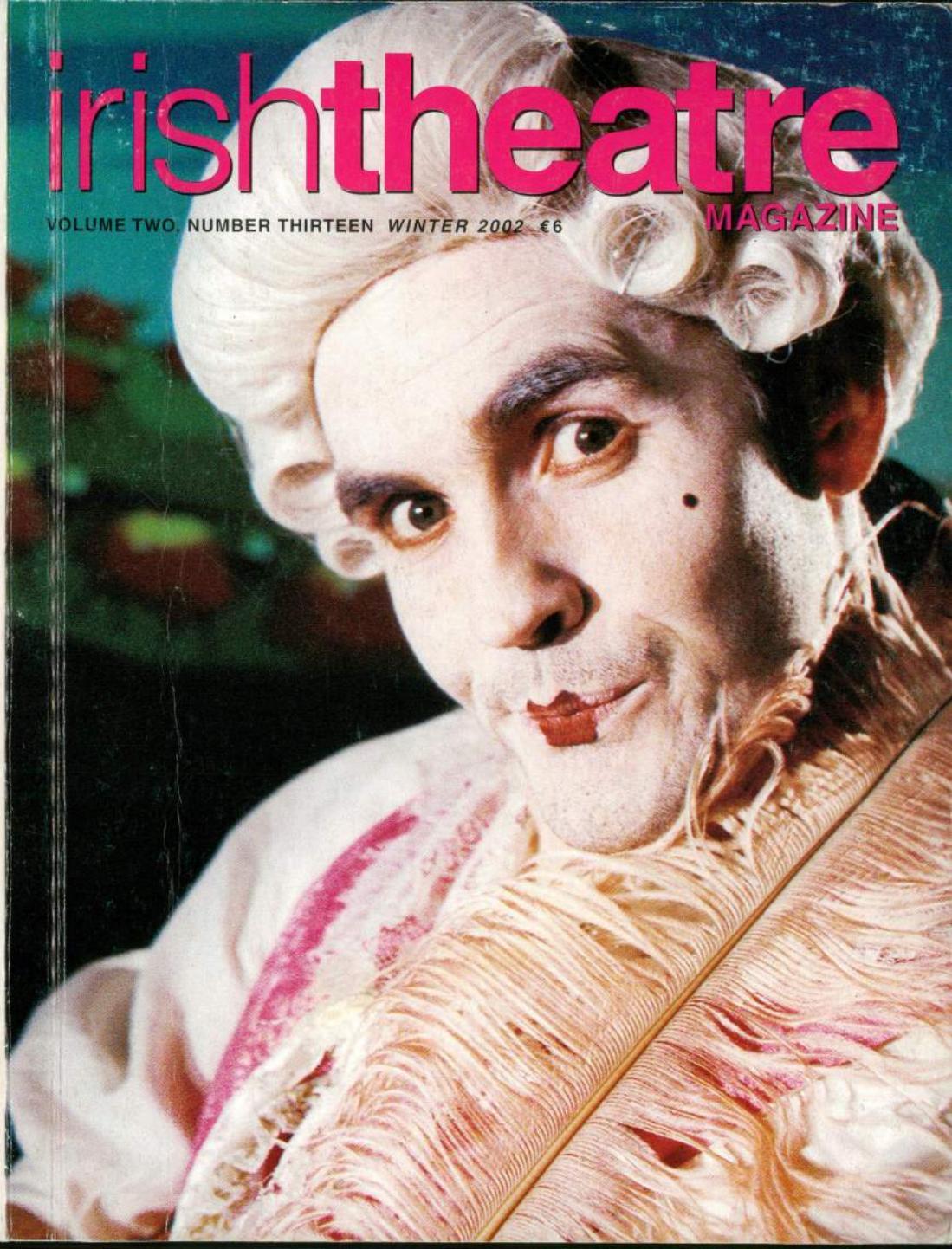


irishtheatreMAGAZINE

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ON THE COVER: Fergal McElherron in the Performance Corporation's production of *Candide*. Photo by Colm Hogan.

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GETTING IN SYNC

IT IS HISTORIC NEWS FOR THE IRISH theatre sector that the Theatre Forum is becoming a legally-constituted reality. The Forum was started a few years ago by a group of theatre professionals hoping to facilitate better central planning, sharing of resources, and advocacy within the professional theatre sector. Last year the Forum employed Annette Clancy to investigate what possible form it might take, and it has now applied to the Arts Council for funding to hire a chief executive and eventually three other staff members. Unlike Theatre Shop, whose remit is to facilitate Irish theatre touring abroad, Theatre Forum is about building infrastructure at home.

Now led by a board of directors (Deborah Aydon, Anne Clarke, Louise Donlon, Johnny Hanrahan, Donal Shiels, and Richard Wakely), the Forum finds itself in the same position as the rest of us: waiting for word back on their funding application in the midst of profound uncertainty about budget levels for next year. Clancy, for her part, is optimistic about what she's discovered about the sector through her consultancy: "There were 80 companies and individuals represented when I

made my final presentation — this is the first time I have seen the sector singing from the same hymn sheet. The time is right for this. Similar organisations have failed by operating at the level of the neediest member — we need to have a broader political vision."

The Forum is a producer-led initiative that will not represent the interest of artists; partly in response to this choice, a group of theatre artists led by Olwen Fouéré, calling themselves Associated Theatre Artists (ATA) is in the early stages of constituting itself to discuss and put forward their own concerns. We will doubtless hear more from the ATA; and it is again exciting news that such a strong swell of organisational activity is happening within the sector.

*"This is the first time
I have seen the sector
singing from the
same hymn sheet,"*
says Annette Clancy
of Theatre Forum.

*"The time is right for
this... we need to
have a broader
political vision."*

September, five independent theatre companies opened productions on the same day — an unfortunate coincidence that seemed to contribute to attendance problems for several productions, and certainly wreaked havoc in the critical community. This lack of coordination reflects a general sense of fragmentation and decentralisation in the sector, which may — given the presence of these two groups — be on its way out. We certainly hope so.

SHOW ME THE MONEY!

AT THE MOMENT WE DON'T KNOW ANYTHING." THE DISCONCERTING words of Enid Reid Whyte, drama adviser to the Arts Council, echo the worries of the arts sector as hatches are battened down for what is expected to be a turbulent new financial year. The Arts Plan 2002-2006 had encouraging projections for increased grants programmes as part of its €314 million budget. But recent developments indicate that the €314 million will be spread over a longer period of time than the five years originally indicated. What this means for the 2003 installment is anyone's guess, but as Whyte says, "all you need to do is read the papers and one would be fairly pessimistic about it."

Arts Council arts development director Mary Cloake says that, while they wait for the budget figures to be confirmed, the Council is "working on a number of options — on a worst-case scenario/best-case scenario basis." However, in the likelihood of reduced funding there will not be a uniform approach taken to reducing each organisation's allotment.

"If there's going to be reductions, we're certainly going to look at each organisation on a case by case basis. We do want to avoid an across-the-board approach, whether it's more or less. We have a couple of key principles set out in the Arts Plan and we'll be looking to support the organisations that most closely fit the implementation strategy."

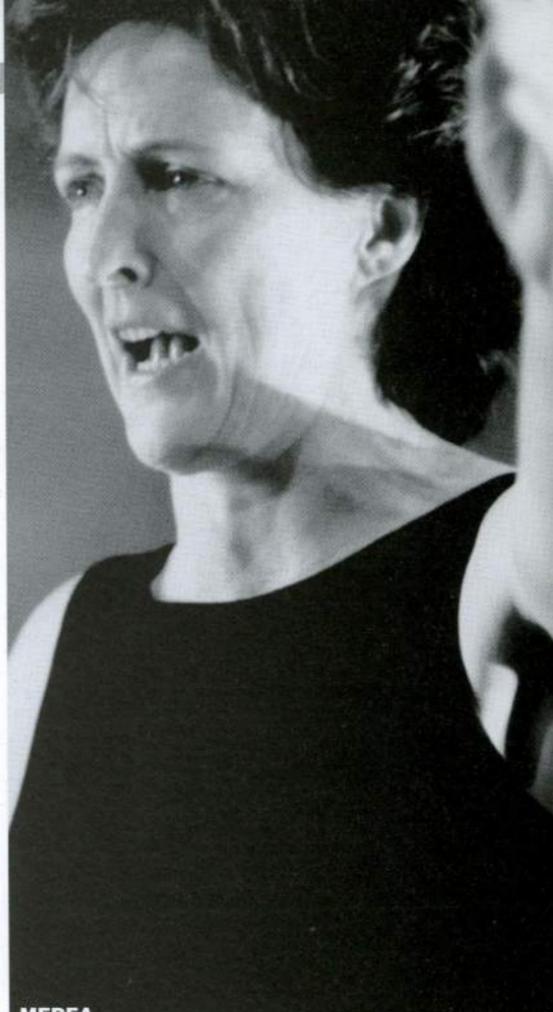
OUR CULTURAL EXPORTS

Eugene O'Brien's *Eden* has opened in London to mixed reviews. Conor McPherson's staging for the Abbey, now produced for London's Arts Theatre by Ted and Norman Tulchin of U.S. company Maidstone and the independent producer Kevin Wallace, performs until 11 Jan... Meanwhile the Abbey's production of *Medea*, directed by Deborah Warner and starring Fiona Shaw, wowed the critics in New York and continues on a five-venue U.S. tour, with performances planned in the new year at the Theatre Nationale de Chaillot in Paris. The Abbey has confirmed that negotiations are underway for a Broadway run.

ACTING OUT?

The new academic year in the School of Drama, Trinity College, Dublin, has begun without a fresh intake of students for the Bachelor in Acting Studies, the only actor training degree course in the country. Trinity Professor of Drama Dennis Kennedy told *itm* that funding for the course was "unacceptable," leaving the School with a huge deficit in trying to maintain it. "The costs were getting to the point that it was beginning to debilitate the School's other activities," said Kennedy. While stressing that the decision to leave this year's intake fallow "does not in any way mean that we are going to terminate the course," Kennedy admitted that unless an approach to the Higher Education Authority for increased funding was successful, the future of the course could not be guaranteed. Kennedy insists that the decision not to admit an intake this year was made pragmatically rather than politically, but admits that the circumstances bolster the school's funding application to the HEA. *itm* will undertake an in-depth study of actor training in issue 14.

NEIL LIBBERT



MEDEA

BELFAST BLUES

At press time, a sizeable chunk of the Belfast arts community, including all major Northern theatre companies, was planning to boycott the Belfast City Council-sponsored Arts Awards on 14 Nov. According to playwright/director Tim Loane, the boycott is in response to a 20% cut to city centre arts organisations this year. "We reject the notion," says

MERRION SQUARE MOVES

As the Arts Council undergoes restructuring, Dermot McLaughlin, formerly artform director, becomes the organisation's change manager, while Tara Byrne leaves her position as artists' support executive to become director of the National Sculpture Factory in Cork. Mary Cloake has become the arts development director and John O'Kane has been named arts programme director. The Council has now advertised for 12 new positions, from webmaster to arts programme managers to a press and communications officer — who presumably will be charged with the weighty task of explaining to us how this new structure is going to work. Check out www.artscouncil.ie/jobs for more details.

Loane, "that they are going to spend £47,000 of public money on food and drink for the people whose funding they have cut." These cuts were particularly galling, says Loane, in the year that Belfast was making a bid to be European City of Culture 2008. The failure of Belfast to make the City of Culture shortlist was "no surprise to any of us in the arts," Loane says. "They were trying to sell a version of culture that didn't take the arts as being relevant at all." Belfast City Council issued a statement on the Monday before the awards, saying it was "dis-

appointed" about the protest but opining that "the rumours circulating greatly exaggerate the numbers of those participating in the proposed boycott."

ITC, OR NOT ITC?

Founded last Jan., The Irish Touring Company (itc) is currently touring *Inis Theatre's lauded double-bill Lady Susan and The World's Wife* until 14 Dec. The company, founded by directors of the Crypt Arts Centre including John O'Brien, already toured three productions last spring, with three more (*Tillsonburg, Stuck, and Casual Comedy*) set to tour nationwide between Feb. and Apr. 2003, concluding in The Finborough, London. O'Brien sees the itc giving an opportunity to small companies to play in larger venues under the umbrella of a recognised brand. If the itc sounds familiar, that's no coincidence. "It's a deliberate wink to tradition," says O'Brien, invoking the Irish Theatre Company which afforded opportunities to practitioners and productions in the late-'70s/early '80s.

SCARY TIMES AT THE CRYPT

Fortunes are not so favourable for the Crypt itself at the moment, which will lose staff next year once FÁS cuts the Community Employment Scheme that currently funds the theatre's personnel. The Crypt has appealed for a "network of volunteers" in order to stay open for the first half of 2003, while other support schemes are sought.

CORRECTION: In an article by Paul Johnson in our last issue, we wrongly referred to Mary Brady as having worked as the Arts Council's dance officer. Mary Brady has served on the board of the Arts Council since 1998.



HENRY IV

SPIRALLING INTO CONTROL

The Helix, a new arts centre based on the DCU campus, opened its doors in Oct. and continues with a programme that includes South African playwright Athol Fugard reading from a new collection of autobiographical short stories (21 Nov.), followed by a "South African Week" including Arc Productions' *He Left Quietly*, based on the life of wrongfully imprisoned Duma Kumalo (26-30 Nov.)

UPCOMING PRODUCTIONS

At the National Theatre, Ben Barnes' production of *The Plough and the Stars* runs 16 Nov.-1 Feb., and Jimmy Fay directs Mark O'Rowe's edit of *Henry IV (Part 1)* from 21 Nov.-11 Jan. in the Peacock... Jo Mangan and Tom Swift's adaptation of *Candide* runs in

Project from 18-23 Nov., with dates in the UnFringed Festival to follow... Another Fringe revival, Loose Canon's *The Duchess of Malfi*, tours to the Bank of Ireland Theatre at NUIG on 17-19 Feb., with Feb. dates in Belfast to be confirmed...

Corcadorka's current productions are two

lunchtimes at the Triskel, Raymond Scannell's *Mix It Up* (11-23 Nov.) followed by *Amy the Vampire (& her sister Martina)* written and directed by Gavin Quinn (24 Nov.-7 Dec.)... Fishamble's latest, *The Buddhist of Castleknock* by Jim O'Hanlon, concludes its run in Draíocht on 16 Nov. before performing in the Civic (18-23 Nov.) and the Helix (2-7 Dec.)... Island Theatre Company's production of *The Quiet Moment* by

Symposium Time Again

The 5th Pan Pan International Theatre Symposium gets underway with *For the First Time Ever, Pan Pan's co-production with German Stage Service, in Project's Cube on 6 Jan. Divided between venues in Project and Arthouse in Temple Bar and running through 11 Jan., the Symposium will feature performances, workshops, and discussions with Dood Paard (Netherlands), Big Art Group (US), La Carniceria Teatro (Spain), Bedrock, Corcadorka, Loose Canon, and Semper Fi (Ireland).*

BLACK ICE



Mike Finn concludes its run at the Belltable in Limerick on 16 Nov. with a national tour planned for Apr. An Island production of Brian Friel's *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* is slated to tour in Mar.

Compántas Aingilín present *Aingilín* at Bewley's Café Theatre 19-23 Nov., with performances both at lunchtime and the evening... Plans for the Civic Theatre next year include the Focus' production of *Tillsonburg* by Malachy McKenna (24-30 Feb.), with Druid's *The Good Father* pencilled in for a week's run from 10 Mar... Barnstorm's production of *Whose Shoes?* by Mike Kenny runs at the Barn, the company's studio space, from 19-29 Nov. *Little Victories* by Shaun Prendergast opens in the Watergate on 17 Feb. and tours from Mar.-May... The Pavilion Theatre sees out Nov. with *Mojo-Mickybo* (19-23 Nov.) and the Reduced Shakespeare Company (26-30 Nov.) before Inis Theatre weigh in with

Lady Susan/The World's Wife (3-14 Dec.).

Next up at the Lyric is Marie Jones' *Christmas Eve Can Kill You* (6 Dec.-4 Jan.); and Frank McGuinness' *Observe the Sons of Ulster...* (7 Feb.- 1 Mar.)... 'Tis the season

BOX OFFICE UPSTART

Ticketing wizard Phil Sterling has taken over the Liberty Hall Centre box office for the next year; in addition to selling tickets for its events, he is launching an independent ticketing agency which (we can only hope) will challenge Ticketmaster's lock on the market. Any theatres and companies looking for a further outlet for tickets are urged to contact Sterling on 01-872 1122

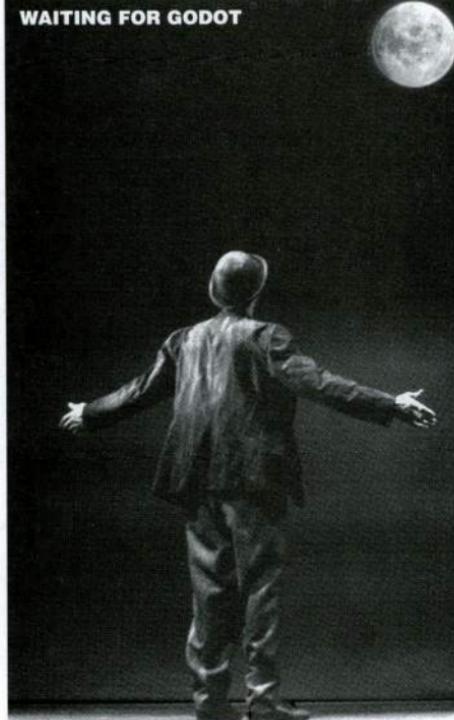
for such festive fodder as The Gate Theatre's *A Christmas Carol*, which returns for a third year. Running until 4 Jan., it will be followed by a revival of the Gate's acclaimed production of *Waiting For Godot*, opening 5 Jan and marking the 50th anniversary of *Godot*'s original no-show... Storytellers present Mary Elizabeth Burke-Kennedy's adaptation of *Hansel & Gretel* at the Project (11 Dec.-4 Jan.). The company follows with a tour of *Antigone*, adapted and directed by Conall Morrison, at the Town Hall Theatre, Galway (11-15 Feb.), Cork Opera House (18-22 Feb.), and Project (3-15 Mar.)... Veronica Coburn's production of *The Big Friendly Giant* runs at the Civic, Tallaght from 20 Dec.-11 Jan... Raymond Keane directs *Annabelle's Star*, Mary McNally's new non-verbal play for 4-9 year olds at the Ark (15 Dec.-5 Jan.)... Lane Productions stage *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* by Ken Kesey, opening 19 Nov. and continuing into the new year in Andrew's Lane.

Upstate Theatre Company is preparing a co-production with Droichead Youth Theatre for mid-Dec. about multiculturalism... Calypso will stage a production in conjunction with Tower of Babel, a multicultural group, in March 2003... The UnFringed Festival at the Belltable, Limerick runs from 28 Jan.-8 Feb. and includes *Tonight: Lola Blau*, a multimedia cabaret piece starring Camille O'Sullivan; Jeanine Osborne's multimedia piece *Death Wall*; Michael Harding's *Talking Through His Hat*; Performance Corporation's *Candide*; and David O'Doherty's *Small Things*.

Blue Raincoat's next production, *The Strange Voyage of Donald Crowhurst* (working title) by Malcon Hamilton, plays in the Factory Performance Space in Sligo

from 4-15 Mar... New York's Irish Repertory Theatre will present the American premiere of Enda Walsh's *bedbound*, with Walsh directing and starring Brian F. O'Byrne in a 6-8 week run from 17 Jan. The original Corn Exchange production of Michael West's *Foley* will receive its American premiere in the same theatre

WAITING FOR GODOT



in Mar./Apr... TEAM are touring Michael West's play *Jack Fell Down* in a new production directed by Mark O'Brien to primary schools in Feb.-Jun. 2003. In the meantime TEAM are touring *Black Ice*, written by Thomas McLaughlin in collaboration with the company, to schools and prisons until 16 Dec.

MARY BRADY, artistic director of the Institute for Choreography and Dance (icd), responds to *itm's* dance issue by offering her thoughts on the choreographic process.

THE ACT OF CHOREOGRAPHY IS A profoundly intimate process often conducted in a relatively public arena. It's the nature of this artform: making dances in a space with other dancers, imaging kinetic human body prints on the blank canvas. This act of conceptual "people writing," authored by the choreographer, may use a multitude of modes and methods of engagement in the process of creating a dance work. Like any creative process it requires extended periods of time for experimentation, reflection, "rewrites." However, dance-making can prove to be a costly business, creating dances "on location" — with a group of dancers, is not necessarily conducive to too many redrafts. With creative blocks and vulnerabilities so easily exposed, it's a formidable task for choreographers to find and cultivate ways of integrating their own private creative considerations with and onto their dancers.

While working with other people, choreographers must, simultaneously, hone their skills as strategists, mentors, directors, collaborators. Beyond the studio confines, issues of practice and resources need to be better articulated through more public forums. Raising the profile of choreographic authorship is vital. Comprehension, then acknowledgement, will surely follow.

Both ends of the continuum of dance-making need to be asserted: the research-based choreography as an almost daily working practice, and the produced and

Raising the profile of choreographic authorship is vital.

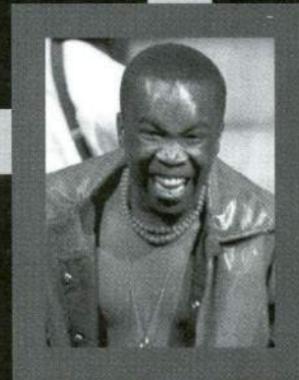
completed dance as an art work. The sustainability of the artform eventually depends on this. Projects for valuing the choreographic culture; for identifying and articulating its needs are underway in Ireland. (e.g. icd, in Cork, is dedicated to choreographic research; Shawbrook, in Co. Longford, offers a rural retreat for Ireland-based dance artists.)

The impact of choreographic processes in Ireland is evidenced in recent Irish publications. Recording and documentation procedures allow us to process choreographic practice through hindsight, giving voice to practice. However, with all dance writing and criticism we must ensure that dance is contextualised within a bigger body of knowledge, of what has gone before and, where appropriate, cross-referenced locally and internationally (an unfortunate omission in *itm's* dance special was any mention of dance in Northern Ireland).

In addition, choreographers must sharpen up their negotiating skills to bypass the "talks about talks" culture in which Aosdána would appear to be entrenched: persuading its membership to acknowledge choreographers — through an additional membership category — as creative authors of their work. Inviting choreographers into Aosdána via a visual arts portal is a denial of an identity and growing status these artists currently enjoy. If Merce Cunningham were Irish/Ireland-based, would Aosdána leave him outside the door?

INTERNATIONAL INSIGHTS

FOR THE THIRD YEAR RUNNING, *itm* BROUGHT TOGETHER A PANEL OF INTERNATIONAL THEATRE CRITICS TO DISCUSS PRODUCTIONS IN THE DUBLIN THEATRE FESTIVAL AND ESB FRINGE FESTIVAL. THIS YEAR'S EVENT WAS HELD IN THE LIBERTY HALL CENTRE ON 7 OCTOBER AND FEATURED CRITICS FROM ENGLAND, IRELAND, POLAND, AND SWEDEN. HERE'S AN EDITED TRANSCRIPT.



KAREN FRICKER: The first production we are going to discuss is one that is already generating a lot of discussion and controversy, Marina Carr's new play *Ariel* at the Abbey Theatre.

HELEN MEANY: (Freelance critic and editor, Dublin): *Ariel* revisits some of the territory with which we have become familiar in the work of Marina Carr. Many of her previous plays have been set in the Midlands and have explored aspects of family dysfunction, of pain, of abuse of various kinds, including incest. They explore the darker side of the psyche, and are way beyond social realism — they really are non-naturalistic in many ways. She has drawn on myth in the past, particularly in her use of the story of Medea in *By the Bog of Cats*. In this play, *Ariel*, she continues this exploration of myth, and her pursuit of the question of whether it is possible to create contemporary tragedy.

The play tells the story of a politician called Fermoy, who is hoping to become elected to Dáil Éireann. He has some ideas about his relationship with God or the gods, that he feels impel him to sacrifice his 16-year-old daughter, Ariel. The play moves ten years into the future, when we see he has been elected and is a minister serving in the Irish government. Gradually his wife realises that he has sacrificed Ariel, and she in turn kills him. And then as their children react to what has happened, the remaining daughter Elaine kills her mother. So it's an extremely dark play that draws directly on the story of the house of Atreus from Greek myth. It seems



ARIEL

that Carr is most interested in Euripides' treatment of the myth, which is a particularly dark and violent version.

The production, directed by Conall Morrison, brings a huge amount of energy and vigour to this difficult material, and most of the performances are very strong. But for me there are fundamental flaws in the piece, the main one being that the myths on which she draws and the contemporary world of the play do not fit. She has taken a very complex myth, which is the story of Agamemnon feeling compelled to sacrifice his daughter in order to secure safe passage of the Greek fleet to Troy in what was to

become the Trojan war. There is a public aspect to what he does — it is to assure the survival of the Greek nation. So it seems to me that if you are going to lift that myth and import it wholesale into the story of this politician, there is an immediate disjunction — in fact nothing actually necessitates Fermoy killing his daughter. And if we are to say that he has to sell his soul in order to become elected to Dáil Éireann, that a very particular view of Irish politics, which again isn't justified by its context. So the disjunction between the scale and grandeur and complexity of the myth of the House of Atreus and the context in which Carr has imported it creates a sense of obscurity at times, and certainly a sense of bathos. That for me means that it really doesn't work.

MADDY COSTA (deputy arts editor, *The Guardian*, London): I agree with that. For me there are two problems. Firstly, trying to swap the gods of the Greeks for an Old and New Testament God is problematic. The Biblical God doesn't have the same mythic resonance that you feel with the gods in Greek tragedy. And then, with the question of necessity, I think it is a problem that you don't feel he has to kill his daughter. But at the same time, in the scene in the second act where Fermoy is being interviewed for television, you find out about a scandal standoff that happened right after he killed Ariel. Because of the scandals that emerged, his rival killed himself — so essentially you find out in one small sentence that there was no reason for him to kill his daughter. I found that quite powerful actually. But the two things form a paradox, really, that Carr doesn't resolve.

KF: Powerful in a good way?

MC: Yes, in a good way. It was so awful that she died for no reason. Obviously there is

no reason in this day and age to sacrifice one's daughter for power. But the fact that he would have won anyway because of his double-dealings with the scandal makes it even worse.

YOU FEEL WITH THE GREEK TRAGEDIES THAT EVERYONE INVOLVED SHARES A FEAR AND REVERENCE OF THE GODS. WHEREAS IN ARIEL THERE IS CONSTANT ARGUMENT — EVERYONE HAS THEIR OWN VIEW OF WHAT GOD IS. AND FERMOY'S VIEW COMES ACROSS AS JUST ECCENTRIC.

KF: When you say that there was no reason — Fermoy does believe his voices. Isn't that enough dramatic reason for the play to take the course it does?

MC: Yes, but the trouble with the voices is that they're just inside his own head. You feel with the Greek tragedies that everyone involved shares a fear and reverence of the gods. Whereas in this play there is constant argument — everyone has their own view of what God is. And Fermoy's view comes across as just eccentric.

KRISTJAN SAAG (freelance theatre critic, Gothenburg, Sweden): I don't quite agree that nothing justifies the sacrifice, because I think that the vision Fermoy has of God is reason enough to do this sacrifice. But I think the weak point is that the parallel is drawn too far. When I first read about the play, I thought that yes, it's a good parallel, because there are so many ways you can betray your child. I don't think you have to kill a child to betray her; you can make your career so important to you, for example, that the children and family suffer. I think it would have been much more effec-

tive if it had been rewritten even more, in a contemporary context.

KF: What follows on from that sacrifice is something of a bloodbath. Do you think the body count was too much, Margaret?

MARGARET SEMIL (deputy editor, *Dialog* magazine, Warsaw, Poland): I think that goes way too far. I would rather continue what Kristjan said — if you want to make a contemporary tragedy you really don't have to have blood spurting all over the place. You don't have to sacrifice the child. There are many other ways to wreak your vengeance in a family nowadays than kill. You can kill with words, and in many other ways. The audience giggled, as a matter of fact, when blood spurted. The audience wasn't terrified, and neither was I. That family was dysfunctional from the very beginning, and those people were ruining each other, whichever way they could. They didn't have to go that far.

KF: To move onto the production, Conall Morrison has taken a non-naturalistic approach to Carr's work here, as opposed to her last play, *On Raftery's Hill*, which Garry Hynes played as hyper-naturalism. What did you think of Morrison playing it large, across the whole of the Abbey stage?

HM: I thought that was a good choice. The problem here was with the text, and I think Morrison did what he could do. He injected a lot of life and energy into it. The first



ARIEL

act was the most successful; the second two acts had major problems in the writing. It became unfocused and meandering, and needed a few more drafts and a bit of editing. I thought the attempt at a parody of a television interview was probably the least successful element, and that was on paper the most realistic scene. But it was least successful because the targets of the writing, which was meant to be satirical, were unfocussed, and it was a problematic narrative bridge.

MC: I completely disagree with Helen on the first and second half, and about the

interview. I found that I didn't really believe in the family relationships in the first half at all. And about the interview: at the end of the play, Elaine says to her brother 'you have never seen our father in action.' Well, we got to see him in action in the interview and she is right — he is very compelling, very charismatic. When he starts talking about dictators of the past and wanting to build a new Ireland, I believed in those visions in a way that I didn't believe in his visions of God, really.

KS: I agree with the final part of it being the weakest. I quite liked the television scene. But in the end, yes, the script made both the actors and the director paralysed. We could see actresses on stage for five minutes with a grin on their face watching someone dying or having a breakdown, and that was a great problem. I liked the dialogue between the priest and the politician; it was very well-written and very funny. I liked the idea of a priest who doesn't have God anymore, and a politician who thinks he is the new bearer of messages. It's like God had forsaken the priest and was looking for new associates. That was very effective.

HM: For me that was continuing Carr's interrogation of the idea of the tragic. So much has been written about the impossibility of tragedy in the late 20th century or now in the early 21st century, the idea being that you can't have tragedy in a world where there are no gods. What she suggests is that in a world where institutional religion is in decline, then tragedy is possible again, because people are turning, like this character, to older gods. That to me was very interesting. It seems she is asking questions about faith and belief and death and how we die.

MS: I don't quite agree about the production — I wouldn't approve that produc-

tion, really. The space was there but it wasn't used. I understand the reason why the realistic scenes are condensed in a very small area, but then to me the mystical and non-realistic scenes don't blend well with

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NOWADAYS THAN KILL.
YOU CAN KILL WITH WORDS...**

the realistic. That is a flaw in the direction that wasn't worked out in any way. Some characters also were just left to themselves at times, just standing around; they don't participate or are not involved in the theatrical action. That is something I am not quite used to. And if a character is killed and he is there and there is blood all over the place, and suddenly he rises and just walks off the stage — there must be a reason for that. You can't just let him stand up and walk away. So those are little things, but it spoils the picture.

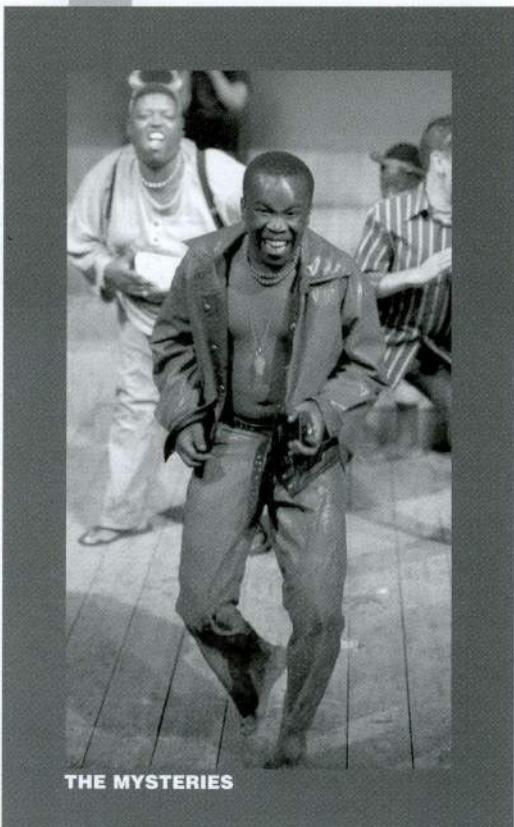
KS: Well, you can just get up and walk away — they did that in *The Notebook*. But we'll come back to that.

KF: I think there is a lot more to say about this play and I would have a different view than our panel. But we need to move on to *The Mysteries*, a production by the Broomhill Opera from South Africa, which played at the Gaiety.

MS: *The Mysteries* is a story of the Bible. It resembled some mystery plays that we have that are set in Poland. I am not going

to tell the story of the play — since we probably all know these stories — but what I found very attractive and exciting in the production was the mixture of cultures and languages. There are at least four languages spoken on stage — English, Afrikaans, Zulu, Xhosa — and a fifth, actually, Latin. The mixture of languages is also balanced by a mixture of musical styles and of choreography. This was truly a post-apartheid performance from South Africa. It is very well-executed. I was particularly taken by the voices in the performance; it was interesting to learn that the same company has performed *Carmen*.

What also I found interesting in this piece was that it is staged in a marketplace. The scenography is very simple, just some oil drums with scaffolding around. That is the only scenography — the strength of the company is really the performance. It's modern, but not in an overdone way. The costumes are mixed African, and they also use a lot of contemporary clothes. Satan is dressed in a red leather jacket and red leather trousers, and he is probably one of those town boys who is there all the time to lead people in the bad direction. It's fun; it's very well done; and it's full of inventiveness... the performance is full of little inventions of how to present characters, how to move from one story to another. So it's a very joyful piece; but speaking of tragedy there is also a scene where Cain kills Abel, and there is no blood there — and still the audience gasps.



