that is often breathtaking. Sabine D'Argent's set of the three-roomed flat is a metaphor of damage and distress for the entire play. Because it is set in London, one might read *The Wal-*

worth Farce as a comment on the trauma of emigration and the trapped memories of the emigrant's moment of exile. But the play's ending reveals that Dinny's stories are not the result of nostalgia for the home country, but of something very personal and sinister. Dinny asks, "What are we if we are not our stories?" When we discover that "he is not his story" at all, only tragedy can ensue from his self-delusion.

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

The Way We Live Now

Fresh dramatic takes on contemporary Ireland have been making a welcome appearance over the past few months, with the emergence of some new writing that places the accelerating pace of social change centre stage. Our critics try to keep up.

DEADLINE by Robert Massey

Andrews Lane Theatre

Directed by Breda Cashe

With Hugh McCusker, Paul Lee, Stephen Kelly,

John Lynn, Úna Crawford O'Brien

3 February – 22 April 2006. Reviewed 21 April

BY TOM DONEGAN

As professions go, the salesman has enjoyed a more than profitable existence on the stage. In the hands of

such luminaries as Miller and Mamet, his position on the front-line of the capitalist battlefield has imbued him with a particular symbolic significance, making him a potent metaphor for the pursuit of financial gain at whatever human cost.

For a first-time playwright, following in such footsteps is never going to be easy, but in conceiving *Deadline* Robert Massey (a successful Sales Di-



Una Crawford O'Brien and Hugh McCusker in *Deadline*

rector himself) obviously felt he had something new to offer by giving post-Celtic Tiger Ireland a salesman play of its own. Quite what that something is, however, remains frustratingly obscure in a production that yields little that is original or insightful.

Set in the dour offices of an unspecified construction firm, the action seems lifted directly from Mamet's *Glengarry Glen Ross*: it is the final week of the present sales quarter, and the contest for the highest profit bonus is heating up. The rivalry between the two most mature

members of the team is intense: former "Million Pound Month Man" John (McCusker) is suffering a chronic loss of form, having been usurped from his topdog position by the highly competitive Stewart (Lee). Their boss Alex (Crawford O'Brien) is adamant that next Monday's deadline is make-or-break time – John wins or he's finished.

The problem is that it's very difficult to care whether John survives or not. The overall tone of the performances is deeply confused, with any attempt by McCusker to invest sin-

cerity or pathos into his character's situation clashing with the more irreverent mood established in other sections of the text.

By far the most successful moments in the play take place outside the thrust of the main narrative, when Massey offers-up amusing slices of everyday sales-office life, presumably drawn from personal experience. Stewart instructs his hopelessly naïve protégé Alan (Kelly) to practise sucking imaginary lemons to affect an effective bartering grimace, while the shambolic Ciarain (Lynn) reveals that his apparent incompetence as a salesman is merely a cunning ruse to guarantee his fast-track promotion to management. This rings far truer to life than anything else the script has to offer.

Seemingly lacking in direction, the actors fail to create an effective distinction between the levity of such moments and the gravity attempted elsewhere. As a result, the action proceeds at an ambivalent pitch, with a lack of conviction in delivery and physicality denying us any proper engagement with the unfolding drama. Potentially interesting issues, such as the impact of a strong female presence in this traditionally male-dominated environment, are hinted at but never properly explored. Such opportunities missed, the play is unable to penetrate the surface of the world it inhabits and by its close even Massey himself seems to have lost interest in John's *Death of a*

Salesman act, leaving the result of the contest undecided.

Though entertaining in parts, *Deadline* adds very little to our understanding of the individuals it portrays or the society that produces them, never attaining the critical edge that until now made the stage-Salesman's career so exceptional.

Tom Donegan is a recent graduate of the MPhil programme in Irish Theatre and Film at Trinity College Dublin

HOW HIGH IS UP? by Brendan Murray

TEAM Theatre Company at The Ark, Dublin

Directed by Thomas de Mallet Burgess

With Sean Duggan, Jill Murphy, Sinead

Murphy, Karl Quinn,

20 February – 11 March 2006.

Reviewed 4 March

BY SARA KEATING

BRENDAN MURRAY'S *HOW HIGH IS UP?* is not just a gentle meditation on death and loss for six to eight-year olds, as the accompanying resource tools to this TEAM Theatre Company production suggest. It is also a crash course in philosophy for an awkward age in childhood, when children begin to develop their own moral compass by asking questions of the world that the world cannot necessarily answer.

Little Star (Jill Murphy), the play's protagonist, is a charming and engaging character for a young audi-

Jill Murphy and Karl Quinn in *How High Is Up?*



PAUL McCARTHY

ence to identify with. She lives with her aging, sagacious guardian, the gardener Ong Gia (Quinn); and the passage of the seasons provides an important metaphor for the play's concern with the natural passage of life. Accompanied by a rakish companion called The Bird-Who-Has-No-Wings (Duggan), Little Star begins a mission to stop time and save her beloved guardian from death. They visit three magicians (played with idiosyncratic variation by Quinn again) who hold the secrets of time, but Little Star realises that saving her guardian involves sacrificing the Spring. At the end of the play Little Star is reconciled to the natural cycle of life and she takes over Ong Gia's role as guardian of the garden. All of this action is spurred on by an exterior narrative device involving a sun-moon character (Murphy) and a telescope. This meta-narrative complements the play's interest in reminding us that our personal worlds are part of a much greater pattern of life and death.

The play is beautifully written in terse, poetic language that projects accessible philosophical ideas with the reflective quietude of Buddhist principles.

The minimalist delicacy of Carol Betera's set and costume design reflects this Oriental influence, while Thomas de Mallet Burgess's direction encourages restraint in the uniformly

excellent performers.

The suggestive image of the cherry-blossom tree shedding the last of its leaves, which opens the play, is just one example of the attention to detail that the production displays on every level. The use of music and dance work as key devices for drawing the children into the world of the play, encouraging them, like The-Bird-Who-Has-No-Wings, to "flap their imagination" in time with the rhythm of Little Star's journey.