THE MYSTERIES

MC: I can't really talk about *The Mysteries* in as much detail as Margaret because I saw it about a year ago in London. But the context in which I saw it was completely different. I saw it at a time when they were doing the double bill with *Carmen*, in one of the most atmospheric spaces in London — Wilton's Music Hall, which used to be a vaudeville theatre and is now in an extraordinary state of disrepair. You sit in it and you really think when they get quite excited the roof might come down on you. The great thing about seeing it in that space was it enhanced the rough-and-

ready nature of the production, the feeling of people gathering together in a forgotten corner and making theatre out of nothing. There is something very magical in that.

HM: I wish I had seen it in the production you describe, because I felt it really didn't sit very comfortably in the Gaiety. I felt that the stage distanced me from it. There was a production of *The Mysteries* in the Royal National Theatre two years ago; it was a revival of the York cycle based on Tony Harrison's adaptation, and it was staged promenade-style — we were down amongst the crowd at the trial. We were part of a moving audience; we were actually participants. And I think for this kind of theatre, which is so much based on popular culture, that was a really good way to do it. We didn't know where the action was going to come from, and it was much more immediate.

I felt quite distant from this piece. It was definitely a feel-good production. But for me I found it quite bland. And I found it a bit cloying, a bit trying-to-please. There were elements I liked, of course, and the simplicity of the props in particular. The use of ladders for the crucifix and the arch.... there were some lovely touches. But I thought simply to use the four languages of South Africa wasn't enough of an allusion to the recent cultural history of South Africa or the context. I felt it lacked layers and nuances. More could have been made of the power of these myths, of the Christian story and its exploration of suffering and cruelty. I felt it was too sweet.

MS: But aren't you demanding too much from it?

HM: Possibly, yes.

KF: Doubtless the most unusual venue that any of us will visit this year was the public

toilets in Stephen's Green where Semper Fi are staging their production of *Ladies and Gents*.

MC: Well, the story of *Ladies and Gents* in

SATAN IS DRESSED IN A RED LEATHER JACKET AND RED LEATHER TROUSERS, AND HE IS PROBABLY ONE OF THOSE TOWN BOYS WHO IS THERE ALL THE TIME TO LEAD PEOPLE IN THE BAD DIRECTION. THE MYSTERIES IS FUN, IT'S WELL DONE, AND IT'S FULL OF INVENTIVENESS... IT'S A VERY JOYFUL PIECE.

itself is quite conventional. It's basically, a man commits suicide because photos have been printed of him with a prostitute and his family take revenge. The exciting thing about it is where it's staged. Site-specific theatre is something that is becoming really fashionable in London; there are lots of small theatre companies who are seeking out railway arches to make their permanent homes, that sort of thing. But I think what really excited me about *Ladies and Gents* was the way that the story and the venue went hand in hand. It's a story about people doing things they shouldn't — and then I find myself walking into a Gents' toilet. I have never done that before. There is something amazing about how those two things go together.

It's a story about people being furtive, people cheating each other and you find yourself standing in this tiny space — you feel you oughtn't be there. You feel you are intruding on the actors' space. You get a sense of the emotions in the story just through where you are standing, the position you are in. I really loved the way the space was used as well. We saw a special afternoon performance where it wasn't

completely dark inside, and I was actually really relieved, because there's a moment where a character comes in and stands very near to you, and it would have been terrifying not to be able to see him, just to feel his presence.

Particularly in the Ladies, it's beautifully lit; there is amazing use of the mirrors. Even when someone has their back to you, you can see their face as well. What you realise is that although you can see all around the characters at all points, it's not until the end that you see inside them. They use that very cleverly.

I think that across the panel, Karen and I are most enthusiastic about the play, and the other three are less so than us — and Karen and I went to the Ladies first and the others went to the Gents first. Basically the two stories happen simultaneously — in the Ladies you see a woman being killed, in the Gents you find out that her husband is her pimp. If you go to the Ladies first you get the middle of the story, and then go into the Gents you get the outside of it. I think that is a much richer experience — but then again I didn't have it the other way around.

KS: I was in the Gents first, yes. I don't think I was as excited about the venue as Maddy — but then again I have been into a Ladies' toilet a few times... I also like the idea of site-specific theatre but for me the crime story was too thin, and the cultural and political and historic connections were a sort of veneer. The venue didn't make up



LADIES AND GENTS

for the weaknesses in the story, nor in direction or acting. I wasn't very enthusiastic.

MS: I am not very enthusiastic, but I enjoyed the experience. I am old enough to have taken off my shoes to walk into a performance, and to have been asked to hand in my personal belongings which I cherish most and want to share with the rest of the audience... so I have been through that kind of theatre. But this was in a way more exciting because I felt I was in the middle of a black movie, because of the character-

KARL SHEILS

isation, the costumes, and the story being told. I liked some of the acting — I think it was very fine.

I am a bit confused about to what extent the political context which was given to us was really *in* the story. When it starts we hear over a recording the story of the Tennessee Williams play *The Rose Tattoo* being performed in Ireland, and people being punished for it because it was breaching some moral laws. That wasn't very well linked into the story which then developed. Of course you can piece it together the same way as you can piece together the two parts of the story, but I thought that was a bit superficial. It was quite an enjoyable experience if you like spooky stories, but I wouldn't make it a big thing.

HM: Yes, I thought the link was pretty tenuous, but between the historical context and the play, it really was a generic piece of film noir. It was very enjoyable to be a participant in it, but it was a bit thin. There was a sense for me as well — I am just getting picky now — but I thought the costumes were very film noir from '40s Hollywood, and I wish that 1950's Ireland had been so glamourous.

KF: One of the visiting productions in the Festival was *Tokyo Notes*, from the Japanese company Seneiden.

KS: For those who haven't seen the play, it's 20 people who meet in the lobby of an art gallery; they don't meet all at once, but they walk in two at a time and one at a time, so only in the end you realise there are actually 20 actors working in this play. The plot... there isn't really a plot. A war is going on in Europe and the Japanese are not yet in it. They don't know what is going to happen. They talk about the war, and they talk about art — there is a Vermeer exhibition going on. No one is a real

expert except for the two people working in the gallery. But somehow this presence of the art is used in a very clever way, metaphorically and as a means to generate resonances.

LADIES AND GENTS IS BEAUTIFULLY LIT; THERE IS AMAZING USE OF THE MIRRORS. EVEN WHEN SOMEONE HAS THEIR BACK TO YOU, YOU CAN SEE THEIR FACE AS WELL. WHAT YOU REALISE IS THAT ALTHOUGH YOU CAN SEE ALL AROUND THE CHARACTERS, IT'S NOT UNTIL THE END THAT YOU SEE INSIDE THEM.

There is very little dramatic action, but still you feel after these two hours that the lives of these people had changed in many ways. And how this is done I don't know — it's done with such subtle means. The play was presented with subtitles, which was a great help of course, but I think I would still have thought it was a great production without having understood the words. There was so much in the body language of the actors, and in the way they represented entrances and exits. The slow movement of the actors, the pauses, and also the set design... I liked it very much. You very seldom see this kind of quiet acting, the stillness that they depicted in this play. Robert Lepage has it — and I hope those of you who are interested in this might get a chance to see the production called *Jimmy* which is coming to the Festival later this week — it too has this stillness. Also I liked the absence of 'types.' The actors don't really represent certain types of people — businessmen or curators — they are very much like ordinary people, and still they make these two hours of very intense drama. It's fascinating to see.



TOKYO NOTES

KF: To pick up on a point you made there — the American opera and theatre director Peter Sellars was in town over the weekend, and in a public interview he said he is sick of seeing theatre that's about theatre. If theatre artists are making work about making their work, to him it means they are not getting out enough — that they are not engaged enough with the problems of the real world. I'm hoping you can bounce off that, Helen, because one could say that *Tokyo Notes* was a piece of theatre about art — there is a lot of playing with the idea of seeing and being seen. Would you use Sellers' criteria against it?

HM: I thought it was concerned with art, but it was really about perception; the discussion of how Vermeer used light, and how artists see things or choose what they don't want to see, could apply to everybody. It's also about how we live. There was a war going on in the background of the play, but it always stayed in the background. The characters were choosing to be preoccu-

pied with other things, as we often are. So I thought that it wasn't obsessed with the metaphor about perception or modes of seeing. It wasn't only about art, though art was a useful springboard for what it was interested in. Also, there was extraordinary coherence between the play, the way it was presented, and the theme. We were also thinking about what the director chose to show us or not about this group of people — but that didn't mean it was hermetic.

KF: I was being provocative — I didn't think it was hermetic myself. The notion of a war in Europe in the background, in a show by a contemporary Japanese company... I found that quite haunting. The show was incredibly memorable, but I am still trying to figure out how and why.

HM: There is a character of a young woman, an heiress, who has a stash of Vermeer paintings that she is going to bequeath to the gallery — this legacy she has received means nothing to her. So there is also a

question here of the value of art. There is no suggestion that the writer is over-valuing art at the expense of life or reality. I think that he is teasing out these issues in an extraordinarily non-theatrical way; but it builds — the cumulative effect is extremely powerful. It was an absolute treat.

MS: This is the kind of performance that the more you think of it the more you like it. You were talking a bit of the play as art, but it's really as the director, Mr. Hirata said himself actually; to me it was also obvious — it's a play about family. The way he combines the lives of the people, whom we learn about from tiny little snippets of dialogue, with the fact of the war in Europe, and with the way we see art and the way we see things through art... the way he combines that blends perfectly. This play does raise one question for which I don't have an answer for. I wondered to what extent this is a Japanese play to be exported. There is one character in the piece who keeps on taking photographs of everything. She is the Japanese that we know as a tourist; at some point she takes a picture of an empty space and says, 'absence.' This is combined with a discussion of how camera obscura changes the vision, about how in looking through a camera, artists saw reality in a different way. How reality is transformed by an artist; whether an artist transforms reality or not; whether the Japanese see the world differently because they look at the world through a camera lens. I think that is one of the questions which comes up in the play.

And the more you look at what is being spoken about, in terms of the role of art in society, art as commodity, art as something which is to save a culture from the other part of the world, art which means nothing to people, art which means everything to people, and art which is just an environment in which family life is going on and

there are great tragedies there... A family falls to pieces; there are old people dying and someone has to take care of them. Things are changing. But there is art around those people and they don't really

THERE IS NO SUGGESTION THAT THE DIRECTOR OF TOKYO NOTES IS OVER-VALUING ART AT THE EXPENSE OF LIFE OR REALITY. HE IS TEASING OUT THESE ISSUES IN AN EXTRAORDINARILY NON-THEATRICAL WAY, BUT IT BUILDS — THE CUMULATIVE EFFECT IS EXTREMELY POWERFUL.

take much care about what they are seeing there. They just run around into the gallery, just have a look at this, 'have you seen it,' 'no not yet' — OK, off they go. But I think this is a play with so many layers in it... you really have to take it to pieces. I am very tempted to read the text and then I would like to see it again. So I do not agree with Kristjan, however, about not needing the language, because the body language is absolutely not enough — because it says much more than we see.

KS: I don't mean that not reading or seeing the text would give the same impression. I also want to use the metaphor to express something that I thought afterwards — how much of this impression that we get from the play, the way of acting, the way of directing, is through our view of Japanese culture? Somehow the Japanese way of behaving in everyday life is stylised. We think it's acting — but how much is acting and how much is just Japanese, 'exotic,' walking and being?

KF: Moving on, we are going to talk about *The Hand*, the Dublin Theatre Festival pro-

duction by Donal O'Kelly here at Liberty Hall.

MS: I am probably not the proper person to talk about it first, because I understood one-fourth of the text. But on the other hand because of that I could perhaps have a better look at the form. Anyhow, for me, this was the first encounter with Irish storytelling theatre at its most pure, and therefore perhaps this naïve or primitive relationship to the text might mean something. Though I only understood part of the story, I was really absolutely entranced by the performer. But I had a feeling that he was cutting the branch on which he was sitting by introducing so much on top of the vocal material — the musical instruments — because he himself was such a powerful performer, and the music and rhythm of his speech, and the story which he was telling was so interesting that I found the music disturbing. I was also very attracted by the little movement, the little body language which he could offer in the very small and cluttered space which remained there for him to move around. From what I understand, this was the first time that he introduced music into his performance and I think he should ... I would rather see it cut it down a bit.

HM: I very much agree with Margaret. The story was of a young boy growing up in Dublin in the 1920s in a certain amount of poverty. It's about his father who had been an admired figure; how he gradually realises that his father is not well and in



THE HAND

fact the illness turns out to be a shameful one — which is syphilis. And then everything really goes into decline but there are some rhapsodic moments in his youth, namely making love with the woman of his dreams in Donabate. There is a lot of happiness amid poverty in Dublin in the 1920s. For me I had difficulties with the whole presentation of it but mainly what I found very disappointing was the sentimentality — the utter sentimentality of this material. I just couldn't understand why we were being given something so clichéd. And as well, Donal O'Kelly is such

an extraordinarily talented performer and write, but it's as if he constrained himself or cramped in his own style by this way of presenting a series of very thinly fleshed-out sketches that weren't particularly theatrical. I agree that the music was a bit intrusive, and I didn't find it added very much, and it really swamped the musicality of his text. So all in all I found it very thin and disappointing.

KS: I happened to see [O'Kelly's] *Bat the Father, Rabbit the Son* 14 years ago here in Dublin, and I think that was a very musical production. And there is a risk of course in adding instrumental music to the music of language and the rhythm of language. But I think it was done very well in many instances — especially when the music and text was used in a sort of call and response pattern, like where the flute was interpreting a line — but too often there were collisions. They would get out of pace with each other. And then it didn't really add anything. Also I was a bit disturbed by this gig concept that O'Kelly is using. There is already a distancing in the way that this story is told — the fact that it is a story. It's storytelling theatre. So to present the different parts of the story as tracks or numbers, that took away some of the magic that it produced. But overall I liked it very much. I think it shows the power of language in many aspects.

KF: Maddy is going to lead off on *One Too Many Mornings*, a show at Bewley's Café at lunchtime, written by Mark O'Halloran and David Wilmot.

MC: I found the first 20 minutes were really quite entertaining. The set-up is quite interesting. You go in and you are given a school lunch — white-bread sandwiches and tomato soup — and you all sit at a table. I think you are supposed to feel like you are

in a café... It's basically two old friends who haven't seen each other for about a year. And in the meantime one has become married, and the other has basically become mad, if he wasn't mad already —

THOUGH I ONLY UNDERSTOOD PART OF THE STORY OF THE HAND, I WAS ABSOLUTELY ENTRANCED BY THE PERFORMER. BUT I HAD THE FEELING HE WAS CUTTING THE BRANCH ON WHICH HE WAS SITTING BY INTRODUCING SO MUCH ON TOP OF THE VOCAL MATERIAL — THE MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS.

he probably was. And in this first 20 minutes they talk... they have an extraordinary conversation about Greek philosophers and the origins of cynicism and the crucial importance of poetry in life, and particularly in Irish life. And there is a wonderful moment when the not-mad one, who used to be a poet, said that his life has become practical just as Irish life has — that everyone is very practical now. And that fascinated me. I don't hear that sort of conversation in theatre very often at all.

The problem with the next half hour of it is that the not-mad character quite rapidly becomes nothing more than a stick to prod the mad character into more and more absurd declarations. It's quite a tour-de-force by the mad one, but you really feel the lack of the other character. You feel he ought to be developed hand in hand, and it's very disappointing that he isn't.

KS: I didn't feel the absence of the other guy. I think he was there all the time, but the story sort of declined and ended very suddenly — like the playwright didn't know what to do. This would confirm what you are saying, that he was so con-

centrated on this one character that he forgot the other one. But I think for me that was more a weakness of the plot than of how the characters were presented on stage. I quite liked it; there was very good dialogue and I was very happy to learn that this play has been translated into Swedish, along with another play by Mark O'Halloran. I was thinking when I saw the play today — they should be translated.

HM: I thought the two performances were great, but I really feel it was a very lopsided piece — I agree with Maddy totally. And I felt that the Dominic character just became a terrible bore, lecturing his friend. I found it quite tedious and badly written which was a pity. I think there is a new 'Bewley's bore' that can be added to the 'pub bore' in the list of Irish characters.

KF: Kristjan is going to talk about a couple of shows he saw on the Fringe — *DO NOT ADJUST YOURself* by Kate Perry, which was in the International Bar; and *The Legend of Badger Bickle's Youngfella* which was in the SS Michael and John this week, written by Brian Desmond and Alan Collins.

KS: To begin with *DO NOT ADJUST YOURself*, this is a piece of fast, witty group theatre, which deals with contemporary issues like television and the way television influences our lives. It's made with very simple means, with very good actors, but a thin story. It was a lightweight



THE PROOF

handling of the subject that confirms what we already know about television as a medium. Perhaps ten or 20 years ago this play would have been more important. There were some good scenes, especially when they move towards the absurd, which they did in two or three scenes, when it took on a much more poetic dimension.

The other show, *Badger Bickle's Youngfella*, tells the story of a lad who loses his parents very early, and moves to America, then comes back to Ireland. He is an absurd character who likes cakes, and is presented

in an extremely stylised way, like a cartoon figure in the way he talks and walks... it's all very well done. In both of these plays the energy is really strong.

But what I miss, what I wish I could see is an aggressive touch with this creative energy. I think several of these companies I have seen often try to be very funny, and are trying to gain the audience's attention by being funny. And of course telling a good story often is funny — but I am looking for something more aggressive, more straight on the issues that they are dealing with.

So this is a general observation that I am making, both at these festivals and even more when I was here 14 years ago when there wasn't any Fringe... I think storytelling theatre is a very good thing. It gives you so much from old techniques — it can capture an audience and surprise and twist with rhetoric and rhythm — but it's difficult to go into depth with issues. And that is why I'd like to see other ways to address an audience — not just asking for their consent but also sometimes go for resistance and contempt.

KF: The Belgian company De Onderneming presented a double bill of plays this weekend at the Beckett Centre, *The Notebook* and *The Proof*.

HM: I thought it was extremely, extraordinarily successful. A really absorbing two nights of theatre, for me the highlight of the Festival so far. To follow on from Kristjan, this was storytelling theatre — and it was done in an extremely creative and imaginative way. At times the two central actors were actually addressing the audience directly, downstage centre, speaking their lines together. There was an emphasis on the text and the words, and they were extremely important. They were delivered in absolutely perfect English, in a variety of

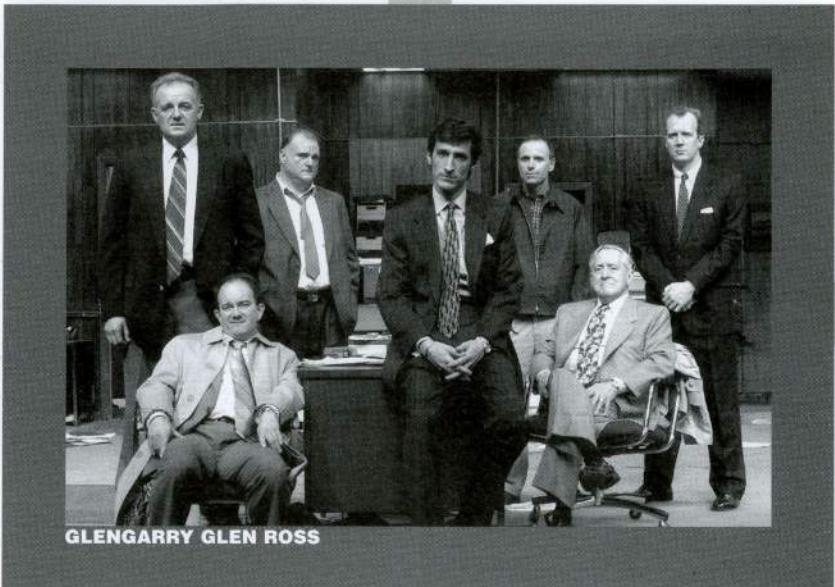
impeccable English and Scottish accents, which was pretty remarkable. They stripped the Beckett Theatre completely bare. There was no set whatsoever. We could see the actors changing their clothes

**IT'S AS IF THE COMPANY OF
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at the back, waiting to come on; it was exciting to see them have that freedom.

This company works without a director, it's a performers' collective. They selected this trilogy of novels by a Hungarian writer, Agota Kristof. The story is set in Hungary during the Second World War, and it has a lot to do with exploring the idea of the past — how we can't return to the past; we can't cross the boundaries, both psychological and literal.

It's a story of two brothers who are twins, who are sent during the war to the village where their grandmother lives; they are sent by their mother because she can't afford to keep them. The grandmother is a rather typical and exploitative character — played by a man — and they have to harden themselves to all kinds of brutality. It's really about how the children become cauterised and desensitised and how they build a wall around their hearts. We see them engaged in various acts of cruelty and/or kindness, and they are equally removed from both kinds of activity. It's about purging their lives from any kind of emotion. They write an account of their life together with their grandmother



which focuses only on what can be verified objectively, so they eliminate all emotional language. It's an extremely interesting point of view on the effect of brutality on a child. That in itself is very rich: they give accounts in very objective terms of acts of sexual abuse and of various kinds of grotesque adult behaviour, and they do so in this very calm and detached way. Often we don't see it enacted — we just listen to their words.

At the end of the first play, the question is raised of whether the brothers really did write the notebook together after all. One of the brothers escapes over the border and the second play, *The Proof*, gives us a whole series of different versions of what happened to the brothers, raising the question of whether in fact they were twins. They are called Claus and Lucas, and it is implied that Lucas might be a figment of Claus' imagination. There is a reunion of two men who may or may not be Claus

and Lucas, and we see what happened to the brothers after they were separated. It's teasing the audience, and questioning ideas of memory and the past. It raises the question of how countries and individuals need to reinvent themselves and their past. It's extremely thought-provoking and very rich — and just so beautifully performed. I thought it was absolutely magnificent.

MC: I found actually that because the characters are so cold and their language is so pared back, I had real difficulty in engaging with them. And while I felt some sort of sympathy for them, it was as if while they were building a wall around themselves they were building a wall between me and them also. At the same time, I did find it really fascinating. The way there is a truth in *The Notebook* — there is one story, and then it ends with that truth being torn apart. I found that incredibly powerful, and even though I didn't necessarily enjoy

or feel engaged by the first play, I felt I wanted to see the second play because I wanted to see how they would deal with that truth been broken down.

There is something quite wonderful about how their two names are anagrams of each other — and so you feel they could just be two people who happen to have these names, or it could be one person. You really never know. It constantly toys with ideas of writing, and whether writing necessarily involves facts. There is a wonderful line — particularly for me at *The Guardian* — where Claus talks about printing newspapers, and he says that nothing that is printed in the newspapers is true at all. Throughout *The Notebook*, the children's writings are presented as pure fact. They say they distrust words such as 'love,' because they are imprecise. So they don't use such words; they just write facts. Then in *The Proof*, Lucas tells you that the notebooks are where he writes his lies. So everything you are told you are constantly being told the contradiction of it.

KS: Before we were talking about the moment in *Ariel* when someone died and then got up and walked offstage. In *The Notebook*, there's also a scene where a woman breaks down — she is denied having her child back — and this is acted out, just as in *Ariel*, up to a certain point. Then, all of a sudden, the actor stops crying and screaming, stands up, and walks off. It's as if they were saying: we can show you this much, but not more. Realism has its limitations. And this is the way they work: they demonstrate situations and feelings instead of acting them out. They underline the theatricality of their performance, sometimes they even pretend to act a bit clumsy, in order to prevent us from total identification. I think it's an exciting aesthetic, but at the same time, as Maddy noted, it produces a distance to what's

happening, and a certain coldness. It's hard to get emotionally involved with the characters. But I agree that it's a formidable performance, theatre stripped down to its essentials.

GLENGARRY GLEN ROSS WAS ONE OF THE ONLY THINGS I KNEW I ABSOLUTELY WANTED TO SEE AT THE FESTIVAL... IT WAS BEAUTIFULLY ACTED, THE TIMING WAS IMPECCABLE, AND THE ACTING SUPERB: DAVID PASQUESI WILL LIVE IN MY MEMORY AS THE ULTIMATE VISION OF THE SLIMY ESTATE AGENT.

MS: In response to what Maddy said regarding the truthfulness of things printed: in the part of the world from where the author of *The Notebook* and *The Proof* comes from, and so do I, in the still quite recent past, it was known that whatever is printed is a lie or at best a half-truth. 'The press lies' was one of the slogans which accompanied the changes in Eastern Europe. Our history and our present time was constantly falsified to suit political purposes, so not surprisingly the issue of truth, especially concerning the past of a nation, is in that region quite vital. Regarding these two performances, although the company claims that each of the two performances can function independently, it seems to me that this is true only in the case of *The Notebook*. After seeing *The Notebook*, I found *The Proof* a bit disappointing.

KF: Steppenwolf Theatre Company brought their production of David Mamet's *Glenngarry Glen Ross* to the Olympia last week. We're running out of time so I'm just to ask for the speediest of comments on this production.

MC: *Glengarry Glen Ross* was one of the only things I absolutely knew I wanted to see at the festival. I've never seen Steppenwolf before and I thought it would be brilliant. And it was, although there is a sense in which it was only as good as it ought to have been — it didn't surpass my expectations, which might seem like a churlish thing to say but there it is. But it was beautifully directed, the timing was impeccable, and the acting superb: David Pasquesi as Ricky Roma will live in my memory as the ultimate vision of a slimeball estate agent.

MS: It was perfectly cast, and had excellent stage design.

KF: Yes, and undoubtedly the best set shift of the year!

MS: What is more important is that it's an old play and it hasn't dated.

HM: Yes — I loved it. You could see the benefit of having a permanent ensemble; the ensemble playing was just extraordinary — the way they just bounced off each other, the energy and pace. I thought it was terrific.

AUDIENCE QUESTION 1: You've talked a lot about your intellectual reaction to shows you saw. Can you speak more personally now, and tell us which were the favourite shows you saw — which ones did you like the best.

MC: I guess the most purely enjoyable were *Glengarry Glen Ross* and *Ladies and Gents*, but for completely different reasons.

KS: Of the international plays, *Tokyo Notes*; and of the Irish, *One Too Many Mornings*.

HM: For me, *Tokyo Notes*, and then a play on the Fringe, which we haven't had a chance

to mention yet — *Candide*, which was a fantastic production.

KF: Why don't you take a few minutes to talk about that production?

HM: It was just a wonderfully inventive and adventurous adaptation by Jo Mangan and Tom Swift. It was directed by Jo Mangan, who we know from Fishamble Theatre Company — but it was created by their own company, the Performance Corporation, for the Fringe's new venue, the SS Michael & John. It was played in the round with great wit and irreverence, and fantastic acting. I just laughed a lot. It was utterly grotesque — they used a screen cartoon commentary on the action. It became more and more absurd — all the actors doubling up playing men and women in wigs and coats, but taking the mickey out of the whole thing at the same time. It was extremely clever and I thought it was great fun.

KF: Margaret, we haven't heard about your favourites.

MS: *Tokyo Notes*, and *The Notebook* as runner up.

AUDIENCE QUESTION 2: Theatre festivals are seen as barometers of what the best theatre is, both domestically and internationally. I'd be very interested in knowing how you felt the programmes stood up themselves, and how the Irish work stood up to the international work in these festivals.

HM: It's difficult to say with the Irish work, because we still have so much coming up this week — Druid and the Lyric are opening, and the Peacock as well. So really we are talking about *The Hand* and *Ariel*, and lots of new work on the Fringe. I have to say that so far, in the two weeks on the Fringe, I have been a bit disappointed. The

acting on the whole is really impressive — so many young actors and actresses coming from the drama schools. But sometimes the choice of material and the direction has been quite weak. There was another Fringe show I really enjoyed — *A Family Affair*, an adaptation of a French play performed in the Alliance Française, and it was very cleverly done. It was adapted into an Irish context, and was very inventive. That is good Irish writing — and the *Candide* also had an Irish flavour to it. But in terms of new writing overall I haven't seen anything that has blown me away.

KS: As I've said, I was here 14 years ago, and now having just seen one play in the National Theatre, and a few other plays on the official Festival, I would say my view is about the same. The weaknesses I saw then are still there — like with the end of *Ariel*, there's too much realism, too much naturalism. But on the positive side, the storytelling tradition is still very strong and exciting, and now the Fringe being so much a part of the whole festival experience is very exciting. I see a lot of vitality in it. Like I said, I would like to see also this energy moving in other directions — not just trying to be funny or sentimental but also a bit more provocative.

MC: I didn't see as much as everyone else because I have been here for a shorter time, but I think what I have found interesting is that the Irish plays that I have seen, no matter what scale, have consistently grappled with questions of the state of the nation. You have corruption in the past, however slightly it was dealt with, in *Ladies and Gents*; you have corruption in the present and future in *Ariel*; and then you have this wonderful thing about poetry and pragmatism in *One Too Many Mornings*. My other festival experiences are in

Edinburgh, and you don't get that sense of Scottish writers dealing with the state of Scotland in the same way — partly because that festival is so diffuse. That the festival here is so concentrated is a good thing.

MS: I am afraid I have seen too little to be able to pronounce any major judgements. To compare what I have seen of Irish theatre before — I have seen the Abbey doing *Observe the Sons of Ulster...* and I saw *The Well of the Saints*. I am sorry to say that what I saw here does not compare very well with those performances. In terms of playwriting, *Ariel* is a very noble and courageous attempt at tackling very important subjects, but it is a failed attempt. I have read much better Irish plays in my past. But if I was just to judge on the basis of what I saw here and now, I don't think it would be a fair judgement. I am not really entitled yet.

KS: We did have the opportunity to see samples of more Fringe work on Saturday...

KF: Yes, this was a very positive development. Theatre Shop, an organisation which brings international producers and presenters to Dublin every year to meet Irish theatre practitioners, this year added a special showcase of excerpts from Fringe work. While they didn't see the whole of these shows, it's great that visitors can have some extra live performances added as part of their 'shopping trip.'

KS: The three plays we saw parts of were all to me very exciting; I would have loved to have seen more of them. There was *Missing Football*, by Peter McKenna; *misterman* by Enda Walsh; and *Talking Through His Hat* written and performed by Michael Harding — such wonderful acting, and a

very well-written play. That showcase gave the overall impression of very vital things happening in Irish theatre.

MS: May I add one thing, there was one piece in that showcase, in the midst of all the literary theatre we saw — it was the only piece of 'body theatre' — Rex Levitates' *Their Thoughts Are Thinking Them*. I quite liked that; I liked the story which was told without words in that piece. But also going back to the small fragments and to what Maddy and Helen mentioned — that sentimentality is a danger. This is also something that I sense — sentimentality is hanging around everywhere. And that is terrible, and I am afraid things will slip into that direction. One of the reasons why I found the small fragment we saw of *Missing Football* so appealing was that it was totally unsentimental. It was terribly brutal and cruel and sad; and there was also an image of social life which I think was very important. I would have loved to have seen that piece as a whole.

KS: It felt like a very British play, because you have an unsentimentality in contemporary British writing, much more than here.

AUDIENCE QUESTION 3: You have talked a lot about acting and playwriting — can you comment at all about the direction that you've seen here?

MC: One of the pieces that is theatrically really fascinating doesn't have a director at all — *The Notebook*. So where does that leave us? There has been a real spectrum of direction; it's hard to generalise. I can say that I really enjoyed *Ladies and Gents* partly because you could tell it was so exquisitely timed — the director had to think very hard about where his actors were going to be at all times, not just inside the two toilets but how they should cross between the

two as well.

KS: Like I said before, naturalism lies very close to the Irish tradition, and I see these foreign plays like the Belgian one as a good example how you can also deal with emotions, deep emotions, without asking people to scream for a long time on stage. On the other hand, there is a danger that you lose the possibility of feeling engaged with the characters.

HM: For me it was interesting that the production I liked the best, *Tokyo Notes*, was directed by the author, and for me it had an extraordinary coherence and that went right through the performance style — the arrangement of the bodies and space and the theme and subject matter. Interestingly the director/writer, Oriza Hirata, is very against all kinds of theories of directing, the 20th century schools of directing. But clearly he has his own vision — maybe even when he was writing he was planning how exactly he was going to deploy these bodies in the space. That to me was an example of very fine directing.

MS: I couldn't but agree with that — there is not an empty moment in *Tokyo Notes*. All the actors, all the performers are used all the time; everything is permanently in operation in the performance. But as we said with *Ariel*, we don't know the purpose of scenography — things are just left without resolution. There are so many loose ends. And with *Glengarry Glen Ross* — that is also a performance which is perfectly directed. There is not an empty split second there. The costumes fit the character; before even they open their mouth you know who you should not trust and why. And the moment the curtain goes up on the second act you know what has happened. It's all there. The reactions are so precise. That is good directing.

THE
IRISH
TIMES



IRISH
THEATRE
AWARDS

*An Act
of
Recognition*



itm's FIVE-A-SIDE FRINGE TEAM



plus subs

Reviewing Fringe festivals is a strange business. So many diverse productions in such a short time — how to bring them all together into one thematic frame? Rather than having one critic face that challenge, this year *itm* decided to share the wealth: we gave five of our hardest critical talents a bunch of shows to review and a strictly limited word count (and enlisted a couple of able-bodied others to cover the few shows that the starters couldn't get to). How they chose to link it all up — or not — was up to them. The very variety of their approaches is, we hope, instructive. Let the games begin....

SUSAN CONLEY

GETS INTERESTED IN INTEREST GROUPS.

WHY DOES THE FRINGE FESTIVAL TURN into the Whinge Festival? Maybe because it's such a Binge Festival: how many shows can one see in three weeks, much less one day? It varies from critic to critic, but this year, in less than six shows, some of us were reduced to moaning skin bags, forging solidarity over pints and fags, trying to reduce our pain to a zero-sum model of time irretrievably lost versus those fleeting hours of enjoyment in the hands of daring and innovative practitioners. The agony of the 45-minute show that seemed to go on for hours is never balanced out by those two hours of sheer bliss in a dark

horse of a show that came out of nowhere... it's a dirty job, but somebody has to do it. And do it we do, with a critical capacity that is honed to merciless sharpness through a kind of focus that long-distance runners or triathletes surely must experience.

The general "Fringe" complaint can be extended towards this article as well: how does one round up as disparate a group of works as could be conceived by certain twists of fate (or our beloved editor)? In six shows, can there be found a uniting feature? Maybe not in all six, but it becomes interesting to examine how four of them speak to and of widely diverse voices and visions.

First, a process of elimination. The stage at the International Bar (which for all intents and purposes became my spiritual home) hosted *Two Magpies*, written by Abbie Spallen, and performed by Spallen and Eithne McGuinness, a one-act whose thin

premise extrapolated from the paranoia that the superstitious among us harbour towards the distinctive black, white, and turquoise birds, and whose director failed to figure out what to do with that limited stage. Not so the case for director Morna Regan and *DO NOT ADJUST YOURself*: draped in filmy white fabric, the Bar's black box transformed into a white box, well-used by an able cast executing a mostly well-written (by Kate Perry) sketch show. Perry herself, along with ex-Nuala Karen Egan, proved that women are funny too, but failed to really "kill." Finally, *Flowers for Fru Fagervik* was one of those hours that never seemed to end, with actress Helena Lewin stranded on a poorly lit and designed stage, with a text whose angry teenage angst fell apart in translation — or, more likely, was never really there to begin with.

If there were four shows that seemed to come from the four corners of the compass, they are the following, each appealing (or attempting to appeal, with mixed success) to a very specific interest group. The focus of each of this final four is firmly rooted in strong choices that didn't seek to pander to a general audience, and taken together create a striking image of the breadth of what was on offer in Fringe 2002.

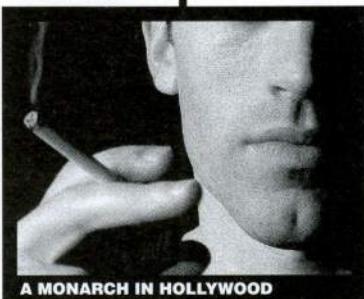
As firmly rooted in their politics as the dredlocks of much of their audience, Spacecraft presented their adaptation of Dario Fo's *Accidental Death of an Anarchist/Hypothetical Death of an Activist*. Taking the events of the now-infamous Dublin protest rally this past 6 May as its jumping-off point, the script (as crafted by Les Shine, Felix Ford, and the company) attempted to

elevate what *The Slate* cheekily dubbed "The Dame Street Massacre" to a height that might be more comfortably inhabited by the students in Tienanmen Square. In it, The Maniac (a moist but engaging Tom O'Leary) infiltrates "the system," impersonates a judge, and tortures a bunch of guards who allegedly tossed an anarchist out a window. As broadly acted as a panto, the characters presented were little more than caricatures, from the credulous and busty journalist to the gormless culchie Gardai. Anyone who dares to call this sophomoric debacle "Pythonesque" deserves to be... thrown out a window. But

how well Spacecraft know their audience, an audience that collectively seemed to wet itself with every broad, stupid gag, and practically screamed itself hoarse with hysterical laughter; and outsiders couldn't help but feel even more alienated from the dram-soc, in-

jokey, cod-socialist gag-athon.

Flipside: *A Monarch in Hollywood*, written by Aidan Harney, a product of the Fringe Festival and Rough Magic Theatre Company's seeds initiative and here staged by D.K. Productions. Opening night was as posh a "do" as could be enacted on the western side of Parnell Square, with a liquor sponsorship making its presence known on passing trays, and a highly motivated launch coordinator working the room. The play didn't live up to the hype of this polished love-in, despite the flashy costumes contributed by Claire Garvey and Louis Copeland, and the Minima furnishings. Set in 1950s Hollywood, it sought to challenge the racist, classist, and sexist views of the time. Abominably staged by Audrey Dev-



A MONARCH IN HOLLYWOOD

ereux — whose primary direction seemed to consist of instructing the actors to stand in close proximity, keep constant eye contact, and shout — the text was a series of non-surprises (hmm, why doesn't heart-throb Dalton York want to get married... it's not because he's GAY, is it!?). The snap-py dialogue, well-written by Harney in the style of late Fifties slag-laden quip-fests, was given a poor outing by the majority of the cast, who oftentimes gave the impression that they hadn't the foggiest idea what they were talking about. The "mature" audience seemed an anomaly for Fringe-time, and may very well have simply been the parents of all involved; nevertheless, the producers positioned themselves perfectly to cater to such a demographic, and with such a willingly captive audience, the whole shebang was like shooting fish in a very shiny barrel.

Along the same highly produced lines, but desperately pursuing the youthful bum-on-seat: *Surface Tension*, a three-hander written by Shane Carr, a product of Dublin's youth theatre system who, if his script is any indication, wants to be known as the ultra-hip product of wealthy South County parents with nothing to do but score, baby. Carr's trio is helpfully divided into the Dark-Haired Girl (earnest, virginal), the Blonde-Haired Girl (manipulative, a slapper), and The Only Guy Worth Having (if he does say so himself). They meet in Grafton Street, in bars, in clubs; get high, get drunk, get laid; play mind games with one another, stab each other in the back — a day in the life of late teen/early twenty-somethings... an Irish vibe thrown on a

fairly commonplace '80s John Hughes story line, or *Rebel Without a Cause*, but this time, really truly without a cause. Carr hits some authentic notes — his lionisation of the Abbey Theatre bar as a "scene" notwithstanding — but the form of dovetailing direct address monologues he employs is so shop-worn at this stage to defy comment, and the text doesn't so much conclude as stop. Yet, had there been any kids in the audience, they no doubt would have been madly texting their friends at curtain about a show that was, like, "so disco, baby."

One hundred and eighty degrees from



SURFACE TENSION & CAULDRON OF BRONTËS



that, and into another century, to a show whose rather unwieldy title made it the hot potato of the *itm* Fringe critics as we bid for shows. *Cauldron of Brontës*, presented by County Roscommon's Praxis Theatre Laboratory, came as an unexpected and pleasant surprise. A period piece set in a bare but atmospheric set, the company didn't try to do too much on a small-company budget. The stage, littered as it was with paper, gave the Sisters Brontë a setting that appealed to their poetical bent, and the script by Andrea Kealy and Sam Dowling, once it found its rhythm, simply and movingly expressed the strange and sad trajectory that these writers' lives would take. Carol Brophy made for a fittingly otherworldly Emily, while Natalie

Childs' ambitious Charlotte developed in believable tune with her publishing successes. As in life, the person of brother Branwell dominated the scene, rather unfortunately in this case, as Shane Gately's sometimes overwrought portrayal of the sickly and petulant sibling hampered the forward thrust of the piece.

Ultimately, the tortuous genius of the Fringe, the devilish attraction of the thing, is that you simply *never know* — despite research and brochure synopses — what's going to fly and what's not. And that's why we critics turn up for everything, hoping for the best, taking it on the chin, and smoking too many cigarettes: no matter what, we have to be part of those audiences, as disparate and bizarre as they may have been, in the hopes that the Fringe will do what I think it's meant to do, and show us what we can expect from Ireland's theatrical future.

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

NICK COSTELLO

HAS FUN IN THE LOO, BUT WONDERS IF ANYONE ELSE IS THINKING ABOUT LOCATION.

BEFORE GETTING INTO INDIVIDUAL reviews, it's important to make some general but true statements about the shows I saw at this year's Fringe Festival. In general the standard of lighting and design was poor, and in some cases nonexistent. There seems to be a generation of fine actors working in Dublin, and a generation of poor writers who can't provide them with good material. In general, the companies I saw did not make interesting use of the spaces provided with the

exception of Semper Fi's *Ladies and Gents*, where the space was effectively a character. These points made, a frustrating, boring, enjoyable, thrilling, and sometimes challenging Fringe was had by this reviewer. And so to the plays.

It was with some trepidation I approached *A Family Affair*, an adaptation and "hibernicisation" of the Agnes Jaoui and Jean-Pierre Bacri play *Un air de famille*. I was a big fan of Jaoui and Bacri's wonderful film adaptation, and wondered if the essentially French nature of the conflicts would translate. Happily, they translated well in this witty production by BDNC Theatre. It's a basic enough story: a loser eldest son is abandoned by his wife and he tries to hide it from a domineering, uncaring mother and a self-obsessed set of siblings. He runs a café in which the action takes place, so the choice of the Alliance Francaise Café was fortuitous, though sadly ill-used.

The audience sat at café tables sipping a complimentary glass of wine — a gesture that invited you in to the acting space. Unfortunately, the cast carried out the action within a rigid space that didn't use the natural opportunities for eavesdropped asides that could have made this a truly engaging production and a real highlight of the Fringe. The acting was mainly good especially from Miriam Devitt, the put-upon and hilarious trophy wife, Yolanda; Jarlath Rice, the frustrated and unheard Henry; Sinéad Beary, the spoilt and irresponsible Betty; and Micheál Tierney as the egotistical company man Philip.

One Too Many Mornings is set in Bewley's, at a Bewley's table (one of the high ones), and features the kinds of characters you sit at least two tables away from. This was billed as the "long awaited sequel to the hugely popular cult comedy *Too Much of Nothing*." As somebody who didn't see *Too Much of Nothing*, I must judge this piece on its own merits — and they are few.

When you've had your first (and in my case, last) snigger at the self-delusion of the two characters, Christy and Dominic, you realise that almost every line seems stale, every observation passé as if it paraphrases a well-worn and perfectly useful comment. It's a strange sensation. Both actors are able and versatile, especially O'Halloran, who revels in his creation of Dominic, a weirded-out wacko desperate for an explanation. Less showy but fully realised is Sean McDonagh's Christy, a man who is earnestness itself. A sort of "nice but dim" Raheny boy. The costumes are as effective as a cycling helmet, reflector belt, and Vegetarian Society of Ireland t-shirt can be.

I arrived along to the closing night of *Acquainted With The Night* at Andrew's Lane Studio with some sense of anticipation. On the face of it, the play seemed perfect Fringe material. Female Parts, a company that was dedicated to developing more roles for women in theatre; and a play that is about a single night in the lives of a pole dancer and a secretary. Would it, I wondered, feature a secretary who was a fantasist and a pole dancer who just wanted to keep house? Just about. The stage featured a podium which broke the action as Gina and Avril paced, competed, danced, and soliloquised their way through a dull and predictable script in an irritatingly knowing manner. Both actors, Bairbre Scully and Caroline Mullarkey, are accomplished and capable and here were underused and badly directed. Perhaps the writer/director Paul Kennedy thought it was illuminating to encourage this kind of choral declamation, feet immovably planted,

suggesting pearls of wisdom to follow and reflecting a kind of overbearing stridency that affected this play badly. The set was pedestrian and the costumes perfectly okay. There was some lighting that neither illuminated nor enhanced the stodgy action as it limped its way to the expected denouement.

The double bill at the Crypt from the Penny Dreadful and Macalla theatre companies sounded intriguing — the prospect of jailed, desperate humans appealed to the *Big Brother* addict in me, and off I went. *A Road in Winter* featured Ian Groombridge and Tom Maguire as two bound



LADIES AND GENTS & ACQUAINTED WITH THE NIGHT

prisoners whose desperate attempts to distract themselves from terror are periodically and effectively punctuated by the noisy sliding of a bolt or echoing slam of a door in their prison. The script is one of word association taking us all over London in a journey of their imagination of escape to the familiar concrete everyday — to anything but the present. As such it works well. The piece is well lit and the performances are strong. At 20 minutes it seemed the right length.

NES In a Noose is another story of imprisonment. This time it's three young Dublin women, Nik, Rose, and Sal, who, it appears, have been picked up by the police for a botched robbery. Their situation serves only to heighten the personal ten-

sions between the three. It transpires that they are lesbians, and that Nik is a prostitute. The unlikely trio help pass an entertaining hour as they bicker, snog, slag, and attack each other. As is often the case with this kind of piece, where the acting strengths and weaknesses are most exposed by a script, there were inevitable strengths that shone through. Particularly impressive were Vicky Burke's energetic and affecting Sal and Libby McCormack's controlled Nik. Bairbre de Barra was quietly impressive in the less interesting role of Rose. The script by Veronica Dyas was often over-encumbered with detail and she directed a sparely lit show with efficiency.

Ladies and Gents at Stephen's Green Public Toilets: Look out! Acts in the Jacks! I was sure this wasn't the first time a group of actors have been found soliciting business outside of a public convenience, and I'm sure it won't be the last. I certainly hope not. Semper Fi have outdone themselves with this imaginative and thrilling show — a what-if/whodunnit in a comic-book style that is sure to be resurrected for other festivals in the future. In a triumph of invention they have created a Fringe original with *Ladies and Gents*. The evening I went it was still bright, and for me it was managed to be a claustrophobic and riveting experience, despite the daylight seeping in from outside. I can only imagine the excitement felt by those who entered in the dark.

Ladies and Gents posits an explanation of and a resolution for a political scandal. Depending on whether you start in the Ladies or the Gents your experience of the story is vividly changed. Essentially you enter the Ladies and you get a slightly confusing but enticing story, the background to which you have missed — a story of the entrapment and disposal of a prostitute. If you start with the Gents, your experience of the story starts at the "beginning," where the tart's husband makes the deal to

provide her to a client, and realises too late that she is doomed. It sounds elaborate, but it is simple and highly effective and impressive. As the fallen wife and pimping husband, Fiona O'Toole and David Heap are a suitably creepy couple. Emmet Kirwan as a nervous and vicious Billy Evans is unconvincing; Ned Dennehy is a sinister, rubber coated Mr X; and Paschal Friel, a fedora-clad stranger. The costumes, lighting, and sound design are all effective in this piece scripted by Paul Walker and directed by Karl Shiels.

Fully Committed, by American writer Becky Mode and playing in Andrew's Lane Studio, follows a day in the life of Sam Peliczowski, an out-of-work actor whose day job is to man the phone lines in a top New York restaurant. There is one outstanding thing about this production, and that is Scotty Fults who plays Sam. Fults is plain, overweight, apparently not overendowed with brains — you're thinking, "Character Parts," "The Victim," "The Obsessive Neighbour." By the end of *Fully Committed*, however, you're in agreement with his agent and thinking, "this actor is capable of anything."

Over the course of the play, we are not only introduced to Sam, but to approximately 40 other defined characters, all of whom are at the other end of a telephone, usually desperate for a reservation, and all of whom are voiced by Sam. It's littered with stereotypes, but it's great fun, and Fults is deeply impressive for the energy and definition he gives each of the characters. There's the unctuous, lisping Bryce who calls every half-hour from Naomi Campbell's office to change the reservation, and in one case the lighting. There's the imperious Fifth Avenue bitch Carol Ann Rosenstein-Fishburne; there's the obnoxious Maitre d' Jean-Claude; there's Sam's lonely dad upstate who just wants his son to come home for Christmas; there's his actor buddy

who rings after castings to rub Sam's nose in; and there's the explosively tempered celebrity chef. It's all a bit of a Muppet Show, but highly enjoyable, and for once a good set — phones, neckties, half-eaten pizzas, a rolodex, and Coca-Cola — what more do you need to control New York society?

Nick Costello is a writer.

PETER CRAWLEY

SEARCHES IN VAIN FOR A SHOW TO LOVE*

JOSÉ RIVERA MUST HAVE BEEN QUIETLY disappointed at the turn of the millennium. After the year 2000, Rivera's New York fairytales of *fin de siècle* magic realism lost a certain urgency when the world didn't end. Burgeoning company x-bel-air continue their Fringe Festival relationship with Rivera by staging his *Sonnets for an Old Century*, the title and form of which signal Rivera's reluctance to move on. Numerous monologues of fantasy, both dark and light, mythic and mundane, are meshed into an unsatisfying whole by an open-ended context, announced by Barbara Brennan's voice over as a sort of after-life waiting room, where each character gets to tell "their side of the story."

Occasionally the mythological revisionism is quite engaging — JJ Rolle's latter-day Icarus corrects "a popular misconception" about his demise, while Leonora Bethancourt's tempestuous *mamasita* is a riot, and Sarah Brennan's paranoid schizophrenic, scratching little x's on window panes, is absorbingly presented. But monologues just keep coming, with little affinity between them other than vague absurdism, and while directors Roisin McBrinn and Sarah Brennan try to keep our interest from flagging, Rivera's shape-

less text barely accommodates their aesthetic embellishments. So while two clubber-chic afterlife attendants attempt to foist some order on the proceedings, soon they simply get in the way, slowing things down with cutesy dances and robotic interaction. It all comes together for one fleeting moment when Rory Keenan's eccentric scientist recalls a gravitational upset in his bedroom as towering projections, music, text, and performance coalesce with wit and finesse. But elsewhere and far too often it feels that some scenes have received more directorial consideration than others and the journey through eternity constantly begs the question, are we there yet?

There is an adolescent appeal in the *reductio ad absurdum* where the forward march of relationships, adulthood and society are exposed for the meaningless constructs they are. But in spite of the semantic anarchy of Josh Tobiessen's assault on American culture, *Bag of Piranhas* doesn't convince you that we should give up on language, relationships, and reality just yet. Indeed, the only alternative that Tobiessen posits is to fritter away the time in front of the TV and not even that resists his tiresome deconstruction. "What are you watching?" someone eventually asks Dean (played by the writer). Liberated from his job, wife, and any need to obey the adult convention of conversation, he replies, "Rays of light." It is doubtlessly a brave move on director Paul Haze's part to encourage staggered performances of spasmodic gestures and sentences which Break annoyingly in the middle. But in the gaps between the stop/start action, audience attention seeps out the door. It is one thing to convey an abstract idea — that reality and society are capable of falling apart if we let the balls drop — but another to sit through a painfully fragmented hour of it. Clearly indebted to Ionesco's linguistic absurdity and Albee's relation-

ship disintegrations, Tobiessen's play goes no further, while Haze's production misses the cultural specifics. A patently Irish actor complaining about "\$100 sneakers" may seem an fitting disjunction between words and experience, but an ideological tussle between a couch potato and a cheerleader requires a proper location. Without the clockwork absurd approach Catastrophe theatre company might have made something more engagingly unsettling, rather than clobbering us into a retreat.

Cartway Productions' curious double bill matches Lee Hall's *Spoonface Steinberg* (in which an autistic, terminally-ill seven-year-old reflects on family, faith and the universe) with *The Woman Who*

Cooked Her Husband, Debbie Isitt's adultery-driven three-hander, which would have been quite progressive had it been written before the Suffragette movement. Isitt's surreal tale begins with a divorcée preparing a meal for her former husband and his new wife to celebrate the couple's three-year wedding anniversary. The main course will naturally consist of the filleted philanderer. But quickly and disappointingly a flashback narrative leaps out from a thousand soap operas — the settled marriage, the satisfied stomach, the cooling conversations, the working-late-again routine, the superficial mistress, yaddah yaddah. Although well-paced and featuring confident performances from Dunia Hutchinson as the jilted cook and Bryan Harten as the odious Ken, director Simon Hubbard fumbles some hamfisted costume symbolism while Isitt's bizarrely chauvinistic characterisations of the female roles are denied any clear irony as the play becomes dominated

by the two-timing two-timer who sleeps with one woman and eats with another.

In *Spoonface Steinberg*, Rachel Rath's socially interactive, happy-go-lucky autistic kid sees any dramaturgical effort shredded in favour of a sentimentalised latter-day "fool" (replete with ski-hat coxcomb in Hubbard's production) who tells us something about life, spirituality, and opera. With little opportunities for fully fleshed

stagecraft, however, Hubbard opts instead for video projections of poor Spoonface sitting motionless at home or innocently playing in a park, as if the text and music wasn't emotionally manipulative enough already. While Rath's performance is committed, the character

doesn't ring true and neither her religion nor the textual allusions to children of the Holocaust are reflected clearly.

Following last year's *Iscariot*, No Alternative theatre company and the elusive Tony Barrow continue their Fringe monologues that imagine the person behind the plaster saints and sinners of the New Testament. This time *Magdalen* takes St. Mary Magdalene as its heroine, breathily performed by Aisling Farrell, who arrives to the stage as though she'd spent the last hour doing aerobics. A waste of time really, as Patrick Sutton's direction sees her spend the next hour performing a peculiar exercise regime by dashing from one end of the stage to the other or occasionally running perimeters of her small set, marked off by posts which bear representations of the seven devils.

These devils are solemnly intoned: the devils of longing, love, loathing, the devil in the dark, the devil of hunger, of loneli-



SONNETS FOR AN OLD CENTURY

ness, and the devil in the window pane. *Magdalen* is full of such quasi-religious litannies, beginning with the fallen/redeemed woman reciting her biblical genealogy (yielding to deliberate anachronisms), leading into the elliptical phrasing of a monologue that pines for a departed lover and tells of her pursuing a beatific fisherman along the shoreline and up through the mountains, but unable to believe the story of Jesus' resurrection.

Matthew 28:9 might contest Barrow's research, but it's clear that the writer is more concerned with the character's symbolic use. Unfortunately a similar approach to the script makes of the language a disassociated poetry. Farrell, more accomplished in movement than emotional conveyance, handles the dance and gestures required of her with considerable grace, but the regulated, enervated pattern of her delivery coupled with her far-away stare give the impression that it is a feat to simply recite these awkward lines, and characterisation remains elusive. Thus despite divvying up the good gossip behind the Messiah's clandestine longings, or exuding a tortured sense of loss, distraction and standard oldest-profession blues, *Magdalen* becomes as wearying as its endlessly repeated double bass score.

Watching both *Word* and *Casual Comedy* you get the impression that American playwright Patrick Burleigh should be more cautious with his representations of women and black people, neither of whom fare particularly well in Premium Pictures'

double-bill. *Casual Comedy*'s late-night monologue has Gary Egan play a frustrated architect, Darrell, whose introspection gives over to violent mood-swings while his partner remains sedated in a bed beside him. Torn between two notions of the world — an architectural Europe and an America of simple rural homesteads — Darrell veers between binary oppositions. With order on one side and chaos on the other he is compelled to slight self-analysis. "That's why I became an architect — to make something of the space around me."

The women around him, however, are dilapidated constructions. Louise Kiely as the sleeping Charlie, exists only as an inert sounding board for Darrell's abuse and fantasies. Wondering why she "knocks herself out with this stuff every night" it seems this over-wrought misogynist has a tenuous understanding of himself.

"Any emotion just translates into pity," says the displaced miserabilist, "a real deep pity that puts my stomach in knots, like fear." Oh, pass the valium.

Equally confused is *Word*, featuring the oddest exchange to ever take place late at night in a notorious New York park. Rory Mullen's strung-out ex-novelist smack-head finds Marcus Valentine's drug deal-

er loitering beneath graffiti murals in the park. Obliging every racial stereotype, Ferone manages to be a confirmed drug-dealer, a natural rapper, a dangerous tough, and a sage brother. Evidently his business sense is a little askew though. "I deal in rhymes and beats," he says before taking



MAGDALEN

Eugene's money anyway, returning, only questions about truth and love. Why the gasping Eugene wouldn't totter down to the next dealer or why Ferone feels even the slightest concern for this whiny white boy is never satisfactorily explained. But just like the earlier play the irritating white guy becomes the centre of attention and Ferone's character is subdued into a guardian angel role, bringing the washed-up writer face to face with his poetic failure and emotional bankruptcy with a whole lot of rhyme, but a lot less reason.

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HARVEY O'BRIEN

SORTS OUT SOME INTIMACY ISSUES.

Intimate spaces are the stock-in-trade of the Fringe Festival, allowing actors and directors to explore more confined spaces relative to texts which often play upon characters framed by narrow boundaries of one kind or another. Though this is sometimes a matter of aesthetics, the low budgets and quasi-professional nature of many of the companies sometimes makes it a necessity. This is a fortuitous marriage of choice and circumstance which often produces fascinating results.

Enda Walsh's *bedbound* was a prominent feature of the 2000 Dublin Theatre Festival; in 2002 his work found his way to the "alternative" programme in the form of the off-Broadway production of *misterman* by Origin Theatre Company. *misterman* is another intensely internalised piece which builds a psychological space around an individual actor. George Heslin played the

quiet, religious Thomas McGill, resident of a small Irish town in which his simple-minded friendliness and religious devotion are treated with equal degrees of amused tolerance. His own perspective is more than slightly skewed however. Walsh allows only the disembodied voices of two other characters to enter his universe: his mother (Aideen O'Kelly) and a girl for whom he has developed a fascination (Laoisa Sexton). These are present only on a tape recorder which Thomas carries with him. All of the other people the character meets are merely suggested, with Heslin playing both sides of the conversation. This conceit amplifies the denotation of physical, social, and emotional space, reinforced by Sean Farrell's lighting design and David DeBeck's crisp, focused direction. This was a strong production anchored by an absorbing central performance and though the inevitability of its *Carrie*-like resolution in which McGill sets the school hall on fire left little room for narrative suspense, the combination of textual and metatextual elements was satisfying.

Geri Slevin's *Invisible Women/Eighth of March* struggled to draw polemical and aesthetic value out of some of the same elements by exploring the space between women's lives and specific physical confinement. Performed at Bewley's Café Theatre, the play charted the interlaced tales of several women imprisoned for crimes and misdemeanours in Ireland, Northern Ireland, and Australia. As the audience entered, Angela Ryan affected the nervous amateurism of a non-professional performer. Dressed in a shiny tracksuit, speaking in a Northside accent, she explained that as Bernie the street trader, she was taking part in a prison play about the lives of women in prison. The heady mixture of place, space, and performance continued with the actor changing costume and putting on make-up until she eventually

became "invisible" by blending in with the prison setting painted on the backdrop.

Never subtle but generally pacy, *Invisible Women* stretched its study of boundaries and parameters beyond the suggested space through incorporating a range of action across three centuries. The show also employed puppetry to evoke the inhumanity of the faceless masculine authorities responsible for the confinement of these women, namely policemen and judges who are literally merely flip sides of one another (the dummy wears a reversible costume with interchangeable headgear). Though not uninteresting, the play's slippage between drama, documentary, and direct address never gave the sense of a fully coherent aesthetic. Polemics were clearly more important, and as such the use of instabilities in narrative, performative, and dramatic space were used perhaps too directly for drawing attention to cracks and fissures in monolithic representational forms.

Ronan Wilmot's *The Man Who Gave The Beatles Away: The Allan Williams Story* was even less accomplished. In trying to capture the informality of the backstage dramas surrounding the early years of the Beatles, Wilmot created an actual backstage space at the New Theatre which he attempted to match through a loosely-organised, anecdotal script. The show also attempted to create documentary disjunction by juggling performative content insofar as the band were played by musicians rather than actors. Their frankly poor dramatic interpretations (complete with wildly wavering accents) were balanced by their live presentation of several popular tunes. This was a well-intentioned

piece which hoped to give a sense of the divergent destinies of a working class lad done good (Williams himself) and the boys he guided one step along the road to megastardom. Its looseness worked against it though, with an alarming oscillation between too much documentary detail presented by the elder Williams (Pearse Butler) and half-realised backstage vignettes poorly performed by all except Darren McHugh. As the younger Williams, McHugh's conviction and energy made the production bearable. The actor conveyed a sense of a life lived with passion and regret which his elder coun-



JOHN GABRIEL BORKMAN & INVISIBLE WOMEN/EIGHTH OF MARCH

terpart did not. The dramatic vacuum left between the writing, the amateurish acting, and the deliberately unpolished musical performance was filled only by the documentary material. Interesting as this was, there was no sense that Wilmot had negotiated a space for it amid the staging choices he had made as writer and director.

Henrik Ibsen's *John Gabriel Borkman* provided the Focus with a more sure-footed grounding from which to shift the boundaries of space and performance. De-emphasising the now-creaking 19th-century narrative of ethics, greed, and family, director Brian de Salvo and set designer Carmel Nugent pushed characterisation to the fore without losing the sense of compartmentalisation and psychological space

which underlies Ibsen's original piece. Set in the cavernous mansion of a disgraced banking official, the play presented a drama in separate places. Upstairs we find the aloof and defiant Borkman (Vincent McCabe), still convinced that one day the world will realise he was right to defraud his customers in the name of building a personal empire. His wife Gunhild (Aine Ni Mhuirfe) resides below, refusing to speak to him but hopeful that her son Erhart (David Johnston) will one day redeem the family name. These and other characters are presented as people whose entrenchment and willing self-delusion defines their personal space, often in defiance of social (and other) realities. The drama derives from collisions between conflicting worldviews and aspirations, and as such the interplay between characterisations gives it its force. It is this which the Focus production

seized upon, and with the help of well-marshalled performances, it succeeded in blending form and content where the arguably more ambitious *Invisible Women/Eighth of March* did not.

Loose Canon's *The Duchess of Malfi* played similar games with text and interpretation, and with even more dramatic results. Without changing a word of Webster's dense 1614 prose, the ensemble of Deirdre Roycroft, Karl Quinn, Bryan Burroughs, and Kevin Hely developed an extremely complex dance-like interpretation of the story with director Jason Byrne.

The plot is bog-standard potboiler melodrama involving the tortuous convolutions of a young widow denied remarriage by her spiteful brother. Neither Webster nor Loose Canon are particularly interested in the realpolitik of the scenario though, and this production leaves all extraneous detail to the imagination. Performed in the round on bare floorboards in a marquee inside the largest SS Michael & John playing space, with basic ceiling lighting, the

production concentrated upon expressionistic physical exaggeration of internal emotional states.

The actors played out the sexual tensions between four characters (though the dialogue was unchanged, scenes and characters were omitted and re-organised), including the duchess and her brother, the duchess' lover and the brother's obsessed Iago-like henchman. The sensuality of the carefully choreographed

movement made the textual preoccupation with the venality of human desire completely explicit. Movement usually represented an interpretation of tensions masked by the dialogue. The actors looked as if they were trying to walk through clouds of ether, stretching every digit and every muscle to emphasise physical relationships and distances between them. Such bodily undulations were accompanied by deliberately outlandish intonation; "affording the actor greater physical and vocal expressivity" as the programme notes stated.



THE DUCHESS OF MALFI

Vocalisations varied between muttering and shrieking, exploring space between repression and hysteria befitting the text. Again a sense of compartmentalisation was also vital to the overall effect. The action was broken into discrete scenes of confrontation between different combinations of characters during which inactive performers lay posed upon the floor. Their slow awakening from self-induced stupor frequently had the feeling of post-coital sluggishness, an impression reinforced by the level of specifically sexualised action. Though *The Duchess of Malfi* made great demands upon its audience to appreciate the complexity of the relationships between these elements of performance, it was a rewarding experience. Its sense of personal and social spaces was (literally) embodied in a coherent theatrical aesthetic which allowed the play to communicate on several levels.

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NICK McGINLEY

GETS ON GRAND, ONCE HE FIGURES OUT HOW THE READ THE PROGRAMME.

THE FIRST POINT OF CONTACT BETWEEN theatregoer and theatre festival is the programme. Now, when I laid eyes on the ESB Dublin Fringe Festival 2002 programme, I felt immediately discouraged. Just because things kick off in September is no good reason to saddle us with a horrible-looking school copybook. Its awful design and colour palette aside, it's badly laid out, making for a lot of wasted time, as you try to locate the blurb about

that show you're seeing in ten minutes' time. This is not a good start. Black mark duly noted, off we go.

Twelfth Night, Shakespeare's rollicking comedy of mistaken identity and thwarted love, was presented by Natural Shocks theatre company at the Crypt Arts Centre. This was an energetic production with an able cast, minimal props, clever costumes and a terrific use of music provided by a bemused-looking Samuel Jackson. Myles Breen weighs in as the scene-stealing champ with his very camp Sir Andrew. Looking very much like Gary Oldman in his Joe Orton mode, he's a joy to watch. The rest of the cast acquit themselves well, with a nice ensemble atmosphere heightened by the constant presence of all on stage. This show coasts by on charm and a cheerful rough-'n'-readiness that director Donnacadh O'Briain can be proud of having achieved.

Next up was *Numb*, two plays written and directed by Peter Hussey for Crooked House theatre company in the SS Michael & John, the terrific new venue that was previously the Viking Adventure Centre. There are three spaces here, a high-ceilinged black box in the basement; a small, curtained-off stage on the ground floor; and the massive upstairs room I found myself in for this production. Long and wide with no raised stage, the room has been restored beautifully, maintaining the ornate ceiling. An amazing space — you could stage anything here, so I hope that a rumour circulating of its planned conversion to a cinema proves false. The first of the two *Numb* plays was called "Three Figures at a Well," with two young women and a teenage boy reciting three interlocking monologues. One woman recounts her difficult relationship with her mum, her time in a stultifying boarding school, and subsequent flourishing in the sex industry. A schoolboy muses on

itm's FIVE A SIDE FRINCE TEAM plus subs

whether he loves his girlfriend and his plan to become a writer, while the other woman is a shopgirl who married the only man who ever did anything nice for her.

Now, my heart sinks every time I see another monologue by an Irish playwright. Spearheaded by Tom McIntyre in the early '90s, monologue seems to have taken over as Irish theatre's favourite form. "Three Figures" is quite well-written, knowing stuff that has some nice swipes at youthful pretension, self-involvement and the piece's own status as a Beckett homage; but no amount of self-reflexive irony can save a piece ultimately devoid of drama. A set of giant pieces of muslin stretched over frames with different colours shining through them looked great, but only served to further dwarf the three actors already upstaged by their opulent surroundings.

Hussey's second piece was much more satisfying. "Bending Spoons" was an absurdist power-play between a shrink and his patient, that nicely segued from dark comedy to serious revelations and back again. Darren Donohue was wonderfully uptight as the patient, while Nick Devlin made a suitably slimy doctor. Again they were dwarfed by the surroundings, but the comparative strength of the play held the audience's attention. Like witnessing Pinter, Kafka, and Woody Allen having a punch-up, this is darkly entertaining stuff, that managed to be far less "numbing" than its companion piece.