So, if the production persuaded its young audience to participate in their own imaginary investigation of Little Star's dilemma, how well did it succeed in its educational concerns? I enlisted the expertise of a pair of children who straddled the target age group for the show. Basing their experience on performance alone, they attuned themselves well to the play's central ideas, but there was a certain amount of confusion about the connection between Little Star's desire to stop time and the fate of Sun/Moon, although this is surely where TEAM's educational workshops prove a crucial element in their work. Nonetheless, *How High Is Up?* provoked interesting questions in my assistants, who were eager to discover whether this reviewer had the answers to the issues the play left unresolved: "How high is up?" Sorry, girls, but it's still as deep as down.

THE GIST OF IT by Rodney Lee

Fishamble Theatre Company

Directed by Jim Cullen

With Amy Conroy, Philip O'Sullivan, Paul Reid.

On tour, 21 February – 18 March 2006

Reviewed 7 March at Project Arts Centre

BY SORCHA CARROLL

RODNEY LEE'S FIRST PLAY, *THE GIST OF IT*, follows the desperate attempts of Orla (Amy Conroy) to finish her final year film project. Obstacles to this apparently straightforward task appear in the form of her neurotic father Gerard (Philip O'Sullivan) and classmate Liam (Paul Reid). Although this is a well-written comedy with good performances, the dynamic of the piece depends on our interest in Orla's attempts to complete her project, a process that occasionally lacks the depth to sustain our attention.

Lee explores the intricate relationship that has evolved between Orla and her father since the death of her mother. Alienated and unpopular at college, Orla is determined to improve her domestic situation: she plans to free herself from the claustrophobic filial bond, using her graduate film to reveal to her father exactly how controlling he is. Attempting to resolve her personal problems on celluloid, she crowds in symbols and surreal imagery: a live butterfly, writhing worms, a Victorian doll's house, a cow's heart in amniotic fluid.

Interestingly, Lee chooses to por-

tray this character as the stereotype her classmates believe her to be: a pretentious would-be intellectual, who thinks herself superior to everyone else. This is shown in her relationship with Liam, her reluctant actor, who irritates her for a variety of reasons: he doesn't understand her script, he enjoys popular cinema, and he makes people laugh. Worse still, his motivation for being involved in the film is not altruistic, but part of a complicated scheme to make his ex-girlfriend Nicole jealous and thus win her back.

Meanwhile, Gerard is preoccupied with his own fear of being alone, and attempts to spoil Orla's work so that she will have to repeat the year and continue living with him. This means that although this is a naturalistic piece, the staging occasionally moves into farce with Gerard's attempts to hide pieces of equipment and sabotage Orla's film.

While the dialogue is sharp, lively, and engaging, the plot unwinds much as one expects and, towards the end of the ninety minutes, it begins to drag a little. The momentum is helped by the use of extracts from Orla's film. Its surrealistic imagery interrupts the naturalistic flow of the drama, while a parody of the script by her classmates adds an additional dimension to the play, creating a strong sense of the other protagonists, especially the fourth



Amy Conroy and Philip O'Sullivan in *The Gist of It*

unseen character Nicole.

Notwithstanding the sometimes monotonous pace, *The Gist of It* is well cast by director Jim Culleton. Conroy presents Orla as a young woman with an extensive vocabulary but no talent for communication: her condescension toward Liam flows naturally, as do her caustic quips and interjections, but Conroy also displays flashes of vulnerability that remind us that Orla is in many ways younger than her years. Reid is relaxed and confident as class joker Liam, while O'Sullivan assumes the role of Gerard with rel-

ish, behaving like an irresponsible child without morals or conscience. Comfortably portraying a compulsive liar, O'Sullivan brings a resolute plausibility to the most outlandishly obvious lies.

Sonia Haccius' design is intriguing, with regular kitchen and living room furniture juxtaposed with a projected backdrop. The projections, by One Productions, add a rich visual element that could have been utilised more fully within the piece. And although the audience are seated close to the action, Culleton might

also have manipulated the intimate space of the Project to better advantage. This production might have used the proximity between audience and performance to evoke an uncomfortable voyeuristic feeling - which could have contrasted with the emotional distances Culleton creates between the performers. Instead, the many complicated layers of satire and parody dehumanise the characters, leaving the impression that *The Gist of It* is a witty black comedy without lasting resonance.

Sorcha Carroll has an M.A. in Modern Theatre Studies from UCD and currently works for Opera Theatre Company.

THE GROWN-UPS by Nicholas Kelly

Peacock Theatre, Dublin

Directed by Gerard Stembridge

WITH Leigh Arnold, Stephen Brennan, Dan Colley, Jonathan Forbes, Fionnula Murphy.

10 February – 11 March 2006.

Reviewed 14 February

BY TANYA DEAN

'YUPPIE' WAS THE EPITHET USED to describe the hip young urban professionals of the 1980s. The term is dated, but the species remains, now embedded in post-post-millennial consumerism. Symptoms include spending approximately one-third of your wages on daily cups of skinny venté caramel macchiato. If this sounds familiar, congratulations: you

are part of a national cliché. What matters is, you know it. Very postmodern.

Directed by Gerard Stembridge, Nicholas Kelly's new play *The Grown-Ups* is deeply concerned with how the current generation is losing perspective in a society that equates personal success with career, property, and tasteful furnishings. Indeed, Sinead O'Hanlon's striking set is a homage to the clean white lines and natural light of Swedish-style décor. The action takes place in the home to hip young things, Alan (Forbes) and Nicola (Arnold). Nicola is an attractive, self-possessed young professional, who is very aware of where the couple stand in the modern measure of success, and is constantly striving for the next step up – for example, she is slightly embarrassed that they rent rather than own their flat.