The Performance Corporation's *Candide* played downstairs in the basement space of the SS Michael & John. This tight, stylish slice of anarchic humour was adapted

from the Voltaire novel by Tom Swift and director Jo Mangan. Candide, played by Steven Swift, is a naive would-be philosopher who takes off around the globe in search of his true love, while trying to test his old mentor's theory of human nature. The audience is seated in the round on wooden benches, with the stage dominated by a screen (doubling as a ship's sails) onto which various animation sequences are projected to signal our hero's surroundings. It's a device that could've proven highly distracting from the action onstage, but such is the level of actorly energy that attention seldom wanders. The uniformly excellent actors are provided with terrific costumes by Suzanne Keogh — and Fergal McElheron is simply hilarious as the one-but-tocked daughter of Pope Urban X, yet again proving himself to be an actor of

dizzying versatility.

Missing Football by Peter McKenna played at the Rubicon Gallery on St. Stephen's Green. Again, my heart sinks as yet another monologue by an Irish writer lumbers towards me, especially as this one is written in a style and milieu so successfully colonised by Conor McPherson. However, my dark suspicions were happily disproved by this assured production. Stephen Kelly plays Stephen, a young working-class Dub with a talent for football and a seemingly assured future in that career. He tells us of his string of unfortunate mishaps and unwise involvement with the local criminal boss that threatens his dream. This marks a departure for film and television writer McKenna, but he finds a lovely balance between humour



NUMB: BENDING SPOONS

and pathos in this knowing monologue from a cheerful lad with little self-knowledge. Each episode is richly described without ever departing from Stephen's vocabulary. This is brilliant both in structure and expression, with an eminently confident performance from Kelly. Rachael Dowling directs and has insured the production's success by nailing the casting, as Kelly's face has the mixture of man and boy perfect for the part.

The Ballad of Badger Bickle's Young Fella from Cork-based company Be Your Own Banana played in the black box basement of the SS Michael & John. This was a highly surreal and scatological narrative about the adventures of the near-autistic son of a rural idiot, Badger Bickle, and the local floozy Molly. Brian Desmond — actor, director and co-writer with Alan Collins — kicks things off with much style and volume as

Badger, who after marrying Molly (Denise Murphy) and very quickly fathering her child, discovers that his son has an amazing nose for predicting winners at the horses. But before they can profit from this, the family have to flee to Amerikay, after Molly's promiscuous ways land them in trouble. About a hundred characters are played by four actors in a virtuoso display of energy and ingenuity. Props are discarded in a pile at the back, while the actors change costume in plain view. Call me old-fashioned, but it's just as easy to throw things out of sight and change behind the curtain; but with the performers performing most of the sound effects also, this is a show that makes a virtue out of its "anti-slick" presentation. David Nelligan's won-

derful hangdog features make the often blank, sometimes bemused Bertie Bickle a hero to root for. Sandra Morrissey is brilliant as Rua the hairdresser, an evil harridan with contempt for everyone and everything (except Bertie), while Denise Murphy's formidable Noo Yawk prostitute is squirmingly hilarious. This is manic, dark-edged comedy that succeeds in its aim of sheer entertainment.

Nocturne, a monologue presented by Cardboard Box Theatre Company, was performed in the small ground floor space at the SS Michael & John. I believe I have made my antipathy towards the Irish



CANDIDE & BADGER BICKLE'S YOUNGFELLA

monologue overkill well known at this stage, but despite this Rory Nolan was simply superb as a young man who accidentally kills his sister by running her down with the car. His family disintegrates through the tragedy and he flees for the Big City. Nolan nailed the character so well I was convinced he was as he appeared: an East Coast prep, and not a Dublin actor. This is a well-written play by Adam Rapp that sometimes over-eggs the lyricism and drives a verbose wedge between the character and the audience. This caveat aside, *Nocturne* is an excellent show ably directed by Darragh McKeon that focuses totally on the performance, with a minimal set of book stacks and a judicious use of music and slides.

Harum-Scarum theatre company inex-

plicably chose (or was allocated?) Meeting House Square as the venue for its show *Executioner No. 14*. Now it's a risk to attempt outdoor theatre in Dublin at any time of the year, but October? I had made my choice too. Even though it was cold and raining heavily on the night I attended, I presumed there would be a forceful reason as to why this show was performed outside. There wasn't. I was annoyed. Guess what else? It was another monologue.

It starts promisingly with the actor, Frederic Dalmasso, sitting behind a perspex pane at a desk with a microphone, dressed in a suit. He speaks in French, with each line translated over the loudspeakers. He switches to English and changes to casual clothes to continue his story of a civil war between the Adamites and the Zelites. This fictional tale of brutality conjures up the ghost of Bosnia, but never manages to conjure an emotional connection in the audience to the events flatly narrated. Dalmasso throws himself into it totally, but is let down by a banal, adjective-heavy script by Adel Hakim, that may have lost some immediacy in the translation by Roger Baines — but I doubt it.

This random selection of Fringe productions points to a festival of professionalism and general high quality. First impressions aside, the Fringe has succeeded in assembling an enviable slate of talented theatre companies who showed their well-honed wares with a definite swagger.

Nick McGinley studied drama at TCD & writes for RTÉ Online & Aertel.

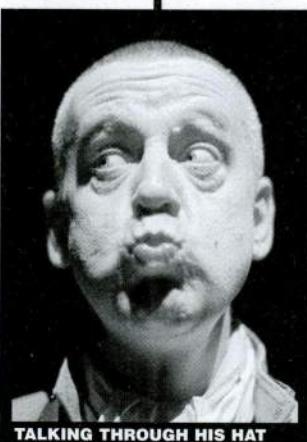
KAREN AFRICKER

TRIES TO FEEL THE JOY.

THEATRE OF JOY IS A TRULY UNIQUE phenomenon in Irish theatre. The two of their productions that I have seen are infused with a rare sense of collaboration and company spirit, and call on the audience's emotions in ways both shameless and profound. Spearheading the company, apparently, are director Gerry Moran and composer Eanna Hickey, and the productions are admirably inventive in the way that they attempt to use music as well as performance, text, and staging as communicative means. But while their 2002 Fringe offering, *The Blood and Fire Show*, contained many moments of musical sublimity, the balance had skewed so far in favour of Hickey's compositions that one had to resort to the Fringe programme to discern what the subject of this show actually was —

the 1889 visit of the Salvation Army to Newcastle for a "Council of War."

The visual impact of the opening tableau — 15 (count 'em!) actors of varying ages and (it soon emerged) skill levels, busily shuffling piles of paper behind two long tables — was extremely striking. A few testimonies were given about religious revelation and belief; the themes are echoed in spiritual and gospel songs played (wonderfully) by a five-piece band and sung by the compa-



TALKING THROUGH HIS HAT

ny. But why were some cast members who could barely hold a tune afforded long solos, while others with lovely voices only given a few lines? Why didn't Moran contain Hickey, whose overexcited stage presence and slightly off-key vocals pulled way too much focus? What were Elena Doyle's fuzzy and unspecific projections all about? And what happened to the whole Salvation Army business?

We don't get near enough musical theatre, particularly of the inventive and contemporary variety, here in Ireland, and Hickey is a composer and instrumental performer of extraordinary talent. Theatre of Joy clearly believes in, and knows how to exploit, the emotive power of voices raised in glorious song. But the overall vibe off this show was almost defiantly anti-professional, which is not the same as communal and joyful.

PATRICIA DANAHER

BRAVES THE FOCUS AT 11 PM AND IS REWARDED.

MICHAEL HARDING'S ONE-MAN SHOW *Talking Through His Hat* takes the audience on an unexpected journey through 17th-century Dublin, through the eyes of one of the most prescient satirists ever. On the way, the surprising and enduring friendship between Dean Jonathan Swift with the gruff, socially unpolished composer Turlough O'Carolan unfolds during a dinner party which goes terribly wrong. Employing some of Swift's own writing and the clever use of contemporary phrasing, Harding weaves a deft spell over the audience in this intimate evening with the Dean.

The play is set during the time of

Enlightenment thinking, and through the blind minstrel composer, Swift considers how it must be "to always live in a dark room." O'Carolan, whose rhythmic and tonal gifts are almost trans-sensory, retorts to the Dean, who on certain subjects often appears to dwell in rigid certainty, "which of us, Dr. Swift, do you think lives in the dark?"

Harding's play suggests that in Swift the relationship between the rational and the unconscious are not wholly in balance, and goes on to explore whether an imbalance between these two parts of any human being may be the source of our existential anxiety. This is done with a great lightness of touch and with great humour by Harding, the actor in his own play. He is as convincing as the urbane Dean as he is as the rough-edged composer.

One obvious criticism of this small but mostly perfectly-formed play is that of its unrelenting visual spareness. Relying on lighting and a single chair as the solitary prop on an otherwise empty stage, the focus of the audience at all times must be on the actor's words and voice — indeed even the actor's head is shaved and not bewigged as would have been the style of that time. (It is not difficult to see how this play would effortlessly translate to radio.)

But thankfully Harding is an accomplished practitioner of the school of "less is more" and the play moves along effortlessly. Nominated for the best male performance in the Dublin Fringe Festival this year, the playwright may make more experienced actors uncomfortable with the ease and confidence of his stage presence. Overall this is 60 minutes of theatrical joy.

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THE GLAMIS GLUT

Shakespeare's *Macbeth* has been seen on Irish stages no less than nine times in the last 12 months – and there are more productions on the way in 2003. Coincidence? Hardly — the play is on the Leaving Cert and GCSE syllabi, and several Irish companies are programming it to capitalise on the built-in audience this brings. **PATRICK LONERGAN** investigates the relationship between professional theatre and school audiences, and argues that it's time to get serious about schools.

ONE OF SHAKESPEARE'S GREAT MOMENTS IS LADY MACBETH'S declaration that, had she sworn to do so, she'd have "plucked my nipple" from the "boneless gums" of her child and "dashed the brains out." This powerful statement should reinforce the chaotic mood that pervades *Macbeth* — but the line is rarely delivered to anything other than uncontrollable sniggering, for reasons that aren't difficult to guess. Productions of Shakespeare notoriously attract large numbers of schoolchildren, so that any mention of nipples is almost certain to generate giggling — just as Macbeth's remark about "self-abuse" at the end of Act III will always bring the house down.

This may be demoralising for actors, but it doesn't seem to bother producers

much. As this article goes to press in October 2002, Dublin's Tivoli Theatre has recently closed its version of *Macbeth* — the ninth production of that play to appear in the Republic and Northern Ireland in a 12-month period. And Second Age has announced that, not a year after its last staging of the play, it's undertaking a new production in March 2003, sending that total into the double-digits.

Of the nine productions already staged,

though they included versions by Loose Canon and Blue Raincoat which weren't geared towards schools, the majority were to at least some extent marketed to Leaving Certificate students in the Republic and students taking GCSEs in Northern Ireland. This shows that, as Gate Theatre director Michael Colgan recently put it, there may now be only two ways of producing Shakespeare in Ireland successfully. "You really do have to make sure you

gives theatres a financial safety-netting that few other productions offer. It may sometimes be difficult to decide whether theatre for students should be seen as a necessary evil or an important public service — but it's certainly hard to blame producers for keeping a close eye on the curriculum.

However, it's also hard not to be concerned at the present situation. When we see ten productions of one play in such a



MACBETH NORTHERN STYLE: *The Prime Cut* production

have an Anthony Hopkins in your cast," he told Jeananne Crowley in his *Theatre Talk* interview, "and if you have to have an ordinary cast, you depend on the schools."

Depending on schools is not necessarily a bad thing. It's obvious that students can benefit from seeing the play they're studying. The value of schools to theatres is also clear: the fact that a play on a school curriculum virtually guarantees an audience

short period, we have to ask whether some theatres' provision of a public service has in fact become unimaginative programming. And when we see venues packed, night after night, for productions that are in many cases of questionable quality, it's hard to defend companies against the accusation that they are simply exploiting schoolchildren. It seems an appropriate time, then, to ask whether the

relationship between schools and theatres is working to the benefit of both parties.

In order to consider these issues, I attended three of these productions of *Macbeth*. The first was by Second Age, the Dublin-based company that first toured Ireland in 1990, with the motto of "compulsory texts, compulsive theatre." They toured a production of *Macbeth*, directed by the company's artistic director Alan Stanford, in February and March of 2002, receiving mediocre reviews (the 2003 production will be all-new, the company says.) Although the company is most associated with school audiences, the marketing and production values of the Stanford *Macbeth* showed how it has recently been attempting to broaden its audience to include adults. This approach doesn't seem to have yielded significant results yet: as Nick Costello stated in his *itm* review, the production was visited mainly by "school groups and a smattering of bemused and finally laughing-out-loud adults."

In May, I saw Crooked House Theatre Company's version of the play at Newbridge's Riverbank Arts Centre, where the company is resident. This production attempted to fuse education and theatre in two ways. While presented as professional theatre for a mainstream audience, it was also aimed at schoolchildren, who were invited to participate in a number of workshops devised by the company, including a "state visit" to their classroom by Macbeth. The production also included in its cast a number of trainee and recently qualified actors, giving them valuable experience of professional theatre.

Finally, Prime Cut's September co-production of *Macbeth* with the Lyric Theatre in Belfast was intended mainly for an adult audience. Emma Jordan, Prime Cut's development manager, agreed that, since the play is on the GCSE syllabus, it is

"by its nature of interest and relevance to a school audience." However, the company seemed serious in its attempts to market the production to adults, with Jordan emphasising their desire to "make sure that it was not seen *only* as an educational aid, but of interest to lovers of drama across the board."

Watching these three productions, it quickly became apparent that *Macbeth* is a famously unlucky play because, quite simply, it's very difficult to produce well. Companies often have trouble finding actors with sufficient technical ability to handle the language and verse in any Shakespeare play. This difficulty is compounded in the case of *Macbeth* by the problems contemporary audiences have with the play's emphasis on the supernatural — and its latent misogyny causes problems too. So the play is challenging from a practical and artistic perspective; trying to accommodate the educational needs of students makes the task even more difficult.

An interesting example of this problem was the presentation of the three witches in these productions. When *Macbeth* was written, the presence of witches on stage was disturbing for an audience that regarded the supernatural with more fear than scepticism — but, four centuries later, it's difficult to present these roles without inspiring anything other than laughter. Economics are important too: even with doubling up, paying the wages of three actors who spend little time on stage will seem something of a luxury to many producers. The three companies tackled these problems in different ways. Second Age presented five witches; Prime Cut only had one; and Crooked House kept their witches off-stage, replaying their lines over an audio-system.

A director would never think of increasing or reducing the number of Chekhov's three sisters, so why it's considered per-

missible to do so with Shakespeare's is an interesting question. Second Age's presentation of five witches made little sense from any perspective. It added nothing to the play artistically, and struck me as a rather self-indulgent use of the company's financial resources. The Prime Cut decision to have only one witch at least *made sense*. The production placed a great deal of emphasis on Macbeth's descent into madness: he does not see ghosts, but suf-

the opposite approach, embracing the supernatural element of the play. Using the adage that the fear one imagines will terrify more than the fear portrayed, the company used sound effects to represent the witches. "The student response to the witches' invisibility was interesting," Crooked House artistic director Peter Hussey explains. "Most said they thought it effective and that they preferred this to a physical presentation."



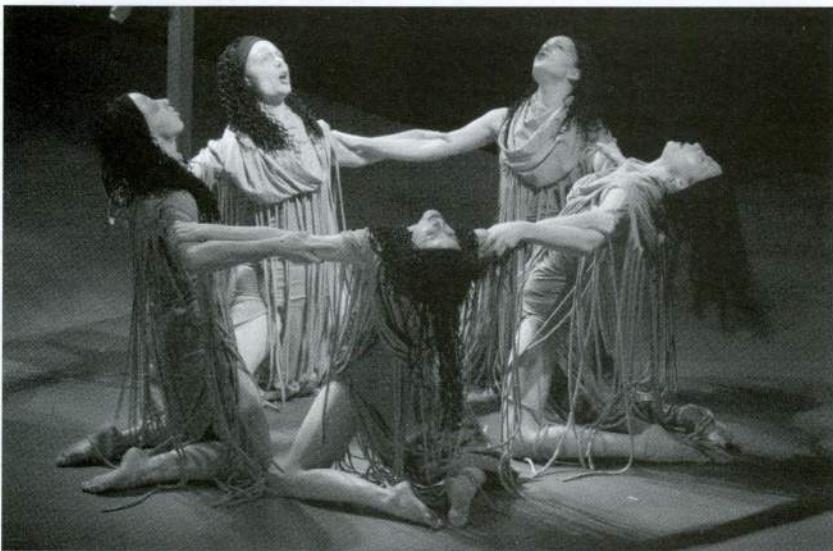
SCOTLAND VIA NEWBRIDGE: *The Crooked House* production

fers from delusions. The presentation of one woman speaking in the voices of three witches reinforced this sense of psychological malaise, making the witch one of many frighteningly disturbed characters in the production. This was a modern rendition of *Macbeth*, with mental instability replacing the supernatural as the play's driving force—an interpretation that may not work for everyone, but which was certainly interesting. Crooked House took

Whatever your feelings about this kind of tinkering with Shakespeare, the problem here is that, when students see anything other than three witches on stage, there is a risk that some of them will become confused. As a result, teachers tend to respond very negatively to productions that do not interpret the text in a straightforward manner—an approach that most companies would find artistically limiting. "Often we are asked specifical-

ly by teachers if there have been any cuts, any 'messing' with the text, any reduction of characters, or indeed any significant doubling-up of characters before they will consider booking," says Hussey. "Some teachers are worried that their students might pick up stray or errant ideas and become confused." Not surprisingly, Hussey is uncomfortable with this. "It seems to imply that there's a single true interpretation of the play — and further-

acting in Irish productions of Shakespeare. This problem is particularly evident in the difficulty with which actors handle verse. As Derek West, a school principal, Second Age board member, and *itm* contributor, points out, "Of all of Shakespeare's plays, *Macbeth* is particularly poetic — you just cannot ignore the verse." Unfortunately, limited resources mean that sometimes a director *must* do so: "When you are operating on a tightrope financially," says West,



FROM DUNSSINANE TO DUBLIN: The Second Age production

more that reading in a controlled classroom atmosphere generates *the truth*." And therein lies the conflict: while there are merits in Hussey's statement, teachers are *not* preparing their students to appreciate drama, but to answer a specific question on the text — so it's hard to criticise those teachers for judging artistic experimentation unfavourably.

Students' needs are further compromised by the often inadequate standard of

"you don't always have the resources you would like — and you will end up with stilted accents occasionally." Stilted accents and other problems with technique were present in all three productions. While there were problems only with a small number of the Prime Cut cast, the difficulties with Crooked House and Second Age significantly undermined both productions.

The standard of movement and deliv-

ery in Crooked House's production was particularly disappointing, due mainly to the decision to cast so many untrained and inexperienced actors. The play's publicity material makes the case that *Macbeth*'s culture is "rigid, hierarchical, and disciplined" and states that this is "explored in the company's choice of movement, acting style and delivery" — but this was an unconvincing explanation for what struck me as faulty technique. Similarly, the delivery of lines was very poor. From the play's first moments, lines were rushed and inaudible, and pronunciation was inadequate. Hussey is quick to defend his actors, pointing out that casting members of Kildare Youth Theatre was in some ways advantageous. "Our actors are used to working with teenagers. They know what makes them focus and they know what kind of stuff comes across as ridiculous, patronising, or untruthful." Crooked House produced, performed, and toured their production on a budget of 3,000; with such financial constraints, casting inexperienced actors was the only way of doing the production, Hussey believes. This is an impressive example of a theatre company utilising its resources carefully — but whether it was a good educational aid is questionable.

Despite having a considerably higher budget, the Second Age production of *Macbeth* also suffered from a lack of attention to the poetic qualities of the play. In part, this was because some of the cast lacked the technical ability required. But this problem was exacerbated by Stanford's directorial style. In a 1996 interview, Stanford described the attitude he has brought to his Second Age productions of Shakespeare: "Whenever I see the phrase 'Shakespeare was the greatest English poet who ever lived,' I just want to scribble all over it," he complained. "The reality is that theatre is a performance form in

WHEN SHALL WE THREE... UH, FIVE... UH, NONE... MEET AGAIN?

The need to innovate clearly pressed on producers of the Scottish play this past year. Read it and weep.

COMPANY: Loose Canon **VENUE/CONTEXT/DATE:** SFX City Theatre, Dublin Fringe Festival, October 2001 **CONCEPT:** Grotowski-esque process- and movement-oriented performance piece. Text pared back. Three actors, 90 minutes. **WITCH COUNT:** Zero **THE CRITICS SAID:** "A strange and beautiful production." Susan Conley, *Irish Times*, 10 October 2001

COMPANY: Blue Raincoat Theatre Company **VENUE/CONTEXT/DATE:** Tivoli Theatre, Dublin Theatre Festival, October 2001 (remount of staging at the Factory Theatre, Sligo in March, 2001) **CONCEPT:** Highly imagistic, visually swirling, little emphasis on text or plot. Nine actors, 75 minutes. **WITCH COUNT:** Three **THE CRITICS SAID:** "Though visually striking, the condensation of the play does lessen its power." Deirdre Green, *The Stage*, 19 October 2001

COMPANY: Second Age Theatre Company **VENUE/CONTEXT/DATE:** National tour, Feb.-Mar. 2002 **CONCEPT:** Robbie Williams video. **WITCH COUNT:** Five **THE CRITICS SAID:** "smacks of condescension" (Nick Costello, *Irish theatre magazine* issue 12)

COMPANY: Crooked House Theatre Company **VENUE/CONTEXT/DATE:** Riverbank Arts Centre, Newbridge and on tour; Apr.-May 2002 **CONCEPT:** Vaguely contemporary **WITCH COUNT:** One (voice-over) **THE CRITICS SAID:** "A production that requires one to make allowances, but offers some enjoyable compensation for its inadequacies." Gerry Colgan, *Irish Times*, 15 April 2002.

which the writer is a contributor, but the actor is the centre of all theatrical experience." There's a lot to agree with in this statement, but it assumes that the actor will have sufficient ability to express the writer's work fully. Few members of Stanford's *Macbeth* cast were up to this task. The poetry was therefore ignored altogether and, to compensate for its absence, Stanford exaggerated the play's theatricality. Three witches became five; movement was too emphatic; the play's moments of humour were stretched until they snapped; and there were moments of downright absurdity, notably with the movement of Birnam Wood. These kinds of weaknesses must surely undermine the quality of the educational experience being received by students.

It's easy to criticise theatre companies, but of course another problem with school productions is that many students set out to be disruptive. It is tempting to assume that bad behaviour occurs only in response to the problems discussed above — but some recent, highly celebrated international productions have been disrupted by schoolchildren. Irish readers will certainly cringe when reading the Royal National Theatre's publication *Observing Hamlet*, which records the production history of the theatre's recent version of *Hamlet* starring Simon Russell Beale. Full of praise for the response of audiences in Denmark, the US, and Serbia, the book is less positive about the production's October 2000 sojourn in Dublin. "At one performance at the Gaiety in Dublin the rowdy behaviour of school groups attracts dozens of complaints from the audience during the interval, and the management has to make an announcement over the tannoy before the second half can begin."

So it's clear that there are a number of problems with theatre for schoolchildren.

Artistic and educational priorities are not always the same — and sometimes may even conflict with each other. Although they are well intentioned, companies like Crooked House — and even Second Age, to an extent — lack the resources to mount high quality productions. And the behaviour of schoolchildren may sometimes be disruptive, whether the production is good or not. What can be done to improve the situation?

Theatre practitioners are not — and should not try to be — educators. The best way to resolve any conflict between a production's artistic and educational priorities is through the intervention of teachers. The cost involved in facilitating such interventions would be prohibitive for most companies. Second Age managed to secure sponsorship from the ESB for a teachers' resource pack for one of their recent productions, but such opportunities are limited. Theatres like the Lyric and the Abbey have dedicated education outreach personnel, who are doing wonderful work — but few other companies in Ireland could afford such a resource.

The example of Crooked House is therefore worth noting. The company offered a range of workshops in support of their production, bridging the gap between their artistic interests and students' educational needs — for a small fee. Such locally-based workshops appear to be the most practical means of enhancing schoolchildren's appreciation of theatre — although there is the problem that they are accessible only by those children whose families can afford to pay the appropriate fees. But if funded appropriately — perhaps at Local Authority level — and devised in consultation with education experts, they could prove the best method of mediating students' experience of theatre. This is an area worth giving more thought to.

What about quality? Derek West puts it clearly: there may be exceptions but, generally, "if the production is good enough, it will hold students' attention." This view is supported by the fact that, of the three productions of *Macbeth* I saw this year, the most successful by far was Prime Cut's. The company treated the play as it would any other script; it set out to do a job and it did it very well—with good production values, strong acting, and a style of direction that challenged audiences' attitudes. The support of the Lyric's financial and staffing resources was undoubtedly a factor in this success—as shown by the Lyric education department's creation of a newspaper called *Glamis News* (which looked uncannily like the Northern Irish tabloid, *The Irish News*) to accompany the production. Headlining with the murder of King Duncan, the newspaper contained a number of articles reporting on incidents in the play, all without hitting any false notes. Such innovative publications may be out of the reach of many other companies, but the approach of doing the best possible production, regardless of the prospective audience, is one that should be widely imitated.

The Crooked House approach was less successful. The production had many problems, and to my eye simply didn't work as a piece of professional theatre: like Macbeth himself, it seemed to suffer from an excess of ambition. But it was still greeted very positively by its audience. The workshops clearly helped, and so did the Newbridge audience's familiarity with the theatre space and many members of the cast. The audience clearly felt at home in their theatre, and conveyed a sense of ownership over the production that seemed more important to them than its artistic inadequacies. With Crooked House's approach, we have a model that

continued on page 144

COMPANY: Travelling Buddha Theatre Company

VENUE/CONTEXT/DATE: The Crypt Arts Centre, Dublin; Jun. 2002 **CONCEPT:** *Macbeth* with witches taking centre-stage. **WITCH COUNT:** Three—who also played most of the other roles. **THE CRITICS SAID:** "Well, it's different." Gerry Colgan, *Irish Times*, 22 August, 2002.

COMPANY: Prime Cut Productions **VENUE/CONTEXT/DATE:**

Co-production with the Lyric Theatre Belfast; Sept. 2002 **CONCEPT:** Contemporary relevance to Northern Ireland. **WITCH COUNT:** One **THE CRITICS SAID:** "A must-see production." Joanna Braniff, *Irish News*, 12 September 2002.

COMPANY: Long Overdue Theatre Company

VENUE/CONTEXT/DATE: English import at the Riverside Theatre, Coleraine, October 2002

CONCEPT: "38 characters, 7 actors, 2 oriental dragons, 1 Zulu war dance, Balinese masks, Aboriginal mysticism, all with a Celtic influence."

WITCH COUNT: One **THE CRITICS SAID:** "Like buses, you wait ages for one production of *Macbeth* to come along, and three arrive at once." Grainne McFadden, *Belfast Telegraph*, 3 October 2002.

COMPANY: Tiny Ninja Theatre Company

VENUE/CONTEXT/DATE: Visiting American production in Belfast Festival at Queen's; Nov. 2002

CONCEPT: Cut-back version of text performed by one man and his miniature ninja figurines.

WITCH COUNT: Three **THE CRITICS SAID:** "brought to life a play which has been butchered one too many times recently." Paul McLean, *The Irish News*, 2 November 2002.

COMPANY: Tivoli Theatre **VENUE/CONTEXT/DATE:**

in-house production; Oct. 2002

CONCEPT: *Macbeth* in a concentration camp; cut back to 90 minutes. **WITCH COUNT:** Zero **THE CRITICS SAID:**

"workmanlike and ultimately accessible," James McMahon, RTÉ Online, 21 October 2002

Lights! Camera!

CALIPO THEATRE COMPANY offers an excerpt from its work-in-progress Action Movie, which was given a staged reading at Draíocht in October and will receive a full production next year.



DARREN THORNTON & MARTIN MAGUIRE: *Action Movie*, as with all Calipo projects, is the result of an intensive period of devising between the company's writers and our ensemble of young actors. As a group, we've always been drawn to projects that allow us to tap into the world of pop culture,

juxtaposing this with the reality of day-to-day contemporary Irish life. In this case, it's the meeting of the blockbuster movie genre with small-town Ireland. ■ Our story is centred around two local filmmakers and their ambition to make a Hollywood action picture set in New York City, but filmed entirely on location in Donabeg, Co. Monaghan. To realise their dream, they enlist the help of the local drama group, the Gardai, the clergy, and several local investors. ■ In this excerpt, self-acclaimed visionary director Steve McLoughlin is looking for an actor to play the leading role of hard-boiled cop Rico Torres. Unable to find a Donabeg local with a convincing Hispanic accent, he seeks out the only non-national in town. ■ One of the production's conventions is the appearance of an American film director speaking to camera on a screen above the stage, acting as Greek chorus; he is the first to speak in this excerpt.

(Action movie music rises, suggesting the arrival of a hero. The actors change the space. From upstage center, smoke spills on-stage and we see the silhouette of a huge man who would appear to be holding a gun. He walks downstage and we see a young Brazilian novice priest, FRANCESCO. A lot smaller than we imagined and carrying an ecclesiastical implement which we took to be a gun. Lights up in church. FRANCESCO hums to himself, removes a candle from the grotto, genuflects at the altar and kneels down to pray. Lights up over Steve and the gang who watch him from upstage. Lights dim on-stage. Onscreen, American film director on location appears.)

DIRECTOR You gotta look at this guy and think 'Is he gonna make an audience feel? guy's gotta wanna be 'em and chicks gotta wanna sleep with 'em... now that's a tall order...

(Picture cuts out. Lights up. STEVE is kneeling beside FRANCESCO at the pew. The others stay back.)

STEVE Do you know Jean Claude Van Damme?

FRANCESCO I don't know this name.

STEVE You don't know Jean Claude Van Damme? Jaysus.

(STEVE realises what he just said.)

STEVE Sorry!

FRANCESCO He is a movie star?

STEVE Yes. Big movie star.

FRANCESCO You want me to see the movie?

(FRANCESCO walks over, genuflects and fusses around the altar. Steve follows him, genuflecting.)

STEVE What?

FRANCESCO (looking at the others) You

want me to come see movie with your friends? Yes?

STEVE No. We... want you to... I want you to be in the movie.

FRANCESCO In the movie cinema?... with you all?

STEVE No! (beat) Okay. (slowly) We... are... making — a — movie — and — we — want — you — to — be — in — it?

(FRANCESCO blesses himself and brings a chalice toward the tabernacle. STEVE blesses himself and follows him.)

FRANCESCO Me? To be in a movie as a big thing I can't understand. Why you want me to be movie star?

STEVE We need... I need... a... foreign... gentleman to play a part. A big part!

FRANCESCO I don't do this.

STEVE Why not?

FRANCESCO I am a novice. I work to be priest... not movie star like Jim Carrey.

STEVE No not like him... Like Jean Claude... eh... like Bruce Willis!

FRANCESCO Ah — Bruce Willis!

STEVE Exactly, now you know.

FRANCESCO No.

STEVE You don't?

FRANCESCO No, I can't do this.

(He walks back toward the altar with STEVE in tow.)

STEVE Why not?

FRANCESCO I cannot say the words like actor. I am having bad language. People who see movie will not understand me.

STEVE But I understand you now. And we can help you with the script. We can help you to improve your English...language.

FRANCESCO You can help teach me... good language?

play excerpt

STEVE Yes!!

FRANCESCO But I am not for movie. I come here to learn about the way of the priest and the way of the community in Ireland...

STEVE And if you do this move you would be very much involved in the whole community. We will have everyone in town taking part.

FRANCESCO Fr. Vincent?... He is acting?

STEVE Well... no. I'm looking for someone younger... And more foreign... that's why I came to you.

FRANCESCO But why? Do you want a priest in the movie?

STEVE Well... actually we want you as a cop.

FRANCESCO I don't understand.

STEVE A cop? A police officer in New York. He's a cop with attitude and he's cleaning up...

FRANCESCO Si no.

STEVE What?

(Francesco looks toward the stained glass window and walks off the altar gesturing Steve to follow him.)

FRANCESCO Cops bad!

STEVE No he's a good cop, he's just in a bad mood that's all.

FRANCESCO (serious) No I see cops... I see Chuck Norris, he is cop. He also is very bad mood. He is having bad sex in the movies, the bad talking, the bad killing... this is not good for me to be doing this in the movies... I am to be Fr. Francesco Delahoia.

STEVE And this will help you. You will learn about... our ways.

FRANCESCO Your ways?

STEVE Yes! This way you get to see the community at work. You'll be part of it. Your bad language will improve, you meet people...

FRANCESCO I meet people all the time.

STEVE Yes, but outside of the church. This will be Fr. Francesco Dela... hoody in the real world. Think of the good work you'll be doing... For yourself and for the people of Donabeg.

FRANCESCO Si. (beat) I must speak to the Monsignor about this... excuse me.

(FRANCESCO blesses himself and walks off the altar shrugging apologetically.)

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New Directions

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

FIACH MACCONGHAIL

(pictured) has been appointed arts policy consultant to the Department of Arts, Sports and Tourism...

ANNE CLARKE is leaving as deputy director of the Gate Theatre at the end of Dec. to set up an independent production and management company. The new position of head of planning has been advertised...

IRENE KERNAN has vacated her position as general manager of the Dublin Theatre Festival, while **MAURA O'KEEFFE** (also managing editor of this magazine) has also left as development and marketing manager. The Festival is currently restructuring... **JOHN KENNEDY** is the new director of Cork European City of Culture 2005... **MARTIN FAHY** has retired from his position as general manager of the National Theatre after 29 years there.



Cork Midsummer Festival has advertised for an artistic director, replacing **TED TURTON**... **SIOBHÁN COLGAN** has left as Project's publicist. The position has been advertised... **GILLY CLARKE** has left Kate Bowe PR, which has acted as the National Theatre's publicity company, for a position in Common Purpose, a management-training organisation.... **BRIDGET WEBSTER** is leaving the position of general manager of CoisCéim Dance Theatre in

December to move to Italy. The position will be advertised... **SARAH DURCAN** has been appointed administrative assistant with Corn Exchange.

YOSHIKO CHIUMA of Daghda Dance Company vacates the position of artistic director in June 2003. The position has been advertised... **MARIANNE KENNEDY**, previously general manager of Taibhdhearc na Gallimhe, has been appointed general manager of Siamsa Tire. Meanwhile **BRIDGET BHREATHNACH** has filled the vacant position at Taibhdhearc.

DIANE JACKSON has joined Storytellers as assistant producer. She worked as administrator with Bedrock over the summer... **TAMBRA DILLON** is leaving as general manager of Temple Bar Properties in mid-Dec to return to New York. Her position has been advertised and an appointment will be made before the end of the year... **JOE DEVLIN**, artistic director of Rattlebag Theatre Company, has been appointed artistic director of Focus Theatre.

MADELINE BOUGHTON has left her position as publicist with Draíocht to become arts officer with the British Council. **NICOLA MURPHY**, previously PR and sponsorship executive of Opera Theatre Company, has been appointed the new marketing, press, and PR manager at Draíocht.... **RICHARD WAKELY** has been appointed commissioner of a festival of Chinese culture in Ireland (expected to take place in 2003) and a festival of Irish culture in China (scheduled for 2004).

AUDREY BEHAN has left as general manager of Barabbas...the company. The posi-

tion has been advertised... TEAM have advertised for a new general manager. **JACKIE RYAN** will leave the position in the new year... **YVONNE CORSCADDEN** is the new administrator of Druid Theatre Company... Barnstorm's artistic director **PHILIP HARDY** is taking a year's sabbatical, during which general manager **VINCENT DEMPSEY** will act as artistic director. **MAEVE BUTLER** is the company's new administrator... **FRANK GEARY** has departed as general manager of Irish Modern Dance Theatre. An appointment will be made in the near future.

CLAUDIA WOOLGAR (pictured previous page), previously an international theatre production manager and producer, has been named festival manager of the Kilkenny Arts Festival, replacing **MAUREEN KENNELLY**, who stepped down after this year's Festival... **MARY BOLAND** has been appointed executive director of Red Kettle Theatre Company. Boland's former position as director of children's programmes for Little Red Kettle will be filled in Jan. when she assumes her new duties.

As part of the restructuring of Riverside Theatre at the University of Ulster, **ANDREA MONTGOMERY**, formerly with Westcliffe on Sea Theatre in Essex, has been appointed to the new position of artistic director... **DEIRDRE FALVEY**, formerly acting arts editor of *The Irish Times*, has been appointed permanently to the position... **DUBBLEJOINT PRODUCTIONS** have advertised for an administrator, coordinator, outreach worker, and publicist... **HELENE HUGEL** is leaving Púca Puppets in Dec. to pursue an independent career.



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opinions & overviews

CONTEMPORARY IRISH DRAMA AND CULTURAL IDENTITY

BY MARGARET LLEWELLYN-JONES

Bristol: *Intellect Books*, 2002

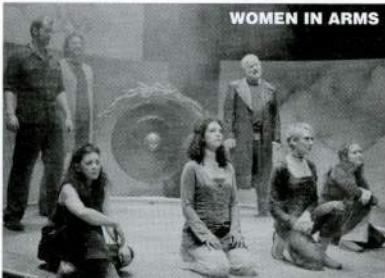
Reviewed by Victor Merriman

CONTEMPORARY IRISH DRAMA AND Cultural Identity is a welcome addition to the growing list of books on Irish theatre and Irish cultural studies. In it, Margaret Llewellyn-Jones seeks to develop a theoretically complex response to contemporary meanings of Irishness, and to use that response in mapping contemporary Irish theatre. This is a most ambitious task, and in working through it, Llewellyn-Jones offers the reader many challenges, provocations, and illuminations. As, in this case, "Irish" embraces the Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland, and the Irish diaspora, the frame of reference demands complex, yet flexible critical tools, and the book's introduction, "Staging Ireland," sets out boldly to forge them.

Llewellyn-Jones suggests convincingly that early contests between W.B. Yeats and the Fay brothers over content and aesthetic practices continue to be played out among the ongoing concerns of Irish theatre. She cites Katharine Worth to foreground her sense that the meeting of metropolitan European theatre with the apparently postcolonial strategies of representation which characterise the dramas of the Irish stage produces complex dramaturgical effects which elude hard and fast categorisation. Llewellyn-Jones acknowledges "the vexed question of Irish drama's postcolonial status," and

this is important, not least because there is no general agreement in the literature (notably Crow and Banfield, and Gilbert and Tompkins) that Irish theatre "qualifies" as postcolonial, but also because many Irish critics dispute this classification from a variety of perspectives. Llewellyn-Jones' disciplined engagement with areas of contestation or dispute appears at first as a post-structuralist's commitment to problematising received ways of seeing. As she develops her argument, she applies it in reading plays — and films — in and of themselves, and in relation to the critical debates which have developed around them. The openness of her critical method results in a compelling broadening of that which constitutes the post-colonial, and a convincing defence of the case for reading Irish theatre as postcolonial cultural production.

At its most effective, this critical stance enables exciting and original readings of plays and contemporary debates around theatre and culture. "Madonna, Magdalen, and Matriarch" is a consistently fine essay, with an impressive scope. Beginning with "the representation of three female stereotypes in [Tom] Murphy's *Bailegangaire*," the argument develops around suggestive readings of three plays, "all shown in London in 1997 ... all directed by women." For Llewellyn-Jones, *Portia Coughlan*, *Women on the Verge of HRT*, and *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* "deploy theatrical space as a site for the performance of desire." The critical voice here is strong, authoritative, and original, making good use of the theoreti-



cal matrix, and tightening the focus with the help of work by Julia Kristeva and Anna McMullan. Add in serious consideration of Anne Devlin's work, and of Mary Elizabeth Burke-Kennedy's *Women in Arms*, and the reader is rewarded with a comprehensive chapter on women in Irish theatre, both on and off stage. "Politics, Memory, and Fractured Form" is most notable for a robust defence of Frank McGuinness' *Mutabilitie*, grounded in the insights of, among others, Edward Said and Richard Kearney.

Throughout the book, the themed approach enables the bringing together of plays not usually discussed in the same breath: Murphy's *Famine* and Enda Walsh's *Disco Pigs*, for example. The merits of the theoretical framework — its ample diversity, flexibility and intellectual robustness — are not always deployed to full effect. There is a tension throughout *Contemporary Irish Drama and Cultural Identity* between critical sophistication and schematic analysis. Where the schema wins out, it limits the author's discussion of the plays to little more than plot summary, and leaves the reader wondering at an apparent reluctance to carry through with the suggestive potential of her method. On a related note, the reader is all too frequently distracted by errors such as the misnaming of plays: *Beside* (sic) *The Bog of Cats*, *Behold* (sic) *The Sons of Ulster...* On page 24 we are told that *Translations'* Yolland "is probably killed by the Doalty brothers." Tell that to the Donnelly Twins!

Such errors compromise the authority of the critical voice and need to be addressed in a second printing. Even if it doesn't fully deliver on all its considerable promise, Llewellyn-Jones' work asks necessary and challenging questions, and offers many thoughtful reflections and

insights, within a rich theoretical matrix. It is a critical work which will engage and reward those interested in Irish drama, theatre practices and cultural studies.

Victor Merriman lectures on contemporary Irish theatre at the Dundalk I.T.

**RIA MOONEY: THE LIFE AND TIMES
OF THE ARTISTIC DIRECTOR OF THE
ABBEY THEATRE, 1948-1963**

BY JAMES MCGLONE

*McFarland and Company, Inc. Publishers:
Jefferson, North Carolina, and London, 2002*

Reviewed by Thomas Conway

WHEN BEGINS MODERN IRISH THEATRE—1953 and the founding of the Pike Theatre? Or '55, and the production there of *Godot*? Or '59, when Keane and Murphy begin their assault on the dramatic and other pieties? Regardless when, and despite the fact that the era preceding our own gave us a staggering amount of new writing, it is more or less ignored. Nothing of the plays after *Plough*, bar one-off revivals by Druid. We are not yet done, it seems, demolishing the totems of the land, the church and the Irish language by which the era is known.

Ria Mooney belongs to that era, and on the face of it gave colossal service to its theatre. By my own cursory count, as an actor she originated roles in 56 new plays at the Abbey between 1924 and 1948. On her then-appointment as resident producer she oversaw 61 new plays until her resignation in 1963, bringing to the public new work by such writers as Denis Johnston, M.J. Molloy, Walter Macken, and for the first time, Hugh Leonard and Brian Friel. She spent four years in jazz-era New York with the pioneering Eva le Gallienne, to which the Wall Street Crash put paid,

opinions & overviews

and the early- to mid-'30s with the boys at the Gate. In 1935 she took over the Abbey school, and in 1944 she gave the first incarnation to that venerable institution, the Gaiety School of Acting. An impressive roll-call of actors passed under her tutelage: Burgess Meredith, Ray MacAnally, Joan O'Hara, Jackie McGowran, Anna Manahan, and more.

So much for the facts, what about the reputation? Damned with faint praise by her contemporaries, just so subsequently by association with Blythe. Ernest Blythe dominates the era at the Abbey, for the drive with which, as managing director, he tried to make it Irish-speaking. Mooney had no Irish and so felt herself, on the rare occasion when report is made of what she said, a stop-gap until an Irish-speaker would replace her, an undermining insecurity under which to work for 15 years. She is judged now as a functionary of Blythe, as a civil servant to this ex-government minister. Her status may be gathered by the position of her portrait in the Abbey building — outside dressing rooms two and three, for none but the actors to ignore.

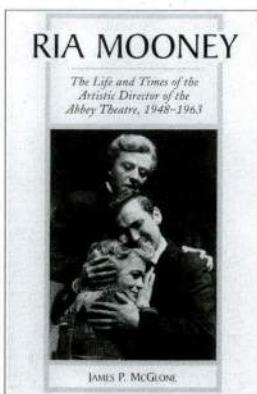
James McGlone, an academic from New Jersey, means to make redress. He claims a threefold set of objectives at the outset: to rehabilitate the reputation, to account for Mooney's teaching and directing methods, and to contextualise her work in a social and historical setting. Maddeningly, the execution sets off alarm bells from the outset, when he nominates Mooney "artistic director" in his title, a position she never held (the position didn't formally exist

until 1969). It quickly becomes clear his sources are thin; namely, the usual suspects of Holloway, Hogan, and Hunt (indeed, the executors of whom he should hope don't read this book too closely) with more recent studies ignored.

Deriving from Terence Brown's serviceable *A Social and Cultural History*, the history takes the paranoid view that a rump Anglo-Irish coterie dictated to artistic standards in Dublin at this time, a coterie which Mooney is supposed to have aspired to and was forever excluded from, and so on *ad nauseum*. He relies on newspaper reviews almost exclusively as a means of assessing the plays, feels aggrieved when Mooney does not come off well or is accused of populism, but provides little evidence that he has read the plays. Apart from Mooney's taking on something of the aura of a governess, we get little idea of her teaching methods, and no idea how

she structured the teaching day. We hear her speak about the primacy of the writer and that no other elements should distract from the writer's work; we learn her blocking was influenced by the principles of classical art; a nod is given to the fact that players rehearsed two hours a day; but we learn nothing of what underpinned her work as a director — theory, school of thought, foreign and native influences, or otherwise.

Indeed McGlone's sensational prose-style cannot cope with the more salient questions, namely, the influence she had, if any, in the selection of plays and on their subsequent shape, whether she took note of developments abroad and was interest-



ed in producing foreign work (the record is not altogether clear that she was): in sum, what resistance she put up to Blythe and indeed, whether she thought of herself foremost as an actor who had to take on organisational functions. A salutary warning, at the very least, resides for us in the fact that an era which gave itself so completely to new and indigenous writing now sees those plays ignored.

Mooney's own autobiography (a 117-page document published in a marginal journal) forms the spine of McGlone's account, which is not so much hagiography as a summation by Counsel for the Defense. Mooney's testimony is, in this sense, left unexamined. This autobiography tantalises with high-points, among which are her creation of the role of Rosie Redmond in O'Casey's *Plough and The Stars* (she claims not to have known then how a prostitute made her living, and was therefore all the more concerned on Rosie's behalf); her direction of the first London production of O'Casey's *Red Roses for Me* in 1946; the award of third prize for *Plough* at the Paris Internationale in 1955, after the Peking Opera and the Berliner Ensemble; and the playing of Mary Tyrone in the first European production of O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey in 1959*.

The lows are left to the record to suggest, among which are the move to the Queen's after the burning of the Abbey in 1951; the year's break from directing in 1960-61; and her resignation and replacement by Tomás MacAnna in 1963, due in part, perhaps, to overwork. But it is especially poignant to learn of the moment in 1948 when Mooney looked three distinct offers in the face: to teach at the Ensemble Theatre in London, to form with Burgess Meredith a theatre company in Hollywood, or to take up as resident producer at the Abbey. By her own account she

chose to serve her country, when such service meant something. In hindsight she chose obscurity. There is enough on record to suggest she should get a better hearing, certainly better than McGlone gives here.

Thomas Conway is a Cork-based freelance director. He would like to thank Mairead Delaney, archivist of the National Theatre, for assistance in researching this review.

TALKING ABOUT TOM MURPHY

EDITED BY NICHOLAS GRENE

Dublin: Caryfort Press, 2002

Reviewed by Patrick Lonergan

IN OCTOBER 2001, TRINITY COLLEGE hosted an academic symposium to mark the Murphy Festival at the Abbey and the acquisition by Trinity library of Murphy's papers. This book publishes the proceedings of that seminar, and also includes an introduction by Fintan O'Toole, a transcript of the public interview Murphy gave to Michael Billington during the Festival, photographs from the Abbey productions, and reproductions of material from Trinity's Murphy archive.

Edited by Nicholas Grene, the book's purpose is to stimulate debate about Murphy's work, and it achieves this aim admirably. Generally informal in tone, the six papers it presents are accessible without being simplistic. This publication does not offer a definitive analysis of Murphy's work, but identifies aspects of it that deserve more attention. The speculative tone of the material is reinforced by the presentation of the papers in dialogic form, with one scholar offering an interpretation of Murphy's work to which a second scholar then replies. This structure works well, emphasising the value of academic debate while high-

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lighting the potential of Murphy's work to yield interesting lines of enquiry.

The papers should satisfy both academic and general readers. They open with Christopher Morash and Lionel Billington's consideration of *A Whistle in the Dark* and *Famine* in the context of Irish society in the 1950s and '60s. Morash's discussion of the importance of amateur drama during that period is particularly valuable. Following this is the highlight of the collection, Alexandra Poulain's close reading of two of Murphy's most difficult plays, *The Sanctuary Lamp* and *The Morning after Optimism*. Poulain, who teaches at University of Paris IV, has for some time been one of Murphy's most perceptive critics, so it's good to see her work being brought to a wider Irish audience. Her reading of the plays is given a valuable theoretical grounding by Shaun Richards. Nicholas Grene and Declan Kiberd end the collection with their exploration of the role of storytelling as therapy in *The Gigli Concert* and *Bailegangaire*, identifying some surprising parallels between two of Murphy's best known works.

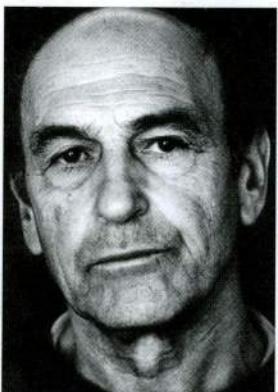
The interview with Billington is a useful source of information about the playwright. His admission that the vitriolic Irish response to *The Sanctuary Lamp* influenced his decision to quit writing in the late 1970s is interesting in many ways, not only shedding light on his work, but also resonating with such contemporary events as the *Hinterland* controversy in February 2002. And it's interesting to read that, as a young writer, Murphy felt that "anything Irish is a pain in the arse," and instead

sought out the work of Lorca and Williams. The value of the interview is its inclusion of spontaneous comments by Murphy that would appear differently in a written piece of autobiography. His statement that he wrote about the Great Famine from a sense that it had caused the Irish mentality to "become twisted" is brutally honest, and his off-the-cuff remark that "any sensible fair-minded person is a socialist" offers an interesting perspective from which to consider his work.

The difficulties with the book are its omissions. Grene points out that only a small number of articles and one full-length book have been produced on Murphy. Given that one purpose of this publication is to rectify that situation, a bibliography would have been valuable. And while the inclusion of Billington's interview is commendable, it draws attention to the absence from print of the excellent papers delivered at the Abbey during

the Murphy Festival by Frank McGuinness, Fintan O'Toole, and Thomas Kilroy. This is not something to criticise Grene for, but perhaps this book's success will encourage the Abbey to bring the material being generated in its ongoing series of public discussions into print.

This publication is well written and elegantly produced. That it was produced and published within nine months of the original festival and seminar is an admirable achievement by Grene and Carysfort Press. *Talking about Tom Murphy* is an excellent example of the potential of the Irish academy to produce work of relevance to a wide audience.



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ATTABOY, MR. SYNGE!

by Deirdre Kinahan

Civic Theatre Tallaght

7-24 Aug. 2002; reviewed 24 Aug.

BY MAURICE DUNPHY

EXPERIMENTING WITH SYNGE AS spoof might seem like a great idea but failing to seriously consider theme, content and ultimate aims, can easily degenerate into fluff. Such is the case with *Attaboy, Mr. Synge!*, written by Deirdre Kinahan and directed by Maureen Collander. The play was originally a one-woman show titled *Summer Fruits*, and performed by Kinahan last year for Tall Tales Theatre Company, which she runs with Collander. The play, here expanded for a cast of five and produced by the Civic Theatre, runs out of steam early on and delivers little of what it promises.

The play opens as the Athboy Society Players, an amateur drama troupe, prepares for its 25th anniversary production, *The Playboy of the Western World*. With two weeks until the opening, the cast still don't know their lines and are continually skipping rehearsals, there's been no full run-through of the play, and the set remains unfinished. The atmosphere is sharp and tetchy as producer and regular leading lady Margery (Ruth Hegarty), incompetent director Raymond (Donal Beecher), dogsbody Flora (Gina Moxley) and new-recruit Conor (Sean McDonagh) meet up to rehearse. The Players' great reputation — entertaining the Midlands for an uninterrupted 25 years — is in great jeopardy. Luckily (they think), self-proclaimed experimental theatre aficionado Denise O'Byrne appears and volunteers to stage-manage. With her tall theatrical tales, she soothes and woos the Players until she clandestinely takes control.

Poor old Synge looks set for a whipping until Margery (who's also playing Widow Quin) exposes Denise as a fraud and demands her expulsion. Denise quits as stage manager, but secretly designs the entire production, resulting in a soft-textured, rustic-chic setting and costumes resembling Peter Brook's *Mahabarata* phase: Old Mahon in African King's robe, Christy in red groin-pouch, and Pegeen in powder-blue tutu. The production lurches unsurely towards opening night but just when they seem to be home and dry, disaster strikes. The actress playing Pegeen (who we never see on stage) is crippled



CULTURE CLASH: Attaboy, Mr. Synge!

during rehearsal of the Kama Sutra-esque wooing scenes and is taken to hospital. Denise's chance to fulfill her true ambition is realized, and she plays Pegeen dressed as the Sugar Plum Fairy.

Attaboy presented numerous, potential-

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ly hilarious opportunities to explore the wide array of attitudes and experiences within contemporary theatre. Although set in the amateur arena, it directly paralleled opposing movements in the professional theatre. Pitting the notion of safe and unchallenging "theatre for the local folks" directly against experimental theatre, the holy versus the unholy, should have resulted in truly biting satirical comment. This, however, demands an unswerving attention to, and dismantling of, the ironies that emerge. Yet rather than pursue this course, Kinahan chose to dodge these obvious collisions. When such opportunities arose, she settled instead for cheap and obvious gags. These diverted us from the issue rather than engaged us and what should have been insightful and hilarious ended up tediously unfunny.

Cast and director did what they could to give life to this weak, albeit ticklish, idea, but it was all quite hopeless. *Attaboy* is a vehicle purely for Kinahan, who played Denise completely over the top, putting more energy into her acting than she had into her plot. The latter degenerated rapidly, going everywhere and nowhere in the process, so much so that the actors need not have bothered returning for the second act.

The rest of the cast worked well, despite the lack of development of character and story, which remained two-dimensional throughout. Beecher and Moxley made the most of their parts, hitting the right pitch and tempo required, giving their characters more depth than the writer could muster.

Karen Weaver's set design was initially sparse and effective, consisting of the usual community centre oddments — the bingo machine, an assortment of posters and bits and pieces for the impending theatre production. Scene by scene, however, the "production" set was added until, by the final scene, the *Playboy* set was in place

for the opening performance. Weaver also designed the excellent costumes, beginning with normal, everyday garb but gradually encompassing Denise's wildly theatrical ideas. Kevin Treacy's lighting design complemented perfectly the gradually developing "production" set and came fully into its own in the final, opening night scene.

If the point of *Attaboy* was to expose pretentiousness in the professional theatre, it failed at the outset because of Kinahan's choice to set it in the amateur arena. There was no attempt to look inwards and examine important issues in the professional realm. Although it felt like a cheap shot at the amateurs, it begs an answer to a larger, more serious question: what's so great about much of the "superior" professional theatre, with its bland, worn-out, threadbare clichés, particularly if this is an example of its merit?

Maurice Dunphy is a community arts worker with Tallaght Partnership.

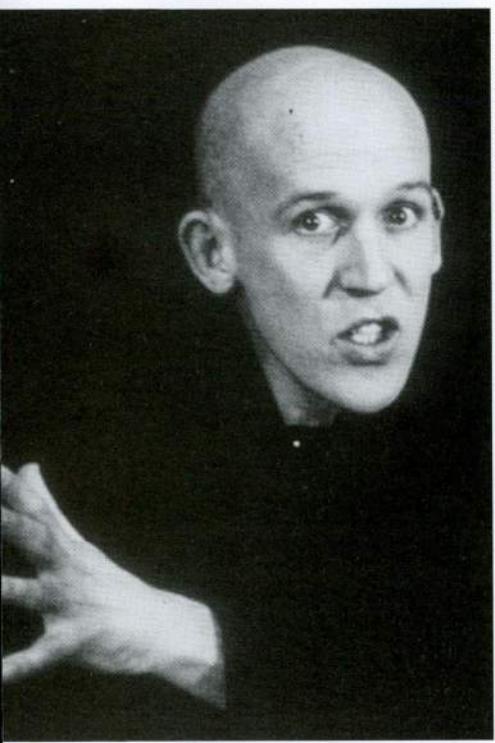
THE BECKETT TRILOGY: MOLLOY, MALONE DIES, and THE UNNAMABLE

Gare St. Lazare Players

On tour; performance at the Pavilion Theatre, Dun Laoghaire reviewed on
21 Nov. 2001 BY GERRY DUKES

BECKETT'S POSTWAR SET OF THREE NOVELS (he actively disliked the term "trilogy") finally appeared in English in 1959. Since then they have been mined by actors and other theatre practitioners to provide texts for readings, performances and animations of various kinds. Max Wall and Ronald Pickup, Harold Pinter and Jack MacGowran have all visited the novels and derived performance pieces from them. The present reviewer worked with the actor Barry McGovern to distil the

script for *I'll Go On* — McGovern's one-man show — from the novels. That show was first presented by the Gate Theatre for Dublin Theatre Festival in 1985 and has had numerous revivals around the world.



TALESPINNER: The Beckett Trilogy

MARILYN KINGWILL

Nor have the novels been neglected in other languages. There have been many French and German versions — there was gossip some years ago concerning a Danish pirated version of *I'll Go On* but whether it was ever played is not known to me. It is unsurprising that the three novels have been so relentlessly quarried because the

texts cry out for performance, given that they are all first-person narratives. Making a performance text from the novels requires fairly simple but agonising editorial decisions about what to leave out because the novels contain Beckett's plenty.

There are those who will object to the notion of "plenty" in relation to Beckett, that well-known minimalistic miserabilist, but those poor souls probably move their lips and use their forefingers when they read. A Beckett sentence, in a play or a novel — or even in his luminous correspondence — is a resonant language event. "Fortunately she was not the first naked woman to have crossed my path, so I could stay, I knew she would not explode." (*First Love*, 1973). No one but Beckett could so precisely register the contamination of innocence by experience and, simultaneously, drive home the fatuity of the process.

The Gare St. Lazare version has been evolving for some years. *Molloy* was first seen in Dublin by your reviewer when it played at the Andrews Lane Theatre during Dublin Theatre Festival some years ago. I saw it having hot-footed it from the Gaiety where Robert Lepage's solo *Hamlet, Elsinore*, was playing. The contrast between the two shows could not have been starker. The Gaiety was all high-cost technology, cool gimmicks and *coup de théâtre*. Andrews Lane had a solo actor on a bare stage in dim light. Shakespeare did not get a look in at the Gaiety, but Beckett was staged and present a few blocks away. Less is always more, and more rewarding too.

Since then Conor Lovett (who plays) and Judy Hegarty (who directs) have added *Malone Dies* and, most recently, *The Unnamable* so that they can now tour three Beckett shows: *Molloy* or *Malone Dies* or all three segments together. That last is the

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optimum way to see this version, which is a triumph of understated stylistic coherence and a most efficient vehicle for Beckett's matchless prose. An actor, whose on-stage mobility is greatly constrained, dressed in Beckettian but serviceable greatcoat and hat, under lights that are far short of showy, speaks his text. It is as simple as that. What makes the tripartite show absolutely compelling is the quality and range of the actor's speaking of that text.

Conor Lovett is from Cork and his voice has all the mellifluousness we have come to expect from that place. Beckett can be lyrical and Lovett can deliver that lyricism with honeyed ease. But Beckett was a writer who was committed to slitting yes's throat with no's knife, to the pitiless exposure of the shabby repertoire of rhetoric and evasiveness that is the ordinary business of language. Again and again in the three novels Beckett deliberately disrupts his text by changing register and thus indicts the medium he is using on the charge that its main task is to mislead us.

Molloj, who has ended up somehow in his mother's room, wonders if she was already dead when he arrived or simply dead "enough to bury." This sounds like a gruesome joke (which it is) but it also acknowledges the scarifying fact that the dead cannot be buried, they haunt us as we will haunt those who survive us. Dying Malone tritely muses that he will die on a day like any other day, "only shorter." That comparative adjective is no's knife used to cut the tripes from the notion that consolation is available for the inconsolable. Language is merely a poultice uselessly applied to life's disease.

Lovett can encompass all of Beckett's signature effects without apparent effort. He can move from craven wheedling to spitting vituperation and back again without moving from the spot. His vocal per-

formance is a true instrument for Beckett's supple prose.

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

THE BOOK OF EVIDENCE

by John Banville, in an adaptation

by Alan Gilsean, and

LESSNESS by Samuel Beckett

Kilkenny Arts Festival

9-19 August 2002; *The Book of Evidence* reviewed 15 Aug. at the Watergate Theatre and *Lessness* reviewed 16 Aug. at Kilkenny Courthouse BY GERRY MORAN

THE BOOK OF EVIDENCE AND LESSNESS — chalk and cheese really — one blustering, swaggering and verbose, the other still, stark and sparse. *The Book of Evidence* is a grandiloquent monologue; lyrical and poetic in parts, this torrent of words is a triumph for Declan Conlon. Staccato almost in its delivery, *Lessness* depends on stillness and silence and the starkness of its prose. It is a *tour de force* for its terseness, and no less a triumph for Olwen Fouéré.

Chalk and cheese. Banville versus Beckett. Banville mining the lurid and turbulent imagination of the demented Freddy Montgomery, inspired by the story of the real-life murderer Malcolm McArthur. Beckett mining the bleak barren landscape, yet again, of his own imagination.

The Kilkenny Arts Festival production of *The Book of Evidence* opens with Freddy Montgomery in the dock, holding his book of evidence under his arm. He is addressing the judge and us, the audience; his judge and jury also. He is not so much defending as explaining himself — who he is, what he is, and therefore why he did what he did — that is, brutally bludgeon an innocent servant girl to death with a blunt weapon. "My Lord," he begins,



FACING JUDGE AND JURY: Declan Conlon in *The Book of Evidence*

"When you ask me to tell the court in my own words, this is what I shall say. I am kept locked up here like some exotic animal, last survivor of a species they had thought extinct."

And that precisely is what Freddy Montgomery becomes throughout the play — an exotic, egocentric, eccentric creature who for reasons we never quite understand has committed murder most foul. Except I never saw him as "locked up," because nothing in Joe Vanek's set gave the impression of prison or incarceration. But we'll get to that later.

In the meantime Freddy explains himself extremely well. Words are his *métier*.

His forte. He has an ear for words and accents as in the wonderful mimicry of his mother — a matriarchal, austere ex-alcoholic. Similarly the mimicking of his wealthy neighbour whose purchasing of his mother's valuable paintings was, we are led to believe, gross exploitation and perhaps the prime reason why he is incarcerated behind bars for murder.

The Book of Evidence — as with any book of evidence — is all about words. In this case the words flow non-stop. They enchant, they captivate, they mesmerise, but they never quite explain why this arrogant, perceptive, intelligent young man behaved so abominably. Which, in a way,

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is what makes him so intriguing and such a fascination.

Yet as charmed and enchanted as we are by Freddy's verbosity and insightfulness and black humour — and there is much humour in the play — we never warm to him. And we never warm to him because the one word we want to hear — "sorry" — never enters his vocabulary.

Freddy Montgomery remains a cold

standing all the time. It was distracting whenever he walked to the back of the stage — to his prison cell, which looked more like a hotel room than a place of incarceration. It was also difficult to hear him when he was at the back of the stage, even from the third row. The clear problem for Gilsenan was how to swell the stage of the Watergate with a one-man show.

To achieve this he introduced numerous



IS LESS MORE? Olwen Fouéré in Beckett's *Lessness*

fish. Different. Disdainful. Aloof. Like his mother. Perhaps a little more of the milk of human kindness, of his mother's milk and all would have been so different — for him, for his family and, in particular, for the heartbroken family of his innocent victim.

Conlon stands for much of the performance, but one wished he could have stayed

and distracting theatrical aids — lights that occasionally descended from above to create a restaurant atmosphere or public house ambience, or what looked like a line of dry cleaning (presumably the various exhibits from the trial.) Conlon is a superb performer and does not require such frills. The production would have been more

COLIN HOGAN

successful with him standing before us with a few subtle lighting cues from Tina McHugh. He is certainly robust and powerful enough to carry it off. The presence also of a small grotto, containing a statue, some soft toys and childhood mementos at the front of the stage was also a distraction, a mawkish and melodramatic graveside memorial to the victim.

Lessness ran for five performances in several venues around Kilkenny: Rothe House (one of the finest preserved 16th-century merchant houses in Ireland); Kilkenny's courthouse; and the new hall in Ballytobin, Callan, ten miles from Kilkenny city.

I was glad to see the production in the courthouse, a most unique and appropriate location, for it was once the main venue for theatrical productions in 18th-century Kilkenny. Appropriate also because where better to judge this theatrical experiment? Who exactly was in the dock — war, the play, the actress, the production, Beckett — or all of them?

Its text is also a book (or rather a paragraph) of evidence, repeated almost ad nauseam throughout the performance's 50-minute duration. The programme tells us that *Lessness* was written by Beckett in 1969 in French under the title *Sans* ("Without"), that it is one of Beckett's most concentrated and potent works, and that it has been seen as an anti-war allegory. Having seen it, I have no doubt of the latter. Consider the following lines, which are repeated, in a variety of sequences, throughout the play: "Ash grey... little body only upright... heart beating... face grey... no sound... no breath... all sides same grey... earth... sky... body... ruins... scattered ruins." Ground Zero immediately came to mind.

Fouéré, thanks to her deftness and lightness of foot seemed to appear magically before us in a long, flowing, pinkish-white

satin gown designed by Catherine Fay. The costume generated an interesting contrast to the bleak, black-and-white images that would emanate from her statuesque, stork-like image.

And what a clever use of the court-room's microphones by director Judy Hegarty-Lovett. There was no real need for amplification: the room is small and intimate. From the start, however, as Fouéré stooped ever so slightly towards the mike to give her evidence or simply to say her lines — whichever — it was the Nuremberg Trials all over again.

I was particularly impressed by the fact that Fouéré stood in court — *stood* on the furniture — on the judge's bench even. Ah, such contempt! Such a statement if she never opened her mouth. And what a performance. I have had my bellyful of Samuel Beckett's bleakness and despair, yet thanks to the imaginative location, the wonderful performance, and the excellent designs, I enjoyed the production immensely — but wondered how much that enjoyment would vary according to the location. It would be interesting to know how the production fared in the more traditional setting of the Royal National Theatre in London, where it travelled after Kilkenny.

*Gerry Moran lives in Kilkenny and is a teacher. (*Lessness* played to mixed reviews at the Royal National Theatre; and was also staged at the ESB Dublin Fringe Festival—ed.)*

THE CALL by Tara Maria Lovett

Peri-Talking Theatre Company

The Crypt, Dublin;

15–27 Jul. 2002; reviewed 26 Jul.