Forbes' Alan, by contrast, is obviously starting to crack under the pressure of their consumerist lifestyle. As the play opens, he is waiting for his estranged sister Amy to arrive. Apparently, she has been involved in some kind of scandal. Fionnuala Murphy plays the shabbily dressed Amy as a nervy, defensive 30-something, who obviously feels out of place in the gleaming modernity of Alan and Nicola's apartment. She is followed by her boyfriend Stephen (Brennan), an alcoholic raconteur who exudes bonhomie. It emerges that Amy has been accused



Jonathan Forbes and Dan Colley in The Grown-Ups

ROS KAVANAGH

of attacking a student at the prestigious school at which she worked, although she maintains her innocence, claiming the student confronted her and she blacked out. The differences between rag-tag pair Amy and Stephen, and 'power-couple' Nicola and Alan are obvious, but both couples share a hopeless co-dependency: Amy and Stephen cling to each other because they are confused and defeated by the expectations imposed upon them by modern Ireland, and Nicola and Alan rely on each other for reassurance that they are fulfilled by their lifestyle, that the constant scramble for success will ultimately make them happy.

In the second act, the arrival of Amy's accuser Scott (played with vile indolence by Dan Colley) introduces the next generation of this cultural malaise, giving us a lotus-eater born into a life of material comfort and instant gratification, who is cruelly dismissive of Alan's hard work to gain a similar lifestyle. His story of being attacked by Amy doesn't ring true, especially as he seems unperplexed when he runs into her. Stephen and Alan start to suspect that Scott's alleged abuse at the hands of Amy is a cover for something darker, possibly involving the never-seen Richard (Alan's boss and Nicola's ex). The details, however,

remain frustratingly unclear, as does the motivation.

The murky intrigues involving Scott and the mysterious Richard are never fully explained, and the play's needlessly convoluted and ultimately baffling conspiracy theory eventually collapses in on itself. No matter: it was merely a scaffold to support an investigation of what the programme blurb describes as the "malaise of a generation seduced by money, status and self". Both couples eventually choose their own way to deal with the pressures of life in the noughties: Alan and Nicola reach the apex of aspiration by buying a flat in an up-and-coming area, whilst Stephen and Amy flee to Aruba (apparently it's impossible to live in this country if you don't buy into the modern dream).

The problem here is that *The Grown-Ups* is trying to explore modern Irish society, but does so by throwing out clichés. References to juice bars and trendy restaurants with names like "Crumb" may draw self-deprecating sniggers from the audience, but nothing new is being said here. This idea of a "malaise" in Irish society that is slowly draining us of emotional depth is repeatedly emphasised, but never explored. *The Grown-Ups*, whilst a glossy take on modern Ireland, does not investigate this identity crisis; it merely identifies the symptoms. Prescription: take two

Prozac and call your mortgage adviser in the morning.

Tanya Dean recently graduated from Trinity College Dublin with a B.A. degree in Theatre Studies and Classics. She is the General Manager of Irish Theatre Magazine and writes for Totally Dublin magazine.

LIMBO by Declan Feenan

Sneaky Productions

Directed by Owen McCafferty

With Bronagh Taggart

Queen's Drama Centre, as part of the Belfast Festival at Queen's

1-5 November 2005. Reviewed on 3 November

BY KAREN FRICKER

SNEAKY LIVES UP TO ITS NAME WITH this outstanding staging of Declan Feenan's haunting, allusive play: the script and Owen McCafferty's production work together to make a simple story complex, intriguing, and haunting. They do so via the accumulation of tiny details, by the crucial facts that its unreliable narrator either leaves out or drops in unexpectedly, and by the nuances of her behaviour. The power of this solo performance by Bronagh Taggart creeps up on you: it is theatre as emotional stealth-bombing.

The opening image as the audience enters is very beautiful, thanks to David Craig (sets) and David McDonald's (lights) well-harmonised

Bronagh Taggart in Limbo



JONATHAN HARDEN

designs: a young woman in party clothes, high heels in hand, stands in a shallow pond of water lined with autumn leaves, the lights glinting off the water and casting shadows on her face and body. First ambiguity: she tells us that she's afraid of water – but then what is she doing standing in it? The physical prettiness of the setting contrasts interestingly with the banality of the story she starts to tell: Claire is a 17 year-old living alone and working in a meat-packing factory, who, on a night out, meets a man in his 40s who treats her with care and friendliness, then ends up in her bed.

Typically, however, the production makes it difficult to cast quick judgement – the man knows Claire's age, but does not force her into anything, nor does she seem to have any view on what's happened. This is another of Feenan's key tactics — to have Claire narrate what's happening to her but not analyse it nor talk about her feelings, and it is an enormous credit to McCafferty and Taggart that they can remain loyal to this cue and keep the story engaging at the same time. We never find out why Claire has such an isolated life nor where her family might be, but these questions, far from being a distraction, become part of the way the production works on the audience: we become aware that we are in the world of someone terribly fragile,

who needs to tell things this way because it's the only way she can.

The results of this one-night-stand take what in other hands might be a predictable turn, but which is, again, made interesting by how laterally Claire conveys the information that she is pregnant. A random encounter on another night out finds her further entangled in the man's life, via a well-handled surprise plot twist. After a slightly overnarrated passage leading up to the child's birth, the story leads us back to where we started, but now we know our location: on the banks of Camlough Lake, where Claire stands with babe in arms. The final moment is one of huge menace and ambiguity, which justifies but does not totally explain the consistent water imagery — though the play's title and poster image (an angelic baby's face, underwater) give strong clues of a tragic ending.

It takes enormous nerve, and maturity, to present work that touches on societal problems without preaching, and which trusts its audience to put clues together without spoonfeeding them. Sneaky, a consortium of Queen's University drama graduates and former staff members, indicates here that it could be a much-needed source of new theatrical energy in Northern Ireland.

Karen Fricker is a research fellow at the

Institute for International Integration Studies at Trinity College Dublin and reviews theatre for the Guardian (UK) and Variety (USA).

O GO MY MAN by Stella Feehily

Out of Joint.