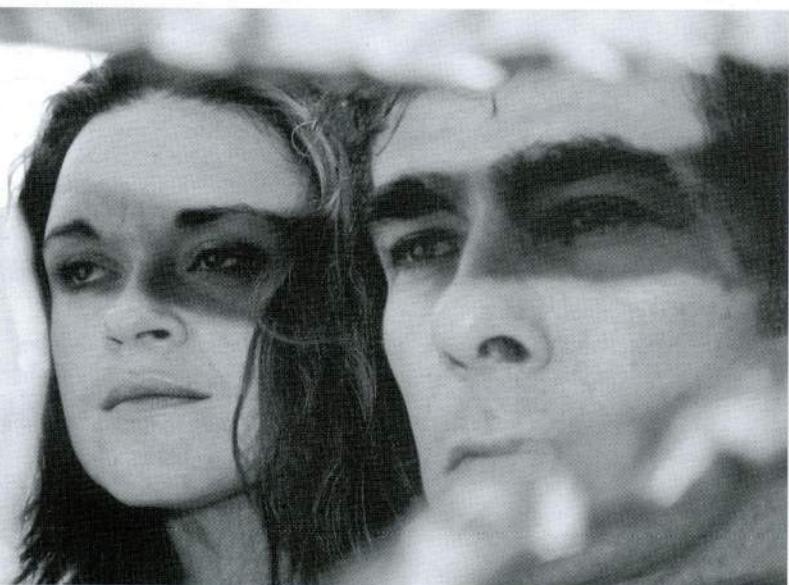
BY PATRICK LONERGAN

ARRIVING TO WATCH TARA MARIA LOVETT'S *The Call*, we realise that we have entered a

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human body. The room pulses with red lighting as we take our seats around a ribcage, a pile of stones at its centre representing a heart. The owner of this body, Maddie — played by Emma Colohan — emerges and, prompted by a mysterious “voice” played by Declan Mills, she describes how her heart has been turned to stone. Taking us from her childhood to young adulthood in a series of vignettes, Maddie explains how she has struggled to

it to herself. Sexuality and desire are the play’s main subjects, but they are never spoken about directly, instead represented in code, analogy — and silence. We begin with the romantic declarations of Scarlett and Rhett in *Gone With The Wind* and, in a disturbingly funny scene, with the man who sexually abuses Maddie, promising to take her horse-riding, but first making her “practise,” sitting on his knee. As a teenager, Maddie observes her teacher’s



HEART OF STONE: Emma Colahan and Declan Mills in *The Call*

understand herself and her relationships with a number of different men, all performed very entertainingly by Michael Fitzgerald.

The paralysis being dramatised is not so much one of the heart as the mouth: we are not witnessing the development of Maddie’s sexuality, but her ability to articulate

struggles to name the parts of the female body, displayed before her on a wallchart; and in adulthood, she wrestles with the unspeaking insistence of a soldier and the inarticulate banalities of a dope-smoking hippie from Dunshaughlin. The play’s conclusion appears to be that Maddie’s ability to express herself as a sexual person

might be based in her spirituality. This suggestion comes from her dialogue with "The Voice" — which, intriguingly, is the voice of a man.

Lovett is dealing with some very big issues here — sexuality, spirituality and gender — and it's encouraging that she faces all of their contradictions and complexities. While it is usual for Irish writers to mockingly tackle the issue of sexual suppression as a by-product of Catholic guilt, Lovett's character is witty and likeable, desperate to protect herself, and in pain from her inability to express her desires. Importantly, although this play is based mainly in the monologue form, it is extremely carnal. The audience, after all, is in a human body, and our attention is consistently turned to the physical. The beating of a heart represented by two stones being thrust together, the movement of the actors — even the heat of the Crypt itself — mean that we are made as aware of the body as the spirit by this play. The monologue form is very common in Irish drama, but Lovett's use of it in so physical a manner draws attention to the disembodied nature of that form as it is used on the Irish stage, implying that if Ireland has become a secular society, it is not yet comfortably a sexualised society.

All of this is great — but, of course, it's a lot to squeeze into 75 minutes, and it seemed that Maddie's struggle to articulate herself was partially a dramatisation of the author's struggle to express herself in the theatrical form. Lovett seems to know what she's good at — her language is poetic but for the most part well controlled, and for a writer so obviously interested in words and ideas, she seems alert to the visual element of theatre. She also has a strong sense of comedy. But she doesn't seem to know exactly what she wants to say, and so the play suffered from

occasional incoherency. I left the Crypt with admiration for Lovett's achievement, but with a sense that she now needs to refine her style of writing — and perhaps to simplify it.

Emma Colohan has impressed recently in supporting roles in *En Suite* and *Midden*, so it was interesting to see her take a leading role, which she filled very well. If we manage to sympathise with the play's mostly unlikeable male characters, this is due mainly to the charismatic acting of Michael FitzGerald. Declan Mills, who played the Voice, did a good job with the play's least successful role. The production design by Sonia Haccius was excellent, so appropriate to the cavernous space of the Crypt that it was hard to imagine the play being performed anywhere else. And David Horan certainly deserves credit for bringing all of these elements together. This is the work of a promising writer — and if that's something of a backhanded compliment, implying that her work is in some ways imperfect, it's also meant positively: *The Call* may not be entirely successful, but it's hard to fault a production that does so many difficult things well.

CLOSING TIME by Owen McCafferty

The Lyttleton Loft,
Royal National Theatre, London
5-12 Sep. 2001 and on tour; reviewed
9 Sep. BY IAN SHUTTLEWORTH

A DECADE OR MORE AGO, THE BELFAST-BASED comedy company The Hole In the Wall Gang had a routine about the stereotypical Northern Irish drama; it was called, if memory serves, something like "Too Late To Talk To Billy And Gerry About Their Barbed-Wire Love Across The Barricades." Its ingredients have proven a remarkably durable prescription: familial stress rather than outright dysfunction, doomed attach-

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ment preferably of a Montague-Capulet nature, and of course the Troubles. (The Gang proved more adventurous than almost all Northern drama to date in also introducing a gay element... well, they had to show somehow that they were being openly ludicrous.) Then there was "the mammy" attempting to set everything right with a nice cup of tea, as opposed to the harder stuff preferred by the menfolk.

Plaudits, then, to Owen McCafferty for almost entirely eschewing the Troubles and concentrating on the drink in *Closing Time*. Only the cause of dogsbody Alec's simple-mindedness (a stray bullet from an incompetent assassination attempt upon someone else) and the story of the decrepit Belfast hotel-bar in which it is set having been bombed years ago (after which landlord Robbie drank away the compensation money) hint at specifics of Northern Ireland. Similarly, although part of me is convinced I used to know the real place which served as the basis for McCafferty's fictional dive, the play could be not just anywhere but any time: only *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire?* on the TV sets the action vaguely in the present. The shambling husks of humanity presented are pretty much universal. London critics remarked that there was not even any indication as to whether any of the characters were Protestant or Catholic; those of us with antennae more sensitive to the reverberations of nomenclature in the province can make educated guesses in a couple of cases, but it's not as if there are buried subtexts to be mined in this area. The five characters are who they are, no more than that.

McCafferty's play brought to a muted end the Transformation season in the National Theatre's newly created Loft space, before embarking on a brief tour including a week in Dublin during the

Dublin Theatre Festival. Its title works on several levels: it refers not only to the end of a particular sodden day, but the imminent closure of the hotel after Robbie's failure to borrow money to keep it afloat, the end of characters' ability even to pretend to their self-delusions (four of the five are burdened with broken or breaking marriages), and in a palpable sense the end of their lives.



SNIPPY: Pam Ferris in *Closing Time*

There's no glimmer of redemption on offer here. Not for Robbie. Not for his semi-estranged wife Vera, desperate for someone to give her the strength to walk out, and fastening terrier-like upon the 20 years younger (and 20 units more stoicous) Iggy as her redeemer. Not for Iggy himself, several days into a determined

SHEILA BURNETT

bender which plainly has its roots in marital crisis, as he mentions so often that he must remember to phone the wife. Not for Alec, bullied in the hostel where he lives. Not for Joe (Lalor Roddy), the hotel's only resident because he can't bear to set foot in his own house just across the road since his wife left long since.

Reviews have almost all duly mentioned *The Iceman Cometh* as a reference point, and several critics — because of the bar setting and the presence of Jim Norton (Robbie) and Kieran Ahern (Alec) in the cast — also made associations with *The Weir*. My own thoughts are rather more lateral. McCafferty's strategy reminds me of one of Glenn Branca's symphonies for massed, overdriven electric guitars. Like Branca, he picks his key and his rhythm and sustains them with minimal variation through the whole piece. The cast, playing on Rae Smith's terrifically dilapidated set, mesh entirely with the script. Norton brings to the role of Robbie the same considered underplaying as in the McPherson plays in which he has most recently made his mark in London; Pam Ferris as Vera wears a face that has long since forgotten how to smile (and, on her first entrance, little else); Patrick O'Kane, a wonderful actor who should be more widely appreciated, gives precise gradations to Iggy's drunkenness, meticulous in his attention to detail even when his character is almost beyond speech.

But in the end, there's a problem with writing about bleak, dreary people in a bleak, dreary setting. The more accomplished you are at it, the more resolute in eschewing grand drama to elevate or otherwise relieve matters, the bleaker and drearier your own work will be. And McCafferty is accomplished. Its very success in terms of his vision is bound up with its failure as compelling drama. *Closing*

Time is a play to admire greatly, but not in any meaningful sense to enjoy; to make one keen to see more of McCafferty on the British side of the water, but in the unspoken hope that "more" will mean "different in tone."

Belfast native Ian Shuttleworth reviews theatre for The Financial Times.

A COUNTRY SONG by Randall B. Wilson

Storm! Theatre Company

Crypt Arts Centre, Dublin

10-21 Sep. 2002; reviewed 11 Sep.

BY HARVEY O'BRIEN

A COUNTRY SONG IS A WORK IN PROGRESS. The play was first staged in 1997 as a one-act drama about the confused ramblings of a mentally impaired youth from a dysfunctional southern American family. It was extended into a full-length production in 1998, adding three more acts which dealt individually with others from the same family. The play was revised further in 2000, adding one new character and altering the ending of Act Three. That version, entitled *Southern Discomfort*, played in Nashville and won the New Southern Play Festival. The current incarnation was revised after 9/11 for production in Dublin by director Alan Sharp's newly-formed Storm! Theatre Company.

The play is centrally concerned with the fissures in the American Psyche caused by conflicts between tradition and modernity. In the conservative South, where God and country are more than mere notions, "freedom" is a problematic ideal which often pits personal values against social morality. The play presents four stories which explore the consequences of America's freedoms, all of them focused on members of the Wheeler family of rural Tennessee.

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Though it would seem a good idea in principle to incorporate the effect of the events of 9/11 into this exploration of personal and social trauma, the play's most forceful elements have more to do with internal moral and political tensions than contemporary geopolitics. The two most powerful segments centre on issues of gun control and the public expression of personal beliefs, themes

minutes do we realise that Hannah is dead. The girl's presence on stage has been a ghostly echo of a life that has now ended. The piece builds to a shattering finale in which Susannah describes how her daughter was killed, along with others in her high school Young Christian group, by a gun-toting classmate in a Columbine-type massacre. Act Three picks up the threads of tragedy as Susannah's younger



AN AMERICAN TALE: Elaine Murphy in *A Country Song*

which were more pressing when the play was at an earlier stage of its evolution.

Act Two is probably the best of the four, a sketch in which genteel Susannah Wheeler (Brenda Larby) waits nervously for a job interview and reflects on the role her daughter Hannah (Elaine Murphy) has played in her life. Only in the closing

brother Scotty (Simon Jewell), only a year younger than his dead niece (whom, he notes, was meant to be "my future; my friend that I could call on and have lunch with"), speaks angrily to a video camera. He is working on a school assignment prompted by the controversy over the pledge of allegiance in schools, but his frames of reference become increasingly

SINEAD MCKENNA

wide to incorporate a vivid demonstration of why gun control is an even more pressing issue which goes to the very heart of American life.

The rest of the play is essentially chaff. Act One is a poorly focused meditation on family values inspired by the disappearance of family matriarch Chloe (Yvonne Robins). Awkwardly staged in the Crypt's difficult space, this segment, which also featured Maurice Collins as Chloe's son, threatened to derail the entire production. Act Four is basically the same as the original one-act drama, an actor's piece which gives Keith Smith all too much rope with which to hang himself on — a well-meaning but overlong monologue exploring how his character came to murder his violent, controlling father.

As a work in progress, *A Country Song* has its moments, but as a completed piece of theatre, it is painfully uneven. Despite tangential connections between the acts, it remains essentially a collection of vignettes, only two of which work. Its staging here with a primarily Irish cast represents a brave but mysterious decision. The actors struggle with the subtleties of the Southern manner and the audience is initially prevented from engaging with the setting by the appalling first act. The play could do with another draft, and probably a change of venue. The nooks and crannies of the Crypt seem to mostly get in the way here, requiring subdued lighting to create any sense of psychological intimacy.

DA by Hugh Leonard

The Abbey Theatre, Dublin

10 Jul.–21 Sep. 2002; reviewed 31 Jul.

BY PETER CRAWLEY

MEMORY PLAYS ARE AS UNRELIABLE AS memories themselves. Open to reshaping,

manipulation and distortion, they should lend readily to the investigations of repertory theatre. Take Hugh Leonard's *Da*, for instance. Was it really a moving comic masterpiece on a universal theme? A candid exploration of the Oedipal trajectory couched in charming and poignant characterisations? Or was it, in fact, a winking classic of camp clowning, transparent authorial vanity, and casual misogyny? Clearly the Abbey's second production of Leonard's Tony award-winning classic provides us with both the possibility for reinterpretation and the equipment for some basic memory jogging.

The kitchen, or "the womb of the play" as Leonard put it in a stage direction, is perhaps its most sympathetically drawn female character, where other representations of womanhood go off to cry or die in the wings. Such clichéd symbolism, however, is packaged in designer Paul McCauley's more interestingly camp aesthetic. As a cyclorama of clouds spin from right to left, the 1968 corporation house could be Dorothy's tornado-surfing home-stead en route to an Oz of the imagination. It's as good an analogy as any, for the characters we meet in these times remembered hardly seem any more credible than dancing munchkins and flying monkeys, filtered as they are through the mind's eye of self-aggrandising playwright Charlie. An unreliable narrator if ever there was one, he is Leonard's (self-)portrait of the artist as an irksome middle-aged aesthete.

To this end Sean Campion's jerkily alert portrayal of the harangued and precocious figure, has him lord it up over all and sundry upon returning to his old home following the funeral of his adoptive father. "Old faces," says Charlie of his less successful compatriots. "They've turned up like bills you thought you'd never have to pay." Desperately clever stuff, and Campion

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on's delivery imbues the line with the requisite throwaway wit, but more immediate attention lessens the drollness of his aphorisms. Not that there's a single character on stage to challenge his intellectual authority. Ronan Leahy could hardly be blamed for an unbelievable Oliver; his role is already a thankless caricature — a sneered-at buffoon of a working-class Dubliner pretend-

Da first, followed quickly by Ma and then, amusingly, his younger, tetchier self. But while McCauley's clever, crumbling set and Paul Keogan's perfectly judged lights conspire with Leonard's writing to present a sepia-toned nostalgia for the hardship of the 1940s, the tone of Patrick Mason's production is instead dominated by marionette-style performances of over-played



ROMANCE OF YESTERYEAR: *Jasmine Russell and Alan Leech in Da*

ing to be more refined than he is. Undercutting Oliver's syncopated el-o-cu-tion affectations with carefully chiseled witticisms, Charlie's cultural cringe is obvious, although any trace of his own social origins have been conveniently erased.

Now at the "head of the queue" both in terms of generation and mortality, Charlie's visit naturally conjures up ghosts: his

physical comedy. Performed so stridently for uncomplicated laughs, it is curious that sexual politics come more keenly into focus while the production cedes any serious interpretation to dramatic frivolity.

In one memorable scene Alan Leech's simpering Young Charlie abandons Oliver to pursue Jasmine Russell's Mary Tate, clumsily objectified as the Yellow Peril. "I

PAT REDMOND

was the one you came out with-you-know," chastens Oliver in a line open to all manner of alternative readings. And when Stephen Brennan's footering but oddly charismatic old codger inadvertently humanises his adolescent prey, Charlie loses all interest. "The last thing I wanted that evening was a person," recalls the older playwright. While Leonard's text undoubtedly has a self-deprecating quality in which the narrator's shallowness (both in youth and maturity) is exposed, the production fumbles the insight in rather depthless presentations.

Elsewhere, however, the production gains from more sensitive reading of the play's subtleties. John Kavanagh as the intolerant and cynical Drumm provides a compelling alternative father figure for Charlie, who is adrift in his identity. Made more attractive to the adopted young man by his withheld favour, Kavanagh has fine-tuned the role to suggest a character with a life beyond the play. (Of course this is literally the case, Kavanagh having played the role already in *A Life*.)

But someone who deserves better is Ma, performed genuinely and capably by Anita Reeves. Here the writing marginalises the character and she remains as elusive from our concerns as she does from Charlie's recollections ("I'd forgotten what she looked like," he greets her), and is finally dispatched with a one-liner, "She died an Irish woman's death, drinking tea." Da, nevertheless, casts a longer shadow in death, although Brennan's performance of a wild haired, cartoonishly-old doddering dimwit denies the play any darkness. He is hardly to blame for the production's sacrifices however, where Mason finds it hard to square a working class gardener with a Hitler-heiling naif, a colloquial community with a petulantly detached artist, or a complicat-

ed portrayal of an era slowly passing from living memory with a gentle entertainment. Viewed through a telescope of diminishing affinity, memory merely becomes parody.

**DEAD BOYS by Pius Meagher
and MISS CANARY ISLANDS 1936**

by Conall Quinn

Focus Theatre, Dublin

Various dates, Jun.-Aug. 2002; DEAD BOYS reviewed 3 Jul. and MISS CANARY ISLANDS 1936 reviewed 30 Jul.

BY HARVEY O'BRIEN

LIFE AFTER DEATH IS THE SUBJECT OF THESE two short plays staged by Focus; specifically, the nature and qualities of the experience for the deceased. Both plays are determinedly secular, both are masculine in outlook, and both attempt to blend comedy and drama. They explore how a person is judged in death relative to how they behaved in life. *Dead Boys* is the more insular of the two, focusing on the immediate emotional responses of disparate personalities to the paradigm shift. *Miss Canary Islands 1936* encapsulates themes of political belief and artistic self-expression and asks if and how its characters have left a mark on the living world.

Dead Boys is set in a suburban funeral parlour where Dead Joe (Patrick O'Donnell) is none too happy. Not only is he dead, but he has been saddled with the company of Dead Fred (Aonghus Weber), a suicide who cheerfully informs him that his upcoming funeral is likely to be "the best boost to your ego that you could ever get." Joe is not convinced. He has left behind a beautiful girlfriend and a future full of promise that he is reluctant to abandon. His mournful self-absorption plays against Fred's seemingly boundless enthusiasm for the afterlife,

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which is worth more to him than his previous existence abandoned, alone, and alcoholic.

Miss Canary Islands 1936 is set in a graveyard where two victims of the Spanish Civil War have spent the previous half-century or more squabbling not so much over the finer points of politics as much as over their respective post-

constantly berates his neighbour in eternal rest Manny Hayes (Lenny Hayden), a veteran of the Condor Legion who was indirectly responsible for the death of real-life left-wing Spanish poet Miguel Hernandez. Manny has been struggling for decades with an autobiography which he hopes will explain himself, but Largo argues that Fascism is inherently



THEY LOOK PRETTY ALIVE TO ME: Dead Boys

mortem literary endeavours. Largo Ryan (Shane Nestor) is a martyr of the International Brigade whose war poetry has already won him acclaim and whose grave is frequently visited by groups including the Hemingway Society. He

incapable of producing art.

Miss Canary Islands 1936 is the more interesting of the two plays on a textual level. It is written with greater richness in expression and a reflexive awareness of the tendency for political allegory to

descend into mawkish simplification. The play engages the audience intellectually in spite of the risks of pretentiousness, and has wit enough to extend its critique to concepts of idealism and ideology larger than the characters consumed by them. *Dead Boys* is lighter in tone, relying heavily on one-liners and on the performances of its leads, but making rewarding use of

an opaque tiling mounted on a screen. The tiling is also used on the floor. Brian Rudden's lighting makes these tiles glow eerily as befits the moment, creating contrast with the otherwise almost completely plain black set. These design conceits allow director Brent Hearne to make use of the full stage space to block off individual scenes and ensure a sense



NO BEAUTY QUEENS: Lenny Hayden and Shane Nestor in *Miss Canary Islands* 1936

Douglas O'Connor
space and stagecraft to reinforce its themes and characterisation.

Emma Cullen's set design for *Dead Boys* concentrates attention on the centre of the stage. A coffin on a stand is the only important prop. The rear scenery is

of physical movement. The characters' feelings of isolation, enclosure, and even proximity are suggested without visible strain on the delivery.

The decorations for *Miss Canary Islands* 1936 are less stark, consisting primarily

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of the two grave sites with a few judiciously-arranged props suggesting Manny and Largo's environment is more expansive than it seems. Largo sits in a comfortable deck chair sipping drinks and reading poetry while Manny pouts and complains when his grave is defiled by left-wing revellers. Director Michèle Manahan keeps the characters physically close to one another in spite of their visible territoriality (Largo frequently spouts "no passeran" as Manny moves across his space). This helps to maintain the sense of tension created by Hayden and Nestor's performances.

Miss Canary Islands 1936 is least satisfying in its final stages. It concludes with the introduction of new characters, Fascists played by James McNeill and Ciarán Walsh who eulogise the hitherto unappreciated Manny, and an elderly woman (Eileen Fennell) who places a flower on his headstone. The play has been uncomfortable throughout in its attempts to articulate Manny's point of view, as if proving that Fascism is not supportable on any level even by Fascists. Ironically, this works against Quinn's attempt to explore the nature self-expression and self-belief. Largo dismisses Manny's manuscript as "unrepentant pseudolyrical drivel," and though there is a satiric undercurrent in Largo's smugness, we see no reason to disagree. The play therefore loses polemical force by letting the audience comfortably identify with Largo, and when McNeill's comical Fascist beings foaming at the mouth about heroism, it is merely a final, unnecessary nail in Manny's proverbial and literal coffin.

Dead Boys' lesser thematic ambitions in a sense relieve it from intense scrutiny, which is just as well given the obviousness of much of what transpires. Its major failing is its inability to generate an emo-

tional response to characters ultimately gripped by sadness and desperation. Meagher fills the space with comic exchanges which rely heavily on delivery. Though five actors are credited, Dermot Byrne and Andrea Coyne appear only briefly first as sombre undertakers then later as spectral auditors, and Eileen Fennell has an almost mute role as a cleaning lady. This throws most of the emphasis on O'Donnell and Weber. Weber is very entertaining as Fred. He captures the sense of relentless optimism that must, of course, mask a deeper despair. Physically taller and slimmer than O'Donnell, he dominates the space with movement and gestures which generate a sense of energy. O'Donnell is more dour, as befits the character. He generally wavers between impotent anger and frustrated indignation. This doesn't make him especially sympathetic but it works in the context of the relationship between the two men.

THE DESIGNATED MOURNER

by Wallace Shawn

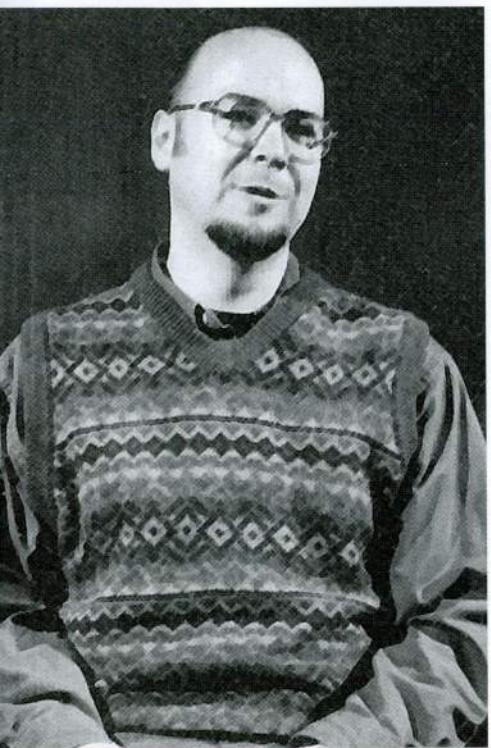
The Crypt Arts Centre, Dublin

26 Jun.-13 Jul. 2002; reviewed 3 Jul.

BY SUSAN CONLEY

WALLACE SHAWN'S PLAY, IN PLAIN LANGUAGE, is a play about intellectual wankers that simultaneously seeks to expose the lot of them as the irritating poseurs that they are, and also express, in extraordinarily wanky language of the highest pedigree, the yearning to be accepted by said wankers, the folly of trying to "marry up" into the world of wank, and the outrage that results in the inevitable wanky snub. In the person of Jack, Shawn has created a verbose, scathing, uncompromising, poetic, and provoking little wannabe, whose ultimate triumph over the people he loves to hate is hollowed by his pathetic and infantile

tile need for their approval and validation. And despite the fact that we are quite obviously being manipulated throughout the piece, Shawn's central idea hits home, slyly and disturbingly, and affects us



WANKER: The Designated Mourner

almost against our will, the will that was in turn fighting steadily against the barrage of wank that rained down for almost three hours.

A war of words is being waged, fought by one man, against a privileged lifestyle on which he can only dance attendance. Jack (Niall Ó Sioradáin) endlessly spews

the frustration of a husband who can never fully possess his wife, neither body nor soul; it is a futile battle of rage and disenfranchisement, spoken in the high-flown, metaphor-laden prose he purports to despise. Married to Judy (Antoinette Walsh) the daughter of the highly respected, indeed, idolized poet Howard (Seán Colgan), he lives on the fringes of the intelligentsia, and is found wanting. He can only lurk, and seethe, and try ineffectually to tear his wife's adoring gaze away from her father. He seems destined for a life as an onlooker, but a radical change in government and the rise of an anti-intellectual regime does what he himself is unable to do: slowly but surely these artists, academics, and scholars (we must assume they are such, as we only know them as the script calls them, chummily, by their first names of Bob and Joan and Arthur) are done away with. Jack escapes intact, while Judy and Howard eventually are taken prisoner and incarcerated.

It is incredibly difficult to care about these people, these folk who inhabit the stratosphere of class and breeding — they are the stratosphere, with their published tomes and cocktail chit chat, drifting in and out of the theatre and the embassy-of-the-week, never questioning their privilege. Jack, in all his self-loathing glory, is an extraordinary type of reverse snob, and despises everything about Howard, his every word and action threatening Jack with annihilation. Howard is pompous, it's true, but he is exactly who he means to be — which is more than can be said for Jack. Judy, rather tragically entwined with her father in a relationship that puts the electricity in the Electra Complex, is also fully herself, is precisely who she was raised to be, and is fulfilling that destiny in spades.

Shawn's text succeeds brilliantly in pre-

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senting us with an entire world, and its strength lies in the fact that it is as odious, hateful and superior as the very over-intellectualised snobs that Jack is raging against; in taking this tack, he quite definitely demonstrating that as odious, hateful and superior as this crowd can be, they do serve the unique purpose of, for lack of a less hateful, odious and superior term, "keeping poetry alive." And it's in this trite idea that Shawn's blade makes it silent and deep gash: that despite all the envy and the pomposity and the smugness, society might need those folks — whether society likes it or not.

Ó Sioradáin holds the stage in the demanding role of Jack, whose endless stream of wry jokes and poisonous bile form the centrepiece of the play, and he manages to convey an enormous amount of information conversationally, with excellent vocal variety and intonation. The three actors suffer from being planted firmly in their places, in a straight line, on their bums in chairs, a situation that encourages mental drift: the denseness of the text becomes almost unbearable in places, and the lack of visual stimulation didn't do the production any favours. John O'Brien and his team perhaps took the play's ambiguity too much to heart, and the combination of the absence of physical life for his actors, a diffident lighting plan, and an uninspired set design put an inordinate amount of pressure on a text that already seems fit to explode.

DONE UP LIKE A KIPPER

by Ken Harmon

The Peacock Theatre

8 Oct.-16 Nov. 2002; reviewed 10 Oct.

BY ROBERTA GRAY

FOR THIS NEW PLAY BY YOUNG DUBLIN playwright Ken Harmon, set designer

Robert Ballagh seems to have ordered an entire living room to be transported onto the Peacock stage — couch, telly, family, and all. A naturalistic set with just a hint of playful symbolism, it's a good indicator of what's to come. In a room where the walls and doors are set at strangely skewed angles, although one's main impression is of the manically cheerful colour scheme, what is played out is a kitchen-sink comedy-drama where the ugly threat of disjointedness — though constantly present — ultimately loses out to the upbeat and life-affirming.

Harmon's play is very much located in Roddy Doyle territory. Set in inner-city Dublin, it is concerned with a series of events — both surreally funny and deadly serious — in the life of one family. One of the charms of this play is that there is lots to recognize here, both in the individual characters and in the psychological dynamics between them.

Harmon's main character, whose actions and very presence power the family's dynamics, is the father Gino (Liam Carney). A charismatic and talkative taxi driver who takes the business of keeping his family together very seriously indeed, he is a forceful individual whose blind spots land him in trouble, but whose benign motivations make him ultimately sympathetic.

Harmon has a good understanding of the interactions among family members: if what we see here is somewhat clichéd, it's only because it's so true. Gino considers his teenage son Eugene (Andrew Lovern) to be bone-idle and immature, while Eugene is rebelling against what he sees as his father's domineering attitude. Daughter Kim (Neilí Conroy) finds Gino overprotective, while he's only trying to safeguard her as she gets over an abusive relationship. Wife Dolores (Jenni Ledwell),



FISHY: Done Up Like a Kipper

meanwhile, wrongly suspects that Gino is having an affair because of his strange, uncommunicative behaviour.

Opening with a chat between Dolores and her friend Vera over a cup of tea at the kitchen table, the play gets off to a slow

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and rather undramatic start. The domestic concerns of these women at first seem pretty banal, and it takes a while to start caring — it's a bit like tuning in to a soap you haven't been keeping up with. Momentum gradually builds up, however, as the rest of the family start to appear in person, and director Pat Kiernan starts to make more use of the whole stage area.

One doesn't really sit up in one's seat, however, until the introduction of Eugene, the rebellious son who seems to spend more time smoking spliffs up in his bedroom than studying for his Leaving. When he comes on stage clad in nothing but a large nappy and wielding a flick-knife, the play swings from being light-heartedly amusing, to being utterly sinister with shocking effectiveness.

Harmon's dialogue is naturalistic throughout, and sounds convincingly like what you might hear if you really were a fly on the wall of someone's living room. At times, representing everyday conversation so faithfully makes for somewhat slow-moving drama. But at its most enjoyable, as performed by all the cast but especially by Liam Carney as Gino, this is a fine example of that kind of creative, effortlessly playful, and vibrant language that just seems to roll off some people's tongues. (In a post-show discussion, Harmon said that in writing the play, he didn't use any phrases or words that he hadn't actually heard being used on the streets of Dublin — so "Get your crash helmet, love, you'll be going through the headboards tonight" is a well-known chat-up line, apparently).

This play touches at serious issues — domestic violence, drug abuse, vandalism, street crime, and racism — but doesn't explore them in depth. The main plot, that of the growing rift among members of the family, is well developed, to the point where it looks as though they will be torn

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apart completely. In a rather simplistic plot manœuvre, however, an important revelation ends up bringing the family together again, and the play ends on an upbeat note, with loose ends tied up, and everyone reconciled amid a good-natured battery of mutual slagging.

This is not ground-breaking drama that will change the way you think. It's a simple tale with a simple moral: that families should stick together, and that honesty is the best policy — and its denouement is more optimistic than strictly realistic. What it is, however, is funny, good-natured, and gently touching — and populated with a lively cast of characters that it's very hard not to like.

Robert Gray writes about the arts for The Sunday Tribune.

Dublin 1742 by John Banville

The Ark, Dublin

31 May-30 Jun. 2002; reviewed 15 Jun.

BY CHRIS MORASH

AND CHRISTOPHER MORASH

CHRIS (AGED 39): IN THE THEATRE LANDSCAPE, children's theatre is a kind of liminal zone, on the fringes of the cultural world, tucked away at the end of theatre festival brochures, and seldom the subject of sustained analysis. This is regrettable, for children's theatre offers opportunities to explore forms of performance that find little place in mainstream theatre. To take an obvious instance, while most adult audiences cringe uncomfortably at anything more exhibitionist than sitting in the dark and clapping politely at the curtain-call, the discerning 9-year-old theatregoer will have serious questions to ask of a production that does not provide at least some opportunity to intervene in the

action. In fact...

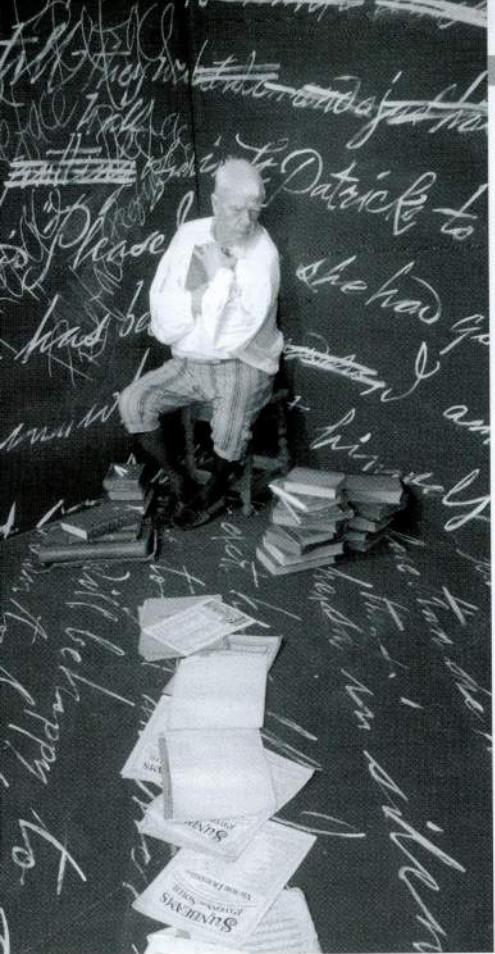
CHRISTOPHER (AGED 9): Dad, what does "liminal" mean? Can we talk about the play now?