Directed by Max Stafford-Clarke

With Paul Hickey, Susan Lynch and Ewan
Stewart
Everyman Palace, Cork
7-11 March 2006. Reviewed 7 March
BY BERNADETTE SWEENEY

"O GO MY MAN", AS ONE OF ITS characters informs us, is an anagram of monogamy. There is however little evidence of monogamy in the plot of Feehily's new play, structured around the interconnected lives of a number of Dublin characters, each of whom is connected to the others through blood, lust, or coincidence. The play is thus reminiscent of soap-opera and, as it moves quickly from scene to scene, reveals the writer's experience as a television actor. The set as designed by Es Devlin and lighting by Johanna Town facilitate the swift-moving action. A multi-functional central structure changes throughout to become a coffee shop in the airport, a theatre dressing room, a living room wall, a gallery exhibition space. It also becomes "neutral" when scenes suggest an outdoor space. The dialogue is quick

and, under Stafford-Clarke's direction, the pace of dialogue and staging are handled very well.

Neil (played with bluster by Ewan Stewart) is a TV news reporter or, in the words of another character, "an atrocity tourist". As the play opens, he is conducting a frantic conversation on a mobile phone. He's elated to have got "the money shot"; unlike his rival reporters, he has progressed beyond the usual shots of refugee camps in the Sudan and has recorded footage of villages devastated in the wake of massacring Janjaweed militia.

Back in Dublin we meet Ian (Paul Hickey) a photographer whose long-term girlfriend Sarah – an out of work actor played by Susan Lynch – is having an affair with Neil. Upon his arrival home from the Sudan, Neil leaves his wife Zoe (Aoife McMahon) and teenage daughter Maggie (Gemma Reeves). Sarah then leaves Ian; Zoe starts internet dating; and Maggie tries to run away. Ian – a work acquaintance of Zoe's – then begins a relationship with young TV producer Elsa (Denise Gough) whose work in television links her – inevitably – to Neil.

These intimacies are standard fare in soap opera, but in performance they are almost too close for comfort, as the tv camera, so good at making real the sometimes ludicrous intimacies between two people, is conspicuous by its absence. Instead, on the

Susan Lynch in O Go My Man



JOHN HAYNES

Everyman Palace stage, we see real bodies performing "real" intimacies. The gap between the act and the actor is uncomfortably evident here at times, especially in scenes depicting sexual encounter, or military-style training. This implicates us, the audience, in the watching of sex and violent "acts", in a way that we might not notice when watching similar scenes on television. Whether this is a deliberate strategy by Feehily and/or Stafford-Clarke is unclear, however.

Dublin's cultural diversity is represented by "non-national" Alice (Mossie Smith), a choral figure who appears in various scenes as a coffee shop waitress, a chambermaid, a cleaner, a homeless woman bedding down in the park. Feehily gives Alice the voice of social conscience, as the other ("national") characters are too wrapped up in themselves and each other to care. Alice's marginalised voice comments pithily on us while in service to our self-obsessed society. While this is an effective choric device, "Alice", troublingly, becomes a generic "immigrant" worker in a gesture that elides the complexities of the immigrant situation.

In the final scene, the characters' lives have brought them together at Ian's exhibition, and the play's climax has the sense of being, in soap terms, 'a double-episode' where plot-lines are resolved or severed. As Ian

is exhibiting intimate photographs of his relationship with Sarah, the scene is set for a cliff-hanging confrontation, which is described in the scene as "the war that we all understand". The political horrors of the Sudan as witnessed by Neil are thus conflated with the love-intrigues of the Dublin middle-class. While *O Go My Man* did not make it to a Dublin audience, the Cork audience seemed a little unsettled by this, if the reactions from the floor at the post-show discussion were anything to go by – not so much in response to the negative depiction of our increasingly selfish and uncaring society, but more so that Feehily seemed to leaving us off the hook. While our emotional lives might indeed be our closest experience of war, it's still, quite simply, not the same. The horrors evoked seem too big to fit the comparison, too much to be just another plot line of *O Go my Man*.

The play ended with the characters, or perhaps just actors here, walking towards the audience while singing "Only Love Can Break Your Heart". This seemed an uncertain resolution to an uncertain play that was extremely well produced, with very strong performances from Paul Hickey and Susan Lynch especially.

Bernadette Sweeney lectures in Drama and Theatre Studies at University College Cork.



David Heap, Emma Colahan and Adam Fergus in Thesis

THESIS by Gerry Dukes,

Paul Meade and David Parnell

Gúna Nua / Civic Theatre, Tallaght

Directed by David Parnell

With Karen Ardiff, Anthony Brophy, Emma

Coolahan, Adam Fergus, David Heap

3 - 22 April 2006. Reviewed 5 April

BY HARVEY O'BRIEN

THESES IS A CONFIDENT, INTELLIGENT and entertaining play, adding the academic rigour of Joyce and Beckett scholar, Gerry Dukes, to the company's usual concoction of contemporary middle class mores and crises. It is breathtakingly assured given its development via three writers and a consulting cast asked to play some difficult games with time and space, so much so that the theatrical box of tricks thrown open by director David

Parnell – including video installation, quick change, slow-motion, and conjuring illusions – does not seem like a desperate distraction. Instead they become tools for dissecting space and time, used effectively to reinforce the play's central concern with parallelism, intersection, and "crossing the line" on personal, intellectual, and political levels.

The constant allusions to *Hamlet* are not incidental, nor are they pretentious, and call to mind Gúna Nua's previous piggybacking on the Bard in *Taste* where *Macbeth* provided a superstructure which did not interfere with Parnell's own voice. There is also a lot of Joyce here, not only at the centre of the plot, where, exiled Stephen (Adam Fergus) finds American academia concerned that

his interpretation of British colonial history might offend their allies in the War on Terror, but also in the character dynamics and narrative structure. This odyssey of indecision presents Stephen and his academic mentor Boyle (David Heap) as both Daedelus and Bloom and Hamlet and Claudius and, without ever forcing the matter, smoothly takes the audience on a witty and literate journey through the mindscape of transatlantic Ireland.