CHRIS: OK. *Dublin: 1742* was staged in the Ark, in Dublin's Temple Bar, one of Ireland's most intimate, and best-designed theatres. With only four rows of step-like benches on three sides of a well-proportioned performance space, it creates an active actor-audience relationship...

CHRISTOPHER: But, Dad, *Dublin: 1742* didn't start in the theatre. It started upstairs, in the workshop room.

CHRIS: True. I suppose that's what I meant when I said that children's theatre offered possibilities for exploring theatrical form. Director Eric Fraad, for instance, is better known for innovative work in opera and music theatre, particularly as a founder of Opera at the Academy in New York in the 1980s. Artistic director of the Ark since April 2002, he begins his production of *Dublin: 1742* not on the stage, but in one of the workshop rooms on an upper floor of The Ark. Here we encounter each character from the play individually, alone in a small, box-like cubicle, oblivious to the gawking crowds, and locked obsessively, repetitively, in some deeply personal gestic movement, detached from any narrative context. Watching characters as pure spectacle is unsettling. Indeed, one of this production's most memorable images is of Jonathan Swift (played with disturbing intensity by Don Foley), stumbling around in his word-daubed cell in the final stages of dementia, looking endlessly for the lost page of a manuscript.

CHRISTOPHER: After the people in the boxes, we went to another room, at the top of the building, and sat in chairs. Lætitia Pilkington (Carmel Stephens) came and sat down, and she asked you if you knew



SCRIPTED: Foley as Swift in Dublin 1742

who the people in the rooms were, and then she told you. When you were walking in the rooms, it was sort of like a mystery; but the mystery was solved when you went to see Laetitia Pilkington. I thought she was dressed interestingly (by costume designer Monica Frawley); her dress was purple, and stuck out very wide, with big puff sleeves, and she had a wig that was very high. Then we finally went

BRYAN MEADE

to the play downstairs in the theatre. It was great.

CHRIS: In a sense, *Dublin: 1742* as a whole was a deconstruction of theatrical form. If it began with pure spectacle, it became pure exposition in its second movement; then, having dispatched the business of exposition, the play itself, designed by Robert Pyzocha and lit by Rupert Murray, re-integrated image and narrative. The theatre component of *Dublin: 1742* centres around Handel (Derek Reed) struggling to finish his *Messiah* in the vibrant chaos of Dublin in 1742, and is effectively a structure on which to hang a series of scenes exploring the competing needs of artistic creativity and social interaction. This is familiar territory in John Banville's fiction. However, as with his 1994 play, *The Broken Jug*, we get a sense that Banville the novelist, the creator of introverted, self-torturing monologists is an inverse version of Banville the 18th-century playwright, who whose stage characters speak in epigrammatic and beautifully poised dialogue.

And yet, for the audience at whom the play was aimed — nine to 14 year olds, for whom all theatrical conventions are new — I expect that the impact of *Dublin: 1742* was less from its accomplished pastiche or its meditations on the artist in society than from the energy of its formal explorations. It is clear from this production that Fraad is interested in theatrical form *per se*, in a manner that augurs well for the future of the Ark.

CHRISTOPHER: I enjoyed *Dublin: 1742*, and the Ark was a great theatre to have it in.

Chris Morash is senior lecturer at NUI Maynooth. Christopher Morash is in third class at Scoil Uí Riada in Kilcock, County Kildare.

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**ELECTRA by Sophocles,
in a new version by Frank McGuinness**

b*spoke Theatre Company

Project, Dublin

14-30 Aug, 2002; reviewed 16 Aug.

BY SARA KEATING

WHILE DRAMA IS ALWAYS TRANSLATABLE, it is not always transposable, but Frank McGuinness' *Electra* manages to transcend language, culture, and history to make the story of the House of Atreus, millennia old, relevant for today. *Electra* is the story of mortal beings in a realm of savagery and vengeance, where family ties are severed to appease a higher good. The emotional range of the central characters is so compelling that they seem very familiar, as they choose their own paths towards happiness and future success, or towards disillusion and their own extinction. What was so revolutionary about the original, written in 494 BC, was Sophocles' marginalisation of the role of the gods; and it is this foregrounding of mankind's role as the driving force of our lives which lets this powerful tragedy remain relevant and startlingly effective 2,500 years later.

The plot is simple and bloody: Orestes arrives back in his homeland to avenge the death of his father, Agamemnon, who was killed by his wife Clytemnestra in revenge for the sacrifice of their youngest daughter. Orestes at first goes unrecognised by his sister Electra, but following the delayed recognition scene — a standard of Greek drama — the revenge is articulated off-stage and the plot is brought to its inevitable conclusion. It is Electra's grief, rather than the action of revenge, however, that lies at the core of this drama. Once she makes her entrance she never leaves the stage and it is the single-mindedness of her misery, anguish,

and love for her brother that is Sophocles', and McGuinness', focus.

Jane Brennan, founding member of the newly established b*spoke company, undertakes the central role with an emotional vigour that is believable and fascinating. Her enormous passion is released in paroxysms that seem driven by something almost bestial, and this is particularly interesting in relation to how the character has been depicted physically. Electra is stripped of all her feminine characteristics, dressed like a man, with short-cropped hair and little evident makeup. Her uncontrollable rage has raped her of dignity, and her motivation becomes less and less about love than about meaningless revenge.

Orestes, on the other hand, is here depicted as emasculated: Pat Kinevane plays him with an effeminacy and clownishness that borders on buffoonery. In itself this is an interesting choice of acting styles, harking back to the original style of performance used in ancient Greece. But Kinevane's playing jars against the naturalism of the rest of the acting, and does not make sense given his character's history and actions. It is Orestes, after all, who demonstrates his virility here by committing murder; why is his masculinity being called into question?

McGuinness' version is worth commenting on for the way he retains the epic poetry and lyricism of the original. The language is at once poetic and idiomatic and the actors deliver it with a fluidity which remains accessible to the audience even in the longer speeches of reportage and emotional outpouring. This helps to push the drama forward even when the plot itself is static. It is also to McGuinness' credit that he manages to compress the story down to



RAGING FOR HER DIGNITY: Jane Brennan as the title character in Electra

an hour and a half, while preserving all of its emotional intensity.

McGuinness directed the production himself, and chose to stage it in the round — a fitting, if not inevitable choice, considering the original performance context. But it works particularly well in re-inventing the story with a modern relevance and in re-infusing theatre with its dwindling symbolic power. The playing area — a small, raised circular flat, covered with a canvas map of the world — reminds us of the universality of emotional experience and the circular nature

of the myths themselves; and audience members' visual awareness of each other recreates the communal experience that was so central to drama festivals in the ancient world. Conleth White's lighting carries similarly symbolic messages. Heavy hues of red and earthy brown drown the stage like spilling blood and spotlights fall on the various characters as they deliver monologues to the heavens or themselves.

But these staging and design choices are at odds with the naturalistic sway of the narrative itself: the artificiality of

the set and lighting only detract from our appreciation of the story as both modern and "real." The only reason Electra's story remains convincing is because of the credibility of the emotional drama being played out on the stage. This is not to say that McGuinness' version of the text presents itself as "reality," but we must believe in the veracity of the sentiment and passion of each of the characters for this drama to affect us in any way.

It is really the absence of divine meddling in the play that instills it with modern relevance. It is the contradictions of human nature and their conflicts with the past that drives the characters on. There is no sense here, as in the tragedies of Aeschylus and Euripides, of fate or inevitability or godly retribution: it is by virtue of man's own humour and free will that his life is made. Even so, this near-atheistic vision of the world still maintains a sense of inevitability by virtue of its familiarity: we do know where it all will end — in tragedy and tears.

Sara Keating is studying for a PhD at the School of Drama, Trinity College.

EPIC by Declan Gorman

Upstate Live

On tour; reviewed at the Old Museum Arts Centre, Belfast on 31 May 2002

BY PAUL DEVLIN

UPSTATE LIVE'S EPIC LIVES UP TO ITS name: it is a sprawling piece of theatre. As wide as it is thick in its dramatic scope, this play is populated with what seems literally to be a whole county of characters. Billing itself in a programme note as "a modern experiment in epic theatre," this ambitious project sets about tackling the

effects of the foot and mouth crisis on a community of farmers on the Cooley Peninsula. The play premiered in 2001 and was partly recast and somewhat rewritten for an extensive North-South tour; it was revived again for a small tour late this year.

Informed by the mythology of *The Táin*, Declan Gorman's script seeks to find some form of poetic logic in the spread of the foot and mouth pestilence, a dramatic means by which to understand the seemingly random nature of the virus. The actions of Gorman's characters in both the present and the past are linked to the spread of the disease, as Gorman's mythological prism suggests that it is not just the livestock that is sick: the land and society are similarly affected.

Gorman's play pretends to the supernatural and blends this with an episodic series of imagined events occurring in Cooley in 2001. This dramatic strategy sometimes works, sometimes doesn't. When it is effective, the interchange between mythology and "reality" resonates because of its ability to foreground the consequences of the individual's actions on a community — especially in a time of crisis. When it fails, it is because the links Gorman suggests, the parallels he tries to draw, are unviable and as a result redundant.

Similarly, Gorman — who also directs — is somewhat inconsistent in his handling of the play's more stylised sequences. For example, a slow-motion sex scene under strobe lighting was especially long and bland. Scenes involving a DJ called Cathbad (John Ruddy), who prophesises down a microphone with the sound of dance music thumping in the background, are more cringeworthy than macabre. However, these are exceptions rather than the rule. He mobilises his four-strong cast with exceptional skill and enables them to com-

fortably play at least five characters each. A scene in which the hapless smuggler McRoth (Dave Nolan) inadvertently spreads foot and mouth throughout the country is particularly well realised and fully exploits the dramatic possibilities of the kind of epic theatre his script aspires to.



TIRELESS: Sinead Douglas in *Epic*

The cast is universally strong. Kieran Hurley and Nolan as the mythical pig farmers Grunt and Bristle are very funny. Sinead Douglas, who performs all of the play's female roles, works tirelessly throughout. Ruddy redeems himself from his overplaying of Cathbad in the guise of the slimy, understated clerical officer cum

computer-virus-hack, Ray Higgins. As an ensemble the cast are a powerful dramatic force, masters of the quick change, and effective in their physical characterisation of their individual roles.

The play is huge in scope and many, many plot lines are set up; while Gorman's urge to resolve them all is understandable, it does result in an evening overlong by at least 30 minutes. But the energy of the individual performances on the night made this a forgivable oversight. As a piece of experimental theatre, *Epic* has much more to commend it than condemn it.

Paul Devlin is a research student at the University of Ulster.

**FRED AND JANE
and OUR LADY OF SLIGO**
by Sebastian Barry

Fred and Jane played at Bewley's Café Theatre, Dublin, 21 Aug.-21 Sept. 2002; reviewed on 22 Aug.

Our Lady of Sligo produced and toured by Town Hall Productions, Galway; reviewed 27 Aug. at the Pavilion Theatre, Dun Laoghaire BY DEREK WEST

SEBASTIAN BARRY WROTE BOTH THESE plays in 1997-98. *Fred and Jane* originally as a short piece for television, but surfacing as a lunchtime offering at Bewley's Café; *Our Lady of Sligo* a far more ambitious piece.

Fred and Jane is a tale of two nuns, who sit decorously upright answering an unseen interrogator. We feel that they might be waiting in some ecclesiastic antechamber, awaiting a latter-day inquisition. There is an edge of nervousness to their demure anticipation. The picture house of the '40s provides the symbols of longing for two girls — for Beatrice (Colette Proctor) the big kisses in the rustling back rows fade in the light of a

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dove descending on the head of Fred Astaire. Anna Nagle (Mary McEvoy) aspires to the physical perfection of Jane Fonda in *Klute*. Barry veers towards nostalgia — each detail of the women's childhoods is like a controlled and revealing brush-stroke.

Barry peels away layers of diurnal dullness to reveal a stratum of warmth and tenderness in the lives of these two

in full, the glue-sniffing urchin who assures her "I'm bollixed."

In *Our Lady of Sligo*, Mai O'Hara, her husband, and her daughter, as well as the ghosts in her life, inhabit an identifiable landscape in such a way as to convince the auditor of its authenticity. The writer subsumes place names — the Garavogue, Knocknarea, Omard — into the text. It makes for writing that carries a high level



TALKING TO GHOSTS: Ann Marie Horan and Fedelma Cullen in *Our Lady of Sligo*

women, to give a sense of loving companionship in a world that will not tolerate the personalised emotions which have yielded up the only real significance in their lives. The idioms are controlled. This is the language of the nun's parlour — a little to do with spirituality, a lot to do with a celibate, mundane existence. There is a little frisson of delight in the unexpected when Beatrice eschews the censoring beeper and quotes,

of familiarity and reassurance. Barry has a power to inhabit places he knows at times that predate his own existence. The Sligo of this play is that of the '30s and '40s. In both plays, he garners a sense of the dance-hall and, again, the picture house. His sense of detail is impeccable — when the marauding doctor has his way with Mai, he unbuttons, rather than unzips. There are butcher boys on bikes and bank offi-

cials ("Mr. King and his associate").

Sebastian Barry is also a forceful dramatist. In Mai he has created a powerful and haunting character. Her narrative, here embodied by Fedelma Cullen, compels such absolute attention that the other characters — some admirable support work from Brendan Conroy (Jack), Emma McIvor (Joanie), Ann Marie Horan (Sister) and Maire Stafford (a beautiful warm

nant mode. And herein lies a form of dramatic debilitation: within this refinement of phrase there is some kind of disjunction. Although we must accept that his characters, in the main, are articulate and educated, there is nothing in Mai or the Sisters in *Fred and Jane* to suggest the lyrical heights to which they — and, in particular, Mai — are allowed to rise. There is a degree of intrusiveness in the careful moulding of



NUNS ON THE RUN: Colette Proctor and Mary McEvoy in *Fred and Jane*

cameo role) as Maria — are relegated to the periphery. They are, however, much more successfully integrated into the action than the figures who surround *The Steward of Christendom* — in that respect *Our Lady* is a more finely crafted play.

Barry's plays juxtapose past and present; there is much evocation of times that lodge in memory. Reflection upon, and recreation of, past experience is the domi-

sentences and phrases. Barry cannot resist the felicitous phrase. It is a card that he plays once too often. Although there is an abrasive quality to his portrayal of the drunken excess to which Mai and Jack descend, he holds back from it at times, or rather is held back.

Barry stands as representative of an admirable power in a writer — he has the sheer talent with language that not only

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renders experience but also elevates it to a level where our perceptions and understanding are new-minted. However, it is a dangerous power, a tempting tunnel that could end in a purple passage. Barry tells us that this is the grandmother he never met and yet she pulses with a life of her own and the life with which the playwright has endowed her. The abiding and recurrent problem is that it is as if she is trapped in a novelist's narrative. Sebastian Barry's wordsmithery keeps hold of her. She remains partially stuck in his head.

What Barry does achieve is the creation of compelling characters. Anna and Beatrice are full of nuance and suggestion. If theirs is a love "that cannot speak its name," the unwritten and unspoken manoeuvres to thwart their loves are ineffectual. He rescues the integrity of the religious life, while probing its capacity to quietly but relentlessly reduce lives of hopes, and fantasy, and spiritual aspiration to empty rituals.

Caroline Fitzgerald's direction of *Fred and Jane* creates stillness around the two central characters, so that every word and tiny gesture is subject to a microscopic scrutiny. Proctor and McEvoy convey that edge in subtle tones in two masterly and authentic performances. While their self-revealing accounts give way at times to an unworldly gaucheness their physical restraint carries the sub-text of the ways in which their lives have intertwined into a platonic interdependency.

In *Our Lady of Sligo*, he has created a most demanding role. Mai is the ravaged, morphined victim of a creeping cancer, but she was the "belle of Galway University," the "first woman in Sligo to wear trousers," a brilliant tennis player, a sight-reader of music. In the Town Hall Theatre production (directed by Ian Rowlands) the role affords Cullen a triumph. It is a towering

performance of stamina, colour, and range. The curve of Mai's life and death follows a very humane trajectory — from a blissful, cocooned childhood, to a flowering into an assertive and striking young womanhood. Her Dada is a disembodied voice that haunts her solitary moments. His tender care of his little girl envelopes her in a painful sense-surround of a lost paradise.

As with her Queen Margaret (in Theatreworks' *Richard III* last year) Cullen has shown a capacity not only for technical excellence but for absorbing and inhabiting the suffering of her characters. If a person's humanity is forged from the aggregate of their experiences, Cullen unravels the life of Mai (much as the cast of *Fred and Jane* do in a minor key). This is the force in Barry's creativity, the power to shadow what he calls "the darkness of her journey." At a simple moral level he portrays in graphic detail the death of an alcoholic, a victim of what he calls "a deep, dark and doom-afflicted disease." But this is not a warning-on-the-label play. Its fundamental strength derives from the pain of the human condition, which, in spite of the rootedness in the specifics of a time and place, achieves a moving universality.

Derek West is a school principal.

FAITH HEALER by Brian Friel

Island Theatre Company
On tour; reviewed 19 Aug. 2002 at the
Samuel Beckett Theatre, Dublin

BY BRIAN LAVERY

REVERED AS PERHAPS BRIAN FRIEL'S greatest play, left largely unperformed and unseen in Ireland recently, *Faith Healer* is surrounded by an undeniable mystique. Island Theatre Company's straightforward, graceful presentation does justice to the classic, and, thanks to its rigorous tour-



MAN AND MANAGER: Barry McGovern and Michael James Ford in *Faith Healer*

ing schedule, goes some way towards helping the play and the public to get reacquainted.

Through four monologues by three characters, we hear the tale of Frank Hardy, faith healer, in his own words and from his wife, Grace, and his manager, Teddy. For years, their traveling medicine show wandered through a string of countless Scottish and Welsh villages like a relic from a bygone century. On good nights, Frank laid his hands on the sick, crippled and deformed, and made them whole. But that happened only ten percent of the time, and in any case, as Frank puts it, they weren't really in the business of healing. Rather the opposite: the wretched souls who trickle in to their rented church halls come "for the

elimination of hope... to seal their anguish."

The beautifully simple structure of the play reveals deep truths about each character by contrasting their recollections of certain events, and their perceptions of each other. Teddy remembers constant sunshine when the trio pull into Kinlochbervie, a seaside village where Grace gives birth to a stillborn boy. Grace describes the town as constantly covered in a dull gray mist, and Frank hardly mentions it at all.

In an interview, director Terry Devlin said that the monologues work like a symphony, in four movements that regulate the pace of the action and the emotional pitch of the narrative. Frank starts with his allegro; the wounded, fragile Grace follows with a downtempo, moody adagio;

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Teddy alleviates the tension between the two with a lively scherzo; and Frank wraps it up with a thunderous vivace. Perhaps due to that musical interpretation of the play, Devlin is in no rush. Things move a bit too slowly between acts, but the actors thankfully have plenty of time once the lights have come back up. Each monologue stretches out luxuriously, and each line hangs in the air, rolling around in our ears like the next stage of an elegant chord progression.

Their rickety van carries them through a world where regular rules don't apply, and from time to time, magic takes hold. Near-mystical incantations appear throughout the play, as a sort of pagan prayer in a forgotten tongue. The characters each engage with the audience through a personal confession, recounting the pain of inevitable human failure. Frank's gift is an even more potent curse: he is tormented by his lack of control over his miracles, and the fact that he is at the whims of chance. Yet he is driven by the rare, exultant — even holy — occasions when it does work, like the Christmas night he cured everyone in a small room in Wales. Grace and Teddy are drawn in by that power, and suffer with him. (No wonder Devlin also called it such a Catholic play.)

Since he is very tall, Barry McGovern fills the stage with a lumbering, uneasy stance. His long strides own the stage, echoing over the hardwood planks of Delores Lyne's set, before he falls back into reverie, hands folded and eyes shut, awaiting inspiration. His Frank is an eloquently compelling man, but one who can be almost frightening, who is rarely compassionate, and who is skeptical of everything, especially himself. McGovern honours the ghost of Donal McCann, who cast a long shadow over Frank

Hardy when he played the part at the Abbey and on tour in London in the early 1980s. (McCann's renowned performance is allegedly one reason why the play has been so infrequently produced since it was written in 1979.)

Grace sits in a dingy London flat, long after the days of the wandering Faith Healer show, and Joan Sheehy creates a woman in a state of permanent withdrawal. Her quavering voice occasionally gives way to bursts of confidence when she recalls the joyous moments from their wandering career and embattled marriage. But she cannot escape the past and remains dependent on Frank like a strung-out junkie. She has lost the fiery personality of her youth, and with shaky hands she tries to control over her life by counting her cigarettes.

In *The Irish Times*, Devlin called Teddy "a lost soul tossing in the wash of Frank's barque." Here he serves as wonderful comic relief, as Michael James Ford relaxes with a bottle of beer, in a dickie-bow and smoking jacket, regaling us in a superb Cockney accent with tales of his ridiculous freak show acts before he took on the fantastic Frank Hardy, faith healer. That outward persona of a cheap charlatan hides the most kind-hearted interior in the play, and we need Teddy's outsider point of view to see the touching reality of Frank and Grace's love affair. We also need a few belly laughs about his whippet dog who plays the bagpipes, and his honest portrayal of Frank's final homecoming, to realise how these mostly miserable people can be occasionally glorious, "balanced somewhere between the absurd and the momentous."

Brian Lavery reports from Dublin for The New York Times.

FORTY-FOUR SYCAMORE

by Bernard Farrell

Quay River Productions/Lane Productions
On tour; reviewed at Andrews Lane
Theatre, Dublin on 25 Jun. 2002

BY SARA KEATING

WRITTEN IN 1993, *FORTY-FOUR SYCAMORE* dramatises an evening in a suburban Dublin home, where a young and nouveau-middle-class couple, security "consultant" Vinny and his wife Joan, throw a dinner party for their slightly more socially established neighbours, Hilary and

Derek. What follows is disaster after predictable domestic disaster, and an exposition of the superficiality of modern Dublin life. Farrell attempts to infuse the social vacuum of the early '90s with the satirical elements of farce, but the world he depicts on stage remains morally and spiritually vacuous, and humour can provide no

panacea in this world where the Celtic Tiger does not just roar, but comes close to killing, in a climactic scene where social ambition turns to sickening violence. The affected and depthless conversation — reminiscent of any pedestrian sitcom — reveals the main themes of the play, which still sit well in an Ireland that is more materialistic than ever: the vulgarity of ambition; the reliance on, but ultimate superficiality of, appearance, image, and pretence; the marginalisation of the eccentric in an increasingly generic world. The cracks in the veneer of



DINNER PARTY FROM HELL: Forty-Four Sycamore

sophistication and respectability are soon revealed as an elderly neighbour arrives, and frivolity yields to expose a darker perspective that, while familiar Irish literary territory, ultimately fails to marry with the play's modern themes.

"Ye Olde World" is spoken for by Mr. Prentice (Niall O'Brien) and his nostalgia

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for a pre-modern Ireland, where "the land," family, and general altruism prevailed. Farrell attempts to update these themes by referring to planning permission, city councils, and general political corruption, but this is an incongruous juxtaposition of modern social issues with now-anachronistic stock theatrical themes. Ultimately, the bygone idyll is dismissed as being irrelevant to modern life and Mr. Prentice is forced to compromise his ideals and to become as dishonest as the suburbanites he has found himself living among. As a character, he remains out of place in the play, but perhaps this is the point: there is no room for eccentricity or nostalgia or even respect in this new materialistic world, and deception and duplicity are the necessary tools for survival.

The play is undoubtedly clever in its technique: Vinny's obsession with security, which drives him to kit his house out with the gadgets he usually sells, is reflective of modern paranoia; and sound and lighting effects are used to provide a visual and thematic stimulus. These production elements are handled with a professionalism sometimes lacking in Irish theatre, and the special effects never fail to impress. Ultimately, however, the play fails to reveal anything new about society. Even if the characters are not aware of the moral problems that have come hand in hand with Ireland's economic prosperity, the audience are. It is historical and current fact that mutual spiritual and material fraudulence is the easiest solution, but where do we go from here?

It is interesting to note that the only characters that come out of this play sympathetically (if perhaps also pathetically, in their ultimate submissiveness) are the women: they are the ones capable of reaching out to Mr. Prentice and the world that he represents; they are the ones capable of

creating a sense of community through shared ritual; they are the ones that have the grammar of sympathy. Farrell, however, undercuts this sympathetic representation of women by refusing them a stable identity in the public world.

Joan and Hilary are forced by their husbands into uncomfortable and unsuitable roles and while neither of them are innocent of this same crime in relation to their spouses, they are ultimately denied the power they should hold.

Under the tight direction of Jim Nolan, the sheer pace of the play never lets the farce tire and the constant assault of gags and visual stimuli almost allow us to overlook the predictability and weakness of the plot itself. Sean Power as Vinny is almost physically and vocally perfect, and he delivers his jibes and gags with a comic timing that never loses its edge. Jenny Maher (Joan) and Fiona Browne (Hilary) are particularly strong and they make the most of their limited female characters and end up stealing the show.

As a statement about modern Ireland, *Forty-Four Sycamore* is impressive in dealing with the interplay between the modern gentry and the newly gentrified, but as a claim to either social satire or comment it falls flat: like the characters and the world it depicts, the play is merely superficial. By using a sitcom formula, the deeper, darker resonances of the Celtic Tiger are alluded to, but ultimately skimmed over. Although the rest of the apparently middle-class, audience delighted in the facetious and often mordant humour, I couldn't help but feel a little disappointed because Farrell's critique of the shallow world of image and pretence remains anodyne rather than curative, and he never succeeds in penetrating a deeper human level that could make the world of *Forty-Four Sycamore* actually matter.

GRAINNE MHAOL, THE DRAWER BOY, and THE GOOD FATHER

The Galway Arts Festival

GRAINNE MHAOL reviewed at the Festival Big Top on 20 Jul. 2002; THE DRAWER BOY reviewed at the Town Hall Theatre

on 20 Jul.; and THE GOOD FATHER reviewed at Druid Lane Theatre on 19 July

BY MARY COLL

FOR SOME REASON SUMMER IS NOT generally regarded as a prime time for theatre; perhaps it's the prospect of serious competition from those warm, balmy nights under the stars that makes venue managers nervous about trying to lure audiences indoors. However in the wet and dreary climate of this Irish summer, audiences literally ran for the shelter of a solid roof and the vague possibility of heating. It's just as well then, that festive gatherings such as the Galway Arts Festival were ready and able to receive them with a varied and exciting theatre programme which was not afraid to place new writing at the top of the agenda. The three flagship shows were very different in terms of style and content, and yet strangely similar in their reliance on the telling of a story as their defining value.

As a locally based company Macnas have been synonymous with the development of the Festival, which celebrated its 25th year in 2002. Their roots are in the European street theatre tradition and their annual parade through Galway has been one of the Festival's highlights. It was therefore a brave decision on Macnas' part to move away from this format, something at which they genuinely excel, and concentrate their energies instead on a large-scale indoor production. This is not the first time Macnas have gone indoors: previous work for the stage includes an adaptation of Patrick McCabe's novel *The*

Dead School and an adaptation of the Irish legend *The Tain*, and their updating of Homer, *The Lost Days of Ollie Deasy*; however, it is the first time that they attempted to do so while retaining the scale of their outdoor work.

Presented in the vastness of the Festival's Big Top tent, *Grainne Mhaol* was scripted by Patricia Forde and directed by Kathi Leahy, and told the life story of the legendary Irish pirate queen Grace O'Malley, a native of county Galway who ruled the coastline of the West of Ireland with her fleet of ships in the 16th century. It was something of an epic tale, from birth to death, told in a performance style which tried to combine the energy and excitement of street theatre with a more conventional and formal staging of individual scenes — and that is where difficulty arose. While the spectacular centrepieces of the production featuring a cast of more than 60 performers managed to achieve their purpose, the smaller and quieter moments in between were lost. Neither the narrative itself nor the manner of its delivery were capable of sustaining either the interest or attention of the audience. The problem seemed to be one of matching ambition with ability, of combining a cast of both professional and non-professional performers.

The format only served to expose any weaknesses — and there were many. At times the dialogue was impossible to hear in the higher levels of the raked seating which rose steeply above the arena on both sides, making the events which followed difficult to comprehend or to place in context. At one point Grainne seems to rescue a sailor from the sea, engage in a passionate relationship with him, and grieve at his abrupt murder before anyone has a chance to work out who exactly this key character might be and why she feels the need to

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avenge his death. In addition, there were three changes of actor in the title role, which while necessary in the childhood period made no apparent sense in the adult years. Finally there was an endless series of crowd scenes marching in entrances and exits that seemed to have no great purpose. In spite of this, there were some moments of great visual beauty when it was possible to see the intention behind the production, particularly when Grainne swept majestically into the palace for her audience with Queen Elizabeth I in London; here all the elements of the production managed to come together and shine. However, overall it was a most disappointing evening, starting more than 20 minutes late, running far too long in the freezing cold, with too much reliance on drumming, shouting, and flag-waving to compensate for an absence of any real emotion or dramatic tension.

The Drawer Boy, an acclaimed play by Canadian writer Michael Healy, was a co-production between the Galway Arts Festival and the Peacock Theatre. The play is set on a small farm in southern Ontario and is the story of two friends, Angus (David Calder) and Morgan (John Mahoney) who have been living together and working the farm in some isolation since the end of the Second World War. Their lives have changed very little over the years, with simple routines around which each day moves like an invisible clock whose intricate workings are thrown out of kilter by the arrival of Miles (Conor Delaney).

A young actor and student from Toronto, he is looking for a genuine rural experience that he can use as the basis for a play he is developing with a group of college friends — a project which did actually occur in Canada in the early 1970s and which Healy acknowledges as the inspira-

tion for this work. What follows at first seems deceptively mundane and conventional, as a somewhat naïve young man clatters around a farm trying to be helpful and unobtrusive but generally getting in the way and making a nuisance of himself, until the magic of the writing starts to pull these loose threads together and a wonderfully moving story softly but powerfully unfolds.

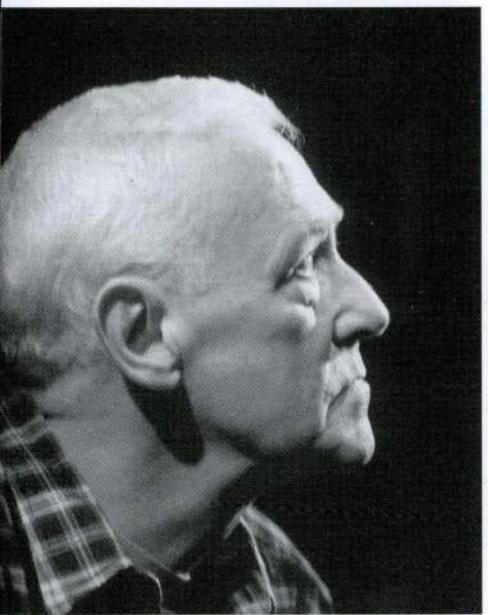


UNLIKELY LOVERS: *The Good Father*

Lynne Parker directed the cast with a firm but gentle hand, keeping everyone in careful check so that nothing overshadowed the narrative, a restraint enhanced by the subtlety of the show's understated but magical lighting by John Comiskey. All was matched to perfection by the truly exceptional and complemen-

MIKE SHAUGHNESSY

tary performances of Calder, Mahoney, and Delaney. Morgan is in charge of the farm and he takes care of Angus in an off-hand but genuinely patient manner. Angus is suffering from memory loss and a kind of confusion with life as a result of an injury incurred during the war. Initially Miles is a source of mild entertainment for the two men, especially Morgan who has a dry and quirky sense of humour



LONELY FARMER: The Drawer Boy

and amuses himself by sending the younger man on a series of useless errands. Angus, in contrast, can hardly remember who Miles is from one moment to the next, and is lost in his own little world until Miles shakes everything loose in their lives which time has held so carefully, by telling their stories back to

them as part of the development process of his play.

This has an impact on two levels: within the world of the drama it allows the tension to build momentum, each revelation or discovery becoming a piece that helps to complete the puzzle which is the story of the older men's past. More importantly, however, by having Miles telling a tale within a tale, Healy uses art to mirror the lives of Angus and Morgan, subtly underscoring what he clearly regards as the central function of theatre itself — its ability to significantly enhance and enrich our lives. What transpires breaks your heart and leaves you with that very rare sense of having been genuinely touched by every aspect of an exceptional production.

Druid Theatre Company, meanwhile, were back in their home base in Druid Lane, much to the delight of audiences who have missed the use of this venue in favour of other, larger spaces recently explored by the company. *The Good Father*, a new play by Christian O'Reilly, brought together once again the almost perfect collaboration of director Garry Hynes with designer Francis O'Connor. The production is staged in the round and is pared down to the bare essentials, with little to relieve the intensity created by the proximity of performers to audience. Rupert Murray's lighting delivers everything required to paint the changing scenes and moods, with a most skillful use of props, and direction that is absolutely assured and deceptively light at the same time. This is the first production of a full-length play by O'Reilly, a Listowel-based playwright who originally came to the attention of Druid through their Druid Debuts play development programme.

It's a love story with attitude, but with a disarming softness at its core, which

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pairs Tim (Aidan Kelly), an unsophisticated but hugely engaging painter and decorator, with Jane (Derbhle Crotty), an urbane, professional woman on the rebound from the supposed love of her life. On paper these two would not seem like an ideal couple, and would probably never even have met if it wasn't New Year's Eve, if everyone else didn't seem so happy, and if too much vodka had not been consumed. The chance of them meeting again in the cold light of a sober day are even less likely — except when circumstances force the issue, and consequences have to be faced.