The play follows Gúna Nua's *Dinner With Friends* in interlinking the past and the present in shared locations which seem to morph magically from one space to another. It compresses physical and temporal space by charting, in reverse, the stirrings of connection between Stephen and Boyle's wife Penny (Karen Ardiff), while detailing how they are finally torn apart. It also moves about in literal space very comfortably, such as opening with Stephen and Penny sharing the same bed as a prop, but in different story spaces. He sits alone in his University-sponsored digs, she lies in her conjugal bed as her husband prepares an early breakfast. The same technique continues throughout, crossing the Atlantic and back again, even charting a Joycean journey through the Dublin night (complete with an updated brothel scene in a lapdancing club peopled by Eastern European dancers), drawing parallels

and interconnections between actions past and present which have bearing on one another. It all works very well, and, more importantly, reinforces a central metaphorical concern with lines and boundaries which are central to what happens to these people. Rather bleakly, but certainly not unduly, the play ultimately suggests that even if you eventually find the courage to challenge orthodoxy, you may fail to overcome it.

The stage chosen for this drama is the academic world. Though it is an appropriate setting and one matched to the script's erudite intertextuality, it did have me wistfully pondering how nice it would be to face a grandiose political crisis, as Stephen does, defending one's work in the face of censorship, as opposed to the banal reality of struggling under the crushing weight of petty bureaucratic vindictiveness enabled by the corporatisation of what used to be called education. The moral decline of academia into the service of transient politics gives the play's intellectual conflicts a sharper political edge, and allows the writers to explore ever-greater levels of interconnection between the small and the large choices which confront these individuals in this setting.

Opening night suggested a need for a little more development in performances and timing, though Anthony Brophy was consistently

strong and funny in a variety of supporting roles. Fergus particularly needed to sharpen up aspects of characterisation to engender sympathy for Stephen's plight, which always runs the risk of seeming like so much wishy-washy navel-gazing if not handled deftly.

HOWIE THE ROOKIE by Mark O'Rowe

Peacock Theatre, Dublin

Directed by Jimmy Fay

With Aidan Kelly and Karl Shiels

5 May – 3 June 2006. Reviewed on 9 May

BY TOM DONEGAN

PREMIERED IN 1999 AT THE BUSH Theatre in London, before transferring to the Civic Theatre, Tallaght, *Howie The Rookie* presented audiences with an uncompromisingly dystopian depiction of Dublin's suburban hinterland – pushing its author into the limelight and acquiring a somewhat legendary status in the process. Seven years on, the Abbey's decision to restage the play – complete with its original cast – allows a welcome opportunity for those not present at the time to see what all the fuss was about.

Told through back-to-back monologues, the piece depicts a frenzied forty-eight hours in the lives of its two unhinged protagonists, The Howie Lee (Kelly) and The Rookie Lee (Shiels). Less socio-realism than a nightmarish hallucination where elements of the everyday meld seam-

lessly with the fantastical, the narrative progresses through an increasingly bizarre cycle of revenge – the stuff of classical tragedy refracted through the surreal lens of O'Rowe's decidedly warped imagination.

First to appear is the skulking, hooded figure of The Howie, confronting the audience directly as he stalks the concrete catwalk of Johanna Connor's minimal thrust stage-design. An epidemic of scabies, he explains, has been wreaking havoc among the local male population and the time has come to punish the individual thought responsible: his "namesake in Lee-ness", The Rookie.

Kelly's performance expertly embodies The Howie's ambiguous nature, his jovial banter and disarmingly candid demeanour juxtaposed by an underlying air of kinetic menace. As he and his mates Ollie and The Peaches travel from the "bandit country" of their suburban estate to the city centre in pursuit of violent retribution, an unsettling picture emerges of a pathological society populated by the grotesque and depraved. His da, for example, seems to have lost the ability to engage properly with reality, instead filming every aspect of his family's dysfunctional lives with his handicam. Then there are the illicit encounters with the grossly overweight Avalanche - whose sexual prowess is "measured in fuckin' tonnage" - as well as the

Karl Shiels and Aidan Kelly in Howie the Rookie



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ominous spectre of joyriding duo Flann-Dingle and Ginger Boy, who seem to be shadowing Howie's every move like "the Mayan god of death".

The singular quality of this vision is compounded by the unique dialect in which it is expressed, comprising a dynamic combination of harsh Dublinese and poetic mannerism. The result is at times reminiscent of the poorly translated dialogue of retro Kung-Fu films, with the character's vernacular constantly striving for a sense of the epic and in the process producing some highly amusing idiosyncrasies - as when The Howie speaks of his friends' behaviour as "a bit fuckin" skullduggerous".

The second half sees The Rookie - all leather jacket and cringe-inducing charisma - offer his perspective on events as they continue to unfold. As he nurses the injuries from the previous evening's punishment beating, his ladies-man façade soon begins to dissolve as he fearfully discusses the £700 he owes gangland hardman The Ladyboy. He has failed miserably to get enough money to pay back the debt; the situation seems increasingly hopeless before, in a classic instance of *peripeteia*, The Howie steps in to save his former foe by taking-on The Ladyboy in a fight to the death.

Astounded and appalled by what he witnesses, Shiels' Rookie recreates the ensuing duel to striking effect through a visceral combination of blood-cur-

dling description and acute physical enactment. Evocatively lit by Sinead McKenna in a progressively deepening red, what at first appears to be a homage to stylised cinematic violence just keeps getting more and more extreme, reaching a point of absurdity that in turn points up the ridiculousness of such vengeful conflict itself. Far from celebrating such behaviour, this gruesome finale actually serves as an effective critique, with the evocation of The Howie's last moments - impaled upon metal railings before being crushed by Flann Dingle's speeding van - creating a palpable sense of the futility and bleakness of such existence.

Though undoubtedly a troubling piece, *Howie the Rookie* emerges from this production as far more than merely an exercise in juvenile shock-tactics. Astutely directed by the consistently impressive Jimmy Fay, the play achieves a dynamic balance between provocation and pastiche, creating a "mythical present" in which contemporary problems of suburban decay, disenfranchised youth, violence and masculine crisis are refracted and re-imagined. Though we may not like The Howie and Rookie Lee as individuals, by sharing so intimately in their experiences the audience become unavoidably implicated in the dynamics of the brutal world they reveal - a situation that ultimately forces us to ask questions of our own.

Play It Again Sam

The recent Beckett Centenary Festival gave directors and performers an opportunity to take a range of different approaches to his dramatic and prose texts, while an *Endgame* from Belfast demonstrated that with this playwright, the meaning is in the detail

BECKETT'S GHOSTS

by Samuel Beckett

Bedrock Productions, Project Arts Centre,
Dublin

Directed by Amanda Coogan, Jimmy Fay,
Jason Byrne,

With Andrew Bennett, Ned Dennehy, Deirdre
Roycroft

13 – 22 April 2006. Reviewed 21 April

PLAY/CATASTROPHE

by Samuel Beckett

Gate Theatre, Dublin

Directed by Michael Barker-Caven and Selina
Cartmell,

With Ingrid Cragie, Nick Dunning, Olwen
Fouéré, Owen Roe, Catherine Walker

26 – 29 April 2006. Reviewed 27 April

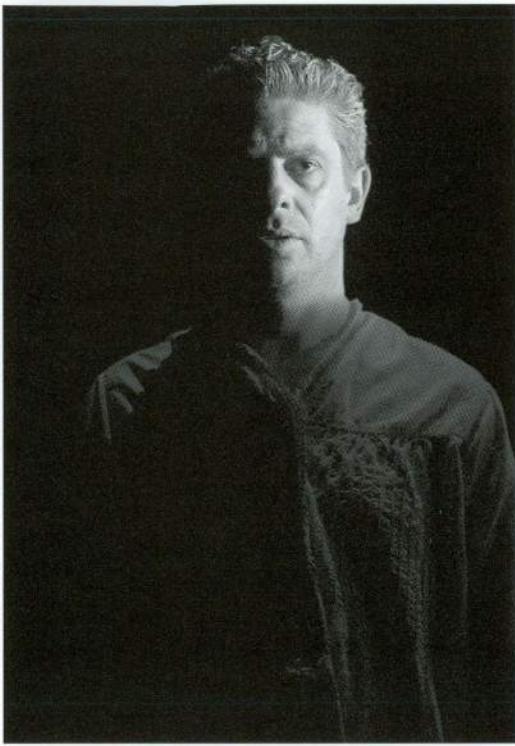
BY SARA KEATING

DESPITE THE EMPHASIS ON BODLESSNESS in Beckett's later plays, physical existence is crucial to their form, and to their reception by audiences. The constrained space that the plays construct around the actors – as they reduce the body to a stock-still statue, a head, or a mouth – demands a constrained per-

formance technique that allows entire gestures, ideas, and philosophies to be embodied in a single grimace or a scream.

Similarly, these plays place physical demands upon audiences. The act of focusing on the concentrated stage-space becomes an act of endurance for the spectator: the light plays tricks with you, your eyes play tricks on you, and the singular stage image is burnt into your mind like a memory drawn from the collective unconscious of the human race.

In *Beckett's Ghosts*, Bedrock bring together four of Beckett's darkest and, bizarrely, funniest meditations on the nature of human existence. The claustrophobic conditions in the theatre trigger the audience's first awareness of the physical force of the plays and the physical demands they will make on them as spectators. In the packed theatre, tiered benches provide little allowance for personal space, while thick, heavy red curtains fall ceiling to floor at the feet of spectators in the front row, shrinking the stage and the



sense of distance between the audience and actor when the auditorium is blacked out and the curtains are raised.

In *A Piece of Monologue*, directed by Jason Byrne, the blackened stage is burnt with a single globe of light, and the grey face of a white-haired, white-clad speaker, played by Andrew Bennett. Bennett's rich orotund voice simultaneously fills the auditorium with the force of human presence and human decay that is the haunting theme of the evening's presentation. Bennett is immobile as he delivers Beckett's resigned philosophy in the characteristic monotone such fatalism

demands. However, the sheer concentration of his restrained performance draws the audience in, as an equal creator of both the meaning and the theatricality of the monologue, and Bennett appears to shrink and then lengthen as the spectator's eyes adjust and readjust to an absolute darkness that somehow manages to get darker as the monologue moves on.

Paul Keegan's full, bright house lights plunge the audience back into their own consciousness for a brief interval that is brief respite. We move then to *That Time*, directed by Jimmy Fay and performed by Ned Dennehy, which creates a similarly singular stage image for the audience to concentrate on. A disembodied head (The Listener) floating in a blackened space provides the visual focus, while three voices coming from different areas of the stage assail it like a conscience. The Listener attempts to ignore their reminiscences and then dismisses them with a shrug and a laugh. Dennehy's cracked smile brings humour to the oppressive 15-minute fragment, which is essentially a dramatisation of inner consciousness and the stories through which we maintain a

BECKETT'S GHOSTS: Facing page: Andrew Bennet in A Piece of Monologue; below: Deirdre Roycroft in Not I





Olwen Fouéré and Karl Sullivan in Catastrophe

tenuous sense of sanity.

Breath, directed by performance artist Amanda Coogan, capitalises on the laughs uneasily generated by That Time with her 40 second version of Beckett's shortest play, whose dramatic action famously consists of the sound of a single breath and a repeated cry. Despite the play's limited dramatic possibilities, Coogan manages to inject her own feminist interests into the piece: as the light grows in its focus to reveal a set of praying hands, it expands to reveal a wasteland of naked disembodied female mannequins, invoking a critique of the commercial exploitation of the female body. By using sculpted figures rather than live bodies, Coogan manages to avoid similarly exploiting the female body for art's sake. However, Beckett's stage directions do not allow for any meditation. This works to the detriment of Coogan's conceptual vision, as the sheer brevity of the piece provokes laughter rather than serious engagement. However, it also lightens the mood for Deirdre Roycroft's performance of *Not I*, which is both funny and scary at the same time.

In *Not I*, again, the stage image is concentrated into a single frame, this time a woman's mouth. Directed by Jason Byrne, Roycroft is a compelling and aggressive Mouth, and this contrasts wonderfully with the neurotic desperation of standard interpretations of the text. The lurking presence of the

auditor-figure on the fringes of the stage – often neglected in performances of the play - provides a context for the anger of Mouth's outbursts, while enhancing our understanding of the politics of language and identity at the heart of the play.

The first half of the double-bill of *Play/Catastrophe* at The Gate was not as successful in negotiating the potential impact of the stage image on the audience's reception of the play. Visually, the design and the lighting for *Play*, by Eileen Diss and Rupert Murray respectively, evoke the fixed filmic incarnation of Anthony Mighella's *Play* from the Beckett on Film series. Director Michael Barker-Caven uses a swinging spotlight to control the spectator's vision of the three immobile characters, and this shifts the focus away from what is said by the speakers to what is seen by the audience. However, actors Ingrid Cragie, Nick Dunning and Catherine Walker are trapped both physically in the urns, but in performance too as the iconic image is privileged over any real meaning in the play itself in this essentially safe production.

Catastrophe, meanwhile, is a far less conservative choice from the canon and Selina Cartmell's production highlights the Eastern European politics of dictatorship that underlie the play's theatrical metaphor – it was written in 1973 as an homage to Vaclav Havel. However, the evocation of these issues

through the cinematic images of the *film noir* genre - particularly in Rupert Murray's shadowy lighting design - obfuscates their contemporary political weight. Owen Roe's underplayed director-figure jars slightly with Olwen Fouéré's intensely physical performance. Their distinctive silhouettes create wonderful stage pictures, but it is the image of the Actor (Karl Sullivan) looking out at the audience in a last-minute assertion of defiant individuality that creates the real, burning climax of *Catastrophe*'s end.

Sara Keating is completing her PhD at the School of Drama, Trinity College Dublin, and writes about theatre and visual arts for various publications.

EH JOE by Samuel Beckett

Gate Theatre, Dublin

Directed by Atom Egoyan

With Michael Gambon

4-8 and 12-15 April 2006

Reviewed 12 April

A PIECE OF MONOLOGUE

by Samuel Beckett

Gare St Lazarre Players at chq, Dublin

Directed by Walter Asmus

With Conor Lovett

11, 13 April 2006

Reviewed 13 April

BY PATRICK LONERGAN

ONE OF THE MORE PUZZLING DECISIONS by the much maligned Beckett Estate is

its willingness to allow the transferral of Beckett's works from one medium into another – for his prose to be “recited”, his radio plays to be staged, and his plays to be filmed (but not made into movies, of course). Beckett was unusually sensitive to medium: his plays are uniquely focussed on the role of the audience in constructing meaning, while his work on film, television, and radio shows an understanding of, and curiosity about, the technologies that underlie those forms. Moving Beckett's work out of their original media thus seems to run the risk of reducing their impact, placing them into contexts that don't necessarily make sense – a process that could be far more damaging to Beckett's legacy than some of the decisions that actually have drawn objections from the Estate, such as the use of incidental music in *Godot* or the casting of female actors in male roles in the same play.

That said, this Gate's production of *Eh Joe*, originally written for television, is stunningly successful as an act of theatre, as a performance, and as a technical accomplishment.

In Beckett's original, a lone male protagonist sits alone in a room, where he is tormented by the voice of a former lover. As her monologue progresses, the camera focussed on Joe's face moves closer to him – so that the viewer's gaze acts in unison with the woman's voice, our scrutiny of the character intensifying as the woman's

accusations against him become increasingly explicit. The piece therefore acts not only as one of Beckett's harshest explorations of human weakness; it's also an interesting examination of the function of television – which can simultaneously isolate the individual, while also connecting us to a potentially infinite range of human experiences.

Atom Egoyan does not simply reproduce this experience – although this production is remarkably faithful to Beckett's aesthetic – he also reimagines it fully for the theatre. As the action begins, Joe (Michael Gambon) closes the doors and windows in his room, before sitting, his back to the audience, on a bed centre-stage. We then see a massive image of Gambon's face, projected onto a transparent screen on the front of the stage, while the voice of the woman (Penelope Wilton) is played over a PA system. The camera movements in the original script are reproduced exactly, but the piece also has the immediacy of the theatrical: there is a moving contrast here between the frailty of Gambon's body as it appears physically on stage, and the intensity of the projected image of his face in front of us. Gambon remains almost entirely motionless throughout, so we see his responses to the voice of the woman only in the most minute movements – the flicker of an eye, or the rolling of a tear down his cheek.

The entire experience lasts just over twenty minutes (which, with full price tickets, means this show costs roughly one euro per minute – a price sure to remind you of the bleakness of existence if the play doesn't do so). But it is a beautifully sustained and terribly sad performance that lingers in the imagination.

Gare St Lazarre's reputation as interpreters of Beckett's work is based on their sensitive stagings of his prose. Their performances are limited by conditions imposed upon them by the Beckett Estate – they cannot dramatise the prose, but must instead recite it. Theatricality tends to be added to these works not be performance or direction, therefore, but instead by location – by the juxtaposition of the prose with an unusual setting, such as an art gallery, a Masonic Hall, or, in this case, the dank cavernous cellar of one of the shiny new buildings in Dublin's Docklands.

Their production of *A Piece of Monologue* offers us a rare opportunity to see how they interpret a work that actually was written for the stage: this piece was first performed in New York in 1980, and is directed here by Walter Asmus, one of the leading interpreters of Beckett's work.

We are directed into seats in the pitch dark cellar, ushers trying to help us along with dimly lit torches. When we arrive, Conor Lovett is already standing on a platform at the front of

the room, an orb of light beside him. Lovett's performance of the monologue is beautifully modulated and rhythmic – his character sounds appropriately bewildered by his circumstances, but his delivery ensures that the audience can attune itself fully to his speech.

This production contrasts strongly with *Eh Joe*, being intensely verbal where Agoyan's production was intensively visual – and showing how a found space can become richly theatrical without needing the technical wizardry and high production values on show at the Gate. Viewed together, both pieces illustrate how Beckett's works can be enhanced when directors and performers are given opportunities to investigate and explore fully Beckett's texts.

Patrick Lonergan lectures in English at NUI Galway, and is Reviews Editor of this magazine.

ENDGAME by Samuel Beckett

Prime Cut Productions at Waterfront Hall

Studio, Belfast

Directed by Mark Lambert

With Conleth Hill, Frankie McCafferty, Stella

McCusker, Ian McElhinney

2- 18 February 2006

Reviewed 15 February

BY TOM MAGUIRE

THE CHALLENGE FACED BY AN ACTOR working on *Endgame* is simple but fun-

damental: to make sense of the script in performance. The Beckett industry thrives on layering meaning and interpretations onto each script and in this, the year of Beckett's centenary, it has gone into overdrive. Little of this, however, is of any help to the performer or the spectator encountering the work. The generation of grand ideas about the plays cannot supplant the experience of watching it in the theatre: the performance must compel us as an event. Ideas, if they are to come at all, come in the aftershocks.

The infamous intransigence of the Beckett estate in prescribing the limits of any variation on Beckett's supposed intentions is helpful in restraining the imposition of ideas onto the play, although it also runs the risk of inhibiting other artists from coming to them with fresh approaches. For this production of *Endgame* it must therefore have been a challenge, especially for designer Monica Frawley, to meet with Beckett's stage directions while providing a set that would not be dwarfed by the barn-like dimensions of the Waterfront Studio. She does so by providing two sides of a once-grand room whose grey-blue flock-papered walls confine Hamm and his parents. Adjacent is an unseen kitchen and beyond these confines an external world visible and accessible only to the servant Clov. Frawley's design deftly creates the atmosphere of this closed interior environment, while resisting

*Frankie McCafferty and
Conleth Hill in Endgame*



too close an identification with a known place.

At the centre of this room is Conleth Hill's corpulent and self-indulgent Hamm. Blind and confined to his chair, he is simultaneously dependent on Clov and despotically malevolent in his treatment of him. Hill's ability to alternate capriciously between these and numerous other ambiguous and contradictory behaviours marks his performance as masterful. With precision and subtlety, he plays the full range of senses and emotions as Hamm repeats an endless sequence of banal rituals and improvised diatribes to pass the time between waking and sleeping, and between birth and death.

If Hill's playing wrung out every aspect of the action in its rude corporeality, Frankie McCafferty's Clov was a strangely muted and shadowy figure. The intention may have been to bestow the role with the restrained suffering of a Keaton-like clown, where Clov is the Fool to Hamm's Lear. However, McCafferty's playing lacked intensity. There is an early moment, for example, when Clov must clamber up and down a stepladder to inspect the vista beyond the windows high in the back wall. McCafferty generated the repeated rhythm of the action, but achieved neither the energy to make it a gag, nor the pain in his physical movement to establish pathos. Given that Clov is the one character who will leave, this loss of intensity removed the any real sense

of rationale for this departure. This was disappointing, particularly given the wonderful contrast between Hill and McCafferty's physical appearance.

In Ian McElhinney and Stella McCusker, Lambert could hardly have cast a better Nagg and Nell. Confined to large bins upstage right (a departure from Beckett's script), they barely exist for long stretches of the play, emerging decrepit, dishevelled and disconnected from the world around them. Yet when they brave the light, there was a palpable tenderness between them, despite their physical separation and their son's ill-treatment of them. Nagg can still tell a good story and McElhinney brings a natural dignity to the role. When Hamm grants his father a stale Spratt's medium dog biscuit, and Nagg reserves it to share it with Nell, the whole of their relationship is illuminated.

It was in this close attention to the frugality of the life the characters lead that the production excelled. The abject state of their personal relationships redounds in every glance, every gesture, every word through which they doggedly pursue or avoid a connection with each other. At its best it was a masterclass in answering the question of how to perform Beckett: forget any preordained philosophical treatise; play the minutiae.

Tom Maguire is the Subject Director for Drama at the University of Ulster.



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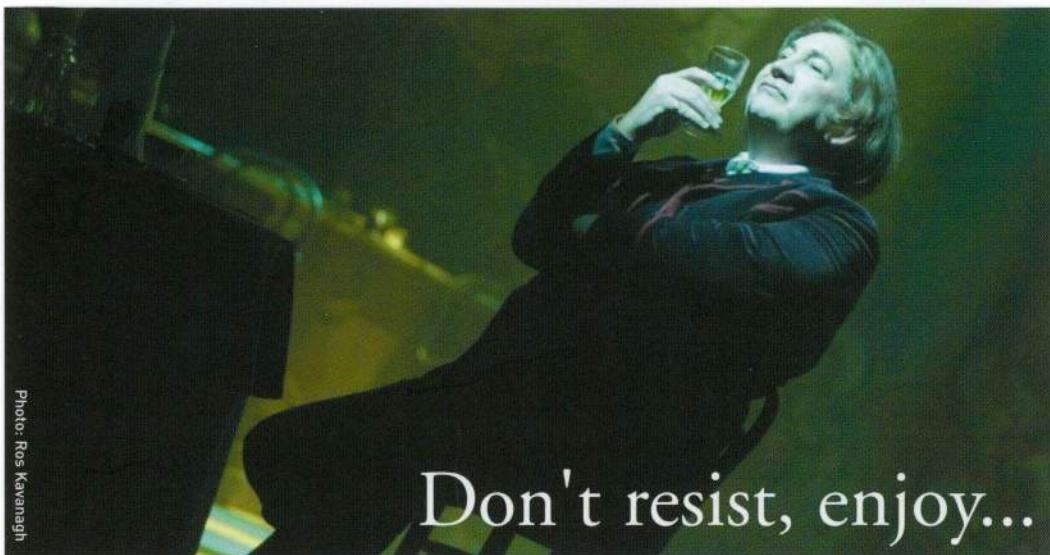


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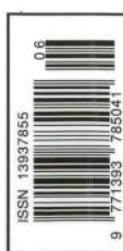
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