In dealing with these consequences, Tim and Jane have to work through some of the most difficult challenges any relationship might have to confront, not just their obvious differences of social class and background, but the kind of painful personal challenges which can either make or break lives. As they move through these moments both separately and together, Hynes keeps the play from declining into easy sentiment and maintains a dimension of profound sensitivity, which further proves her extraordinary skill in interpreting writing for the stage.

While there is probably no such thing as a new and truly original love story, sometimes when one is well-told with honesty and sincerity, it is almost possible to imagine we are seeing love for the very first time. The play catches us off guard with writing that is confident and accomplished, and which glimmers with light while allowing shadows to emerge from beneath the surface. This was further enhanced by two thoroughly convincing and quietly sincere performances from Kelly and Crotty, which made for a most enjoyable and moving evening of theatre.

Mary Coll is a Limerick-based poet and critic.

HUMMIN' by Tony Guerin

Red Kettle Theatre Company
On tour; reviewed 27 May 2002 at
Andrew's Lane Theatre, Dublin

BY BRIAN SINGLETON

Hummin', RED KETTLE'S 20TH NEW PLAY reaffirms its commitment to premiering new talent. Tony Guerin, a 63-year-old ex-Kerry footballer and Garda detective sergeant, packs into this, his first professional production, situations and dialogue with which his career, no doubt, made him familiar: abuse, murder, and prostitution. But whereas the policeman's remit is to solve the crime and to separate the good from the bad, the playwright's might be to transcend the murkiness of low-life and offer spectators at least possibilities of redemption, shading evil with a complexity not tolerated by an Old Testament vision of life.

It is often said that a writer's first play is derivative and this is no exception. *Hummin'* owes an enormous debt to his countymate, the late John B. Keane, in its depiction of rural obsessions with land and family feuds. Guerin, though, has also been affected by more recent trends in rural drama, namely the melodramatic violence of Martin McDonagh's *Beauty Queen of Leenane*. But Guerin possesses none of the postmodern sensibilities of McDonagh's recycling of a 19th-century form (melodrama), serving us up straight a tale of brutal misogyny told through a set of relationships depicted as transactions.

Mike Dee (Peadar Lamb) has taken in Jennie, a former prostitute (Geraldine Plunkett), and mother of his illegitimate son, for his own gratification while she has grander designs of marriage and inheritance of his acres. Meanwhile Mike's nephew Andy Dee (Bryan Doherty) is betrothed to the unseen Nancy on -

the condition that he acquire 50 of his uncle's acres as well. Andy sees Jennie as an interloper in a straightforward family inheritance and the battle is on for these two outsiders to win the mind of the sexist, misogynistic, arch-patriot and bigot, Mike. The play opens with a familiar



A LITTLE OFF THE TOP: Hummin'

country kitchen in which an axe is prominently placed downstage right, an index to an obvious gruesome tragedy which is about to occur.

The set, realistically timewarped in the 1950s by Moggie Douglas, is an index,

too, to the entire concept of this play being out of touch if not out of date, as well as to when its seeds might have germinated. Crude references to a world outside North Kerry place Bono at the centre of the North's peace process, and Jennie refers to her street-life amidst the Dublin smog. The plot suffers from pauses for incongruous set-pieces of inaccurate reminiscence and a rendition of "A Nation Once Again," which does nothing other than pander to base nationalism, Wolfe Tone's style; it is nothing other than an engineered claptrap. When it is on the move, the plot is replete with hackneyed insults from one-dimensional characters, played one-dimensionally. Lamb uses all his comic sensibilities to revel in caricature, while Plunkett plays up her character's vulgarity with a histrionic performance which masks any attempt to find a humanity, given all her character has suffered at the hands of men. Director Ben Hennessy, too, fails to pull the whole thing back from the brink of offence, as the script and its performance descend mercilessly into, believe it or not, Healy-Rae racism.

The plot's twists reveal the rejection of Jennie by her son upon his discovery of her profession, her son's true parentage, and her abuse at the hands of the man with whom she is living, Mike. The battle between Andy and Jennie over the property of such a morally worthless individual leaves us to care little who will wield the axe and who will win. The plot nudges us towards Mike being the ultimate victim, but before the axe can fall, an absurdly improbable character called Howdy enters on a bicycle with steer horns, dressed as and speaking like a Hollywood cowboy. Howdy (Mal Whyte) is a man-child trapped in a childhood fantasy but offers Jennie a chance of

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escape. This, we think, is the redemptive character to save the script from its baseness. Whyte plays the improbable with sensitivity and truthfulness, but unfortunately Guerin does not permit the character to be anything more than a caricature of a man in a fantasy world. Jennie is tempted momentarily by the affection of Howdy, but pulls back from a moment of redemption to blackmail Mike for his last use of the axe: the onstage slaying of his nephew. Her new conditions of blackmail involve only land inheritance as she has shed all notions of marriage. All she has learned is how to be even more self-satisfying.

What we can learn from this production is that realism in design, directing, and acting, is not appropriate for a script which underscores rather than challenges amorality, sexism, racism, violence, rape, sexual abuse, and a host of other horrors. This is the sort of play which in the late 19th century was used to denigrate truthfulness of representation by revelling in the morals of the gutter. And this production matches the baseness with sensationalist set-pieces of caricature.

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

LOLITA adapted from Vladimir Nabokov's screenplay

by Michael West

Corn Exchange at The Peacock
3–28 Sep. 2002; reviewed 20 Sep.

BY PETER CRAWLEY

WITH *LOLITA*, CORN EXCHANGE CELEBRATES their maturity by returning to the company's childhood. Built on commedia dell'arte interpretations of plays and film-scripts, their early reputation was distinguished as much by stylistic bravery

as a brazen approach to sacred cows.

At first, Vladimir Nabokov's infamous tale seems an appropriately inappropriate choice. Hunting their own past, both Humbert Humbert and Corn Exchange find *Lolita*, and in each case the relationship is often wittily conveyed but ultimately unsettling. "While I keep everything on the brink of parody," Nabokov said, "there must be, on the other hand, an abyss of seriousness." And for all its playful teetering between comedy and tragedy, theatrical ingenuity and harrowing contemporary resonance, Annie Ryan's production finds it hard to keep such balance.

Adapted not from Nabokov's novel, but his screenplay, Michael West's script slavishly follows the plot of the movie — itself a problematic adaptation. "How did they make a movie of *Lolita*?" asked the original poster of Stanley Kubrick's film, with as much prolepsis as intrigue. Rather than beginning with Nabokov's punch-drunk poetry, a stormy sound design yields to Professor Humbert's last desperate actions as he shoots his rival Quilty in a prologue/dumbshow that also re-establishes Corn Exchange's curiously cinematic commedia conventions. As Andrew Bennett's Humbert and David Pearse's Quilty exchange rapid glances (their facial features beautifully skewed in distinctive, colour-coded make-up), one face invariably peers out at the audience, while the other flips to profile. As in the juxtaposed point-of-view shots of film narrative, here the audience becomes the camera, while each bullet-paced exchange is accompanied by the clatter of David Boyd's perfectly synchronised percussion.

Against Kris Stone's set (a multi-purpose white ramp that stands in for everything from a bed to the highway with its vanishing point apex), European academic Humbert drives through Ramsdale



HIS SIN, HIS SOUL: Andrew Bennett as Humbert and Ruth Negga in the title role of *Lolita*

searching for lodgings and finds the materially and sexually avaricious widow, Mrs. Haze, full of pushy affection and affectations. "I know as a European intellectual you hate our luxurious monstrosity," says the wonderful Clara Simpson, whose depiction of over-ripe sexuality, underscored by Joan O'Cleary's parodic costume, makes her the closest thing to a commedia stock character. Enchanted by her 12-year-old daughter Delores (newcomer Ruth Negga, a natural to the style with her louche *Lolita*), Humbert sets up home, surrenders to the unwanted advances of Mrs. Haze for the darkest possible reasons, and following Haze's sudden accidental death, takes *Lolita* on a road trip of seedy seduction and sordid corruption, stalked by jealousy, morality, and Quilty.

On paper, it should work. This Chi-

nese-whispers-development of commedia from Ariane Mnouchkine's *Paris*, through the San Francisco Mime Troupe to the L.A. Actor's Gang, on to Chicago's New Crime and back to Corn Exchange, thankfully erodes most debts to the improvisations, half-masks, and scatological stock gags of 16th-century North Italy. Instead we get commedia by way of Hanna-Barbera, where each cartoonish gesture is accompanied by a quirky sound effect, while characters invariably depart stage left only to reappear from stage right, disorientating any established sense of space as though the stage is an endlessly scrolling cyclorama.

But *Lolita*, already wryly subversive and unconventionally amusing, merely absorbs such brash impositions, making them feel superfluous to its own tragicom-

ic tone. Even the production's more successful comic flourishes, such as cartoonishly blooming flowers (scored with — what else? — a slide whistle), a letter-ex-machina, where Haze's amorous intentions dangle down to Humbert from the rafters; or his ferociously mimed, murderous imaginings for his new bride, simply provide fleeting moments of self-definition, while *Lolita* relentlessly consumes its would-be iconoclasts.

More successful then is the congruence between production and source. Breaking from his cruelly mirthful reading of Haze's love letter, Bennett's laughter freezes and his eyes meet ours when he reads, "link up your life with mine forever and ever and be a father to my little girl." These dubious double takes establish an uneasy rapport with the audience. Our complicity is further invoked when he throws a mischievous glance over his shoulder as Pearse's sobbing policeman (one of his several alternate roles) breaks the news of his spouse's fatal car accident... and we laugh. It's the same kind of uncomfortable affiliation engendered by Nabokov's novel, where the first-person perspective (the narrative "I") and lush comic prose beckon unwitting support for inexcusable actions.

But little distracts from the simplest of failings — a mismatch of style and material, where either Nabokov's legacy or his estate hampered a truly radical reworking of *Lolita*. Corn Exchange must surely envy the recalcitrance of his characters and perhaps that of their own youth. In the adult world of Peacock Partnerships and zealously guarded performance rights, however, such relationships between young and old necessarily involve compromise. Having shaped commedia to their own ends, Corn

Exchange find *Lolita* unwilling to yield to its juvenile life force. The flaw is sadly entwined with the spirit of their enquiry. Their sin, their soul.

M. BUTTERFLY by David Henry Hwang

Dark Horse Theatre Company
Andrews Lane Studio, Dublin
11-29 Jun. 2002; reviewed 13 Jun.
BY HARVEY O'BRIEN

IN 1950S CHINA, FRENCH DIPLOMAT René Gallimard (James McNeill) becomes entranced by Chinese Opera performer Song Liling (N. Warnock). For René, Liling represents an ideal of femininity: yet though her submissiveness and inscrutability also represent the Orientalist ideal of the East, their affair takes place at a time of change in the world order. The personal and the political are consciously intertwined as communist China overlooks French failure in Indochina and American intervention in Vietnam signals the downfall of western foreign policy. The contextual scaffolding becomes even more complicated when it is revealed that Liling is not only actually a man but also a communist spy. In the course of their long relationship he consistently obtains sensitive information which leads eventually to embarrassment, scandal, and personal and political ruination.

Does René realise the truth? Do we? There is much more to this tale of fantasy and roleplay that is initially obvious, and with each development in the plot, ever more subtle layers of detail reveal a rich dramatic, emotional, and theatrical tapestry. From its opening scenes the central "twist" is alluded to in ways which make it less a gimmick than a theme. Several scenes employ a mixture of memory and fantasy. The narrative is

framed as a reminiscence told by the shattered, imprisoned René and is thus filtered through his imagination, frequently given relief by the ironic commentaries of his old schoolfriend Marc (John O'Reilly), and by Liling herself, freed from the constraints of fancy by her acknowledgement of the truth.

The play on the whole consciously employs reference to Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*, a text which Hwang problematises both as a political and romantic story. There are many delicately balanced moments in which subtle shifts in tone allow the dark humour to shine through and in which the melodrama which lurks under the play's surface is quietly subverted. As the text moves in and out of performances within performance, the actors are usually trying to portray characters who are both consciously and unconsciously playing roles on many levels. As such, *M. Butterfly* requires extremely skilled acting and directing as it explores the strata of parody and masquerade which make up its characterisation and which are integral to its structure.

Dark Horse have set themselves an immense challenge here. The first Irish production of this complex, provocative play is the fourth for the company, and probably their most ambitious. Director/designer Robert Lane has done a reasonably good job with it, especially given the constraints of budget. His stage design is very effective in creating distinctive spaces. A black and red palette makes for an understated yet powerful visual backdrop, and the costumes by producer Deirdre McAweeney are clean and vivid against it. The action shifts from an opera stage to a prison cell to a Chinese apartment without any movement of props or fittings, which

makes blocking, movement, entrances and exits extremely important. All of these have been well timed and organised, and the flow of the drama is never interrupted by metatheatrical obfuscation.

Though all of the actors make a creditable stab at it, there is a level of nuance that is absent in the transitions between roles and roleplay and the degrees of delusion and realisation which determine how we react to and understand these characters. Elaine Jordan gives the only naturalistic turn as Helga, René's passive/aggressive wife. Each of the other actors grapples with the challenge of the many layers of performance, but seem stretched to their limits by it.

McNeill is a suitably tortured Gallimard, though it takes the actor quite some time to find the kinks in the character which allow the audience to see the sense of self-delusion which defines his behaviour. Warnock struggles to maintain the discipline of his delivery in a way which robs his character of some of its relish, but he is generally an effective match for McNeill. O'Reilly is suitably vivacious as Marc, but his accent wavers alarmingly when about to deliver some of the choice punchlines. Michelle Manley fares worst in the role of a communist controller. The character's disgust with Liling is vitally important to the tone of at least one key scene, but a sense of confusion between parody and caricature leaves the audience uncertain of how to respond.

M. Butterfly is an exciting and involving work of theatre which has been given a solid staging here, but there is a sense that its true brilliance has been slightly dulled, which leaves the audience intrigued but not quite exhilarated.

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MAIRE A WOMAN OF DERRY

by Brian Foster

The New Theatre, Dublin
25 Jun.-6 Jul. 2002; reviewed 26 Jun.

BY SUSAN CONLEY

WHAT COMPRISES THE CHARACTER OF AN alcoholic? What happens when a fictional character is expressly written to be alcoholic? A world of complexity opens up — or crashes in, as the case may be — and a series of difficult but potentially powerful and rewarding questions must be broached about appropriate psychology and basic truth in order to create a fully embodied and complicated figure. It is not simply enough to "say" that someone suffers from the addiction (or disease, depending on your point of view) and put a bottle in their pocket. There are determinative influences, family history, and personal choices that strew the path to a life lived rough. With *Maire A Woman of Derry* playwright Brian Foster pulls his punches as he tries to tell the tale of a promising life gone terribly wrong.

This one-woman show performed by Carmel McCafferty is constructed along the lines of a "day in the life." Having staked her claim in Derry's Guildhall Square, Maire takes pull after pull from her naggon, and regales us, in idiomatic language and a series of impersonations, with the details of her life thus far. Her reminiscences begin where we presume that her independent life consciously commenced: with a fevered courtship through to marriage and a long-awaited and welcomed pregnancy. That her father had bit of a problem with the drink is alluded to and glossed over; this rings true enough, as the kind of denial that accompanies alcoholism can be very strong indeed. The rhythm of the piece was initially promising, as it seemed that every time Maire was



ON THE BOTTLE: McCafferty as Maire

getting close to an ugly truth in reality, she would immediately revert to memory and another cheeky tale of yore, full of friends with colourful names like Tina the Tap, Big Brady, and Jimmy the Tadpole. McCafferty performs each of these friends and neighbours, and spends a lot of time leaping from park bench to (inexplicably) a chair as she dialogues with herself.

Act One grinds along in this vein; as the memories darken, the constant use of

blackout from anecdote to anecdote becomes predictable and wearisome. The mundanity of Maire's story is numbing, and when it appears that the playwright is attaching the genesis of her drink problem to Bloody Sunday (and by extension, eight hundred years of oppression), credulity is strained to the breaking point. It becomes increasingly painful to watch and listen, and one was lost as to how in the world Act Two was going to proceed.

It doesn't proceed as much as ignite: The naggon having finally taken effect, we watch as McCafferty painfully, hopelessly, helplessly falls into the bottom of the bottle. As she deteriorates, and her story along with her, it becomes obvious that this was where the actor is at her most comfortable, in her characterisation and in her own body, and her performance is simply astonishing. Utterly realistic and moving, McCafferty becomes, finally, what all the p.r. had promised, as she embodies her alcoholic tragedy believably: her inability to keep her focus, her lack of clarity, her outbursts of rage, her failure to keep a straight narrative line, all this behaviour is precise and correct and convincing, and shattering to watch.

The lack of unity between the two acts thoroughly undermines the play and the build from sorrowful but too-lucid sobriety to the full impact of Maire's addiction simply doesn't mesh. All the happy-clappy family bits are obviously placed to give us a reference point, and invite us to acknowledge the terrible turns of events and to mourn Maire's squandered life, but the lack of integration between "then" and "now," the failure to enmesh past and present hamstrings what had the potential to be a daring and challenging piece of theatre.

Finally, the physical presentation of Maire herself is a problem from the first set piece. For someone who hasn't a penny she

hasn't begged, she is possessed of a clean and well-fitting enough coat, whose only concession to beggarliness is a lack of buttons. McCafferty's personal cleanliness is unreal as well — surely she'd have no chance at all to give herself a good wash. And as to the character's psychology, there simply isn't enough there that exhibited the tics and pitfalls of alcoholic behaviour, and the notion that the British are to be blamed for her disease is patently absurd. A lack of real investigation into the alcoholic background and mindset compromises a character that, had she had a consistent text to work with, might have allowed McCafferty to create something enormously special — she is certainly able for it.

THE MASSACRE @ PARIS

**by Christopher Marlowe,
adapted by Alex Johnston**

Bedrock Productions

Project, Dublin

4-21 Sep. 2001; reviewed 20 Sep.

BY BELINDA KELLY

CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE'S *THE MASSACRE @ Paris* is an historical tragedy recounting an ongoing series of religious civil wars in France that started in 1562 and ended in 1598. At the start of the play the ruling King of France, the Catholic Charles IX, marries his daughter to a Protestant king in an attempt to bridge the fractious religious divide. But his conciliatory efforts prove futile, as senior figures in his immediate family are intent on a religious war and devise a massacre which results in a further 30 years of disenfranchisement. Marlowe's script is so convoluted and obscure as to be considered by many an unfinished work.

Into this already complex territory, enter Bedrock Productions. Alex Johnston has written a very loose adaptation of Mar-

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lowe's original, in which original Elizabethan passages are fused with modern reportage in the form of a roving Sky-esque television commentator. While juxtaposing a modern media-hyped war with 16th-century warmongering is admirably ambitious, I fear Johnston has backed the wrong horse. Bedrock's programme acknowledges that the original play is "a ruin with some remarkable moments." So why stack a ruin with such a weighty (and unfulfilled) premise as a mediatised war? Surely a wreck needs to be built from its base. It needs restoration and clarity in the shape of form. In Johnson's adaptation, the focus is very much on style. The veracity and pertinence of the original apparently needed no added devices in his view. While I appreciate that Johnston very much wanted the play to be as "intelligible..... and involving as possible," he should have had more faith in the origin of his adaptation.

Jimmy Fay directs with a charged confidence. The whole production had a flamboyant air of rebellious bravado. He is an exciting director with a fearless intuition. The world of this play is very much alive and kicking. On the subject of kicking, there was some pretty exciting violence and an excellent smothering by plastic bag (Paul Burke staged the fights.) Adaptor Johnston's portrayal of the King of France as a conscientious objector developed in its complexity. Andrea Irvine was compelling as the once resolute, then grief-stricken Queen Catherine; Karl Shiels was perfectly cast as a bloodthirsty Duke of Guise.

Apart from a backdrop of modern religious imagery the entire production was set in a black box. Despite several valiant efforts to place furniture in various positions around the stage, the actors appeared slightly forlorn in such an indiscriminate landscape. There is no set designer listed



HANGIN' OUT: The cast of *The Massacre @ Paris*

in the programme. Lighting by Paul Keogan was minimalist and stark. Ivan Birthistle's music merged ambient with sound effects and was the most striking facet of the production. Catherine Fay cleverly designed a wide range of period dress that incorporated paramilitary uniforms through to Victorian ruffs.

So did Bedrock succeed in shaking this classic text alive? The answer, sadly, is no. If more time had been spent on text analysis, more money spent on design, and even more money spent on actors being allowed the time to perfect their craft, then it just might have reached its potential. But why choose such an arduous and overambitious project in the first place? Don't get me wrong. As a former actress, I am certainly not in favour of artistic policies being defined by an abacus. I am, however, an optimistic realist and if a company only has X to spend, then in order to develop they need to take these budgetary limitations into account. Bedrock is a radically talented company. That they are struggling to achieve their ambitions of realising just one full production a year is a sad indictment of the state of arts funding in this country.

Belinda Kelly is a writer.

MIND THAT 'TIS MY BROTHER

by Gaye Shortland

Meridian Theatre Company

Granary Theatre, Cork and Project, Dublin

Reviewed 25 Jun. 2002 at the Granary

BY LINDA MURRAY

ADAPTED FROM THE NOVEL OF THE same name, *Mind That 'tis My Brother* follows the fortunes of Dec and Liam on the Cork gay scene as they attempt to lay the ashes of Liam's deceased brother, Tony, to rest. Tony, however, is not particularly

keen to depart, and his ghost accompanies them on their journey, acting as a narrator and providing a link between characters and audience.

Hailed as Cork's answer to Roddy Doyle, Gaye Shortland has a definite ear for the spoken vernacular, and there are many endearing moments of wit and rhetoric in the play that epitomise the humour of the streets of Cork. It seems strange then — but is unfortunately true — that the script, which descends from a novel that relied heavily on direct speech for its depth and vitality, lacks these very qualities in its transition to the stage. Despite the native accents and familiarity of the turn of phrase, there is something false and stagy about the dialogue, almost as if the local slang was used to prove the authenticity of the work rather than emerging organically from the characters.

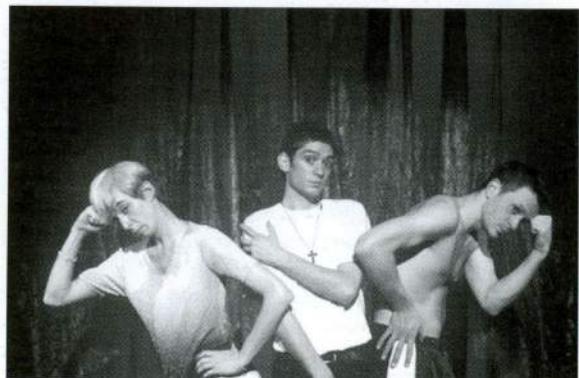
Director Johnny Hanrahan, for his part, seems to have been intent on highlighting the magic realism of the play through naked theatricality, with mixed success. There was, as is now almost expected, a distinct visual impact to Meridian's approach, which was most effective in the use of an array of props that were suspended from the ceiling. These ranged from a series of dressed mannequins, fashioned from wire clothes hangers, complete with wigs and a gap to allow the face to poke through (reminiscent of those old seaside novelty pictures where tourists donated their heads to the bodies of a swimmer and strongman), to more conventional dummies. The former permitted actor Frank Bourke to switch from the central character of Tony into a wealth of recognisable stereotypes and was a good device. But because these hanging bodies descended so frequently on the stage, the inclusion of a dummy for the role of novice rentboy, Scarlett, seemed superfluous.

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Indeed, there appeared to be a desire to involve too much in the way of props, lighting, and sound, while the set remained minimalistic. Nice in theory to juxtapose different visual elements, but it didn't quite gel on this occasion. A round of applause, however, for the mind behind the enormous legs and feet that disappeared into the rafters and swung down as part of an awe-inspiring Garda — it was visually enchanting and helped along the comedy that was flagging somewhat in other areas. As with their last production, Sebastian Barry's *White Woman Street*, the staging included film projection, which brings with it all the difficulties of merging multi-media. But while in the Barry play the screen images helped provide the sense of expanse needed for a piece taking place in open countryside, it did not add much to the play on this occasion. Its purpose was to create atmosphere and imaginatively portray the emotions of the characters, but in this regard, better direction of the able cast would have been preferable, especially when Tom Creed's lighting was already sensitive to the rhythms of the piece and established sufficient mood for the drama to unfold. Indeed the technical seemed to supersede the action on stage with overbearing sound and special effects consistently interrupting the spectator's relationship with the actors. It made it practically impossible for a rapport to be established, something that a play which relies on familiar speech needs.

Though location is central to this play,

the fact remains that the dominant themes of *Mind That 'tis My Brother* are homosexuality and the threat of AIDS, topics that Meridian does not explore or engage with sufficiently. While culturally the gay scene may be associated with disco music and anthems such as Gloria Gaynor's "I Will Survive," it should not be forgotten that queer culture has embraced much of this on a subversive level, ironically performing the heterosexual stereotyping of their sexuality as a statement of the discrimination and marginalisation that they encounter. Unfortunately, the production does not capture this at all, seeming con-



MACHO MEN: *Mind That 'tis My Brother*

tent to play to straight notions of homosexuality and get laughs rather than speaking to the people who are the subject of the play where humour would still be present but with a dark underbelly. While Myles Breen's nightclub choreography has a certain entertainment value at first, it becomes frustrating to watch when it continues to suffocate the much more substantial issues of sexuality, identity, and mortality that are ever-present, but never delved into in any great depth. The fear

that surrounded the AIDS epidemic is never apparent, nor is the discrimination that the gay community experienced as a result. This is not to suggest that the production should have become an earnest political statement — humour is important in this work. But — and it is a big but — Meridian failed to strike a balance between playing for laughs and asking unsettling questions of its audience.

Linda Murray is dance curator at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.

A NIGHT IN NOVEMBER by Marie Jones

The Lyric Theatre, Belfast

7 Jun.-6 Jul 2002; reviewed on 1 Jul.

BY PAUL DEVLIN

STEWART MARSHALL'S MINIMALIST SET for this restaging of Marie Jones's acclaimed one-man-show presented the audience with a wall of (anonymous) photographed faces hung above and behind a representation of a stone terrace in Windsor Park football ground. Marshall's design was not just a highly adaptable space for the performance of this multi-location drama; it also foregrounded the play's pivotal scene and intimated that the story to be told was that of an ordinary man, a face in the crowd.

Kenneth McCallister, the central figure, is a petty-minded dole clerk whose life largely revolves around soulless dinner parties, a desire to get into the golf club, and generally trying to keep his socially ambitious wife happy. A Protestant, Kenneth resents having been passed over for promotion at work in favour of one of his Catholic colleagues. The bitterness this elicits reveals a thread of bigotry running through Kenneth, a sneaking sense of Protestant superiority that, in his mind, justifies the

negative stereotyping of Catholics.

The extent of this bigotry is tested when Kenneth reluctantly accompanies his foul-mouthed father-in-law Eddie to a contentious football match between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. The level of sectarianism Kenneth witnesses at this match appalls him. Eddie leads Protestant Northern Ireland supporters in a chant of "trick or treat" (a reference to the then-recent Greysteel massacre) and Kenneth, whose disgust has turned to fear, feels obliged to join in the singing of sectarian songs to avoid being mistakenly taken for a Republic fan. For Kenneth, the moment is a defining one, calling into question many of the assumptions upon which he has founded his identity. What follows is Kenneth's personal odyssey, a journey of self-discovery that ultimately leads him to New York where, in a Second Avenue bar, he witnesses the Republic's 1-0 victory over Italy in the 1994 World Cup.

The play is couched in real-life events that occurred in Northern Ireland during 1993 and 1994. The actual football match between the Republic and Northern Ireland took place not only under the spectre of the Greysteel murders but also the Shankill bombing and what seemed at the time like the accelerated workings of an embryonic peace process. Kenneth's sea-change in this context is indicative of what many perceived to be a larger shift in social attitudes in Northern Irish society as a whole. The extent to which Jones successfully explores the transformation of the individual from bigot to pluralist is by turns genius, manipulative, saccharine, and genuinely moving.

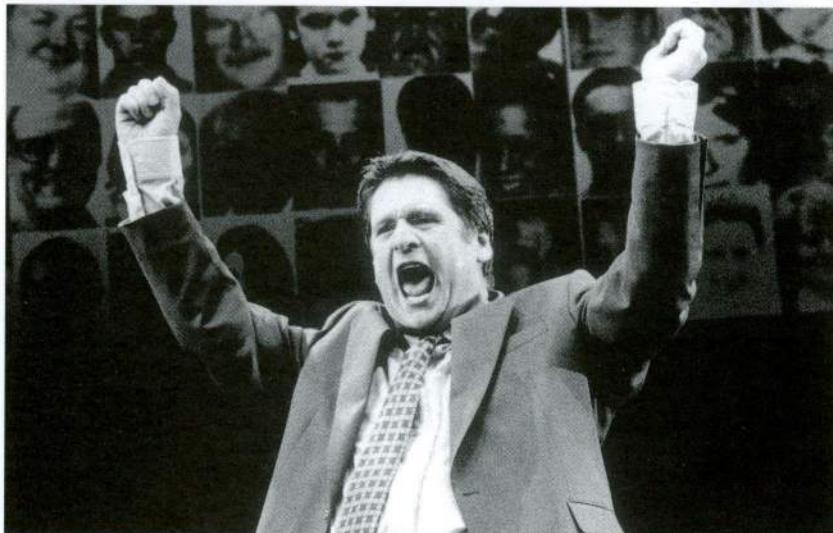
At the core of Jones' drama is a tension between the playwright's impulse towards social commentary and her instinct for sharply observed comedy. Partly, this is a result of the play's narrative

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technique. The play is built out of Kenneth's recollection of events and as such flits between full re-enactments and other occasions where his narrative becomes more explanatory and confessional. Jones trusts her comedy to be self-explanatory and as such allows it to occur within the action of the play. However, this trust, and the subsequent dramatic immediacy it lends, is infrequently extended to those moments when Kenneth seems to reach a point of epiphany. Often, rather, Jones

Kenneth's shock and disgust at the football supporters' sectarianism is never fully believable given that he was brought up in a "loyalist area" and had likely been witness to this type of racial prejudice before — gives way to a richer, less moralising second act.

Dan Gordon here reprises the role he originated in the first production of this play; he has performed it over 500 times including a four-month run off-Broadway. His performance was proof, if proof were



COME ON YOU BOYS IN GREEN: Dan Gordon in *A Night in November*

elects to have Kenneth tell, not show, the audience of his transformation. The effect of this is to make the play sometimes feel contrived.

Not that this is always the case, however. *A Night in November* is at its strongest when Jones' comedy is the commentary and vice versa. So it is that a problematic first act — in which the establishment of

needed, that practice makes perfect: he was simply brilliant. The sheer muscularity, commitment, and energy he brought to the role was exhilarating. Gordon had the ability to make the Lyric actually feel like a football stadium through the intensity of his presence, but with alarming ease, the arch of an eyebrow, and a change to the tenor of his voice, he could close down the

sense of space between the audience and the stage to create an altogether more intimate and personal arena.

Stephen Wright's direction was remarkable in its invisibility. Gordon's movements were blocked with care but without rigidity, and Wright encouraged him to exploit the full width of the stage. The play's pacing calls for frequent movement between frenetic energy and a more measured inertia. Wright accomplished such shifts without any sense of "jump-cut" or stiltedness, but rather at all times felt fluid, organic and comfortable.

PRIDE AND PREJUDICE by Jane Austen, adapted by James Maxwell
The Gate Theatre
13 Jun.-21 Sep. 2002; reviewed 19 Jul.
BY SUSAN CONLEY

DEAREST READER: It is with a heavy heart that I pen these few words; for indeed, there is no greater admirer of the works of Miss Jane Austen, that esteemed Hampshire dame, no truer champion of the spinster Englishwoman's tales of young women and their often harrowing fate at the hands of a rigid and intransigent society. The source of pain that has plunged me into the depths of despair from which I labour to give expression, is the advent of yet another representation in dramatic form of the estimable Lady Genius' highly esteemed second work; and to quote the scribe herself, in reference here to the production by the Gate Theatre, "the work is rather too light and bright, and sparkling; it wants shade..." Oh! Happy fate that Miss Austen can bear no witness to a theatrical rendering which, whilst adhering with great constancy to her original plan, well and truly leeches it of the very darkness of which she speaks —

Whew. You wouldn't think so, but that's fairly difficult to sustain — and this itself foregrounds the fact that Jane Austen's work seems deceptively easy to reproduce. Her finely wrought plots would seem to lend themselves heart and soul to dramatic form as the many adaptations to film and television attest (among them Greer Garson and Laurence Olivier's 1940 version of *P&P*; the BBC's superb mini-series of same; and Emma Thompson's Academy Award-winning script for *Sense and Sensibility*.)

Easy to produce, but also easily misproduced. These high-profile versions have set the tone for romance against all odds, and if one didn't know better, one would think that Austen was a writer of costume dramas, rather than a highly insightful, delicately yet deliciously uncompromising transcriber of human nature at its best dressed but least noble. The Gate's offering shed little light on Austen's dark side; add to that the lack of any chemistry whatsoever between the male and female lead, and the result is polished, innocuous, superficial fare.

For those of you joining us late (from Mars?) the story line unfolds thus: The Bennett family is burdened by five daughters and straightened circumstances. The stoic and quietly caustic Mr. Bennett hides from his over-excitable wife behind books and correspondence, and generally deploys cutting bons mots on the subject of daughters' collective silliness and unsuitability to go to wife. Second eldest daughter Elizabeth escapes such censure — our Lizzie is bright, sharp, and as equally acerbic as her father. Her love for gentle and angelic elder sister Jane knows no bounds, and her patience with giddy young Lydia and Kitty and bookish Mary is boundless. This patience is strained

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when the neighbouring Netherfield estate is let to a fine, young, rich fellow the name of Bingley; Mrs. B shoots off into the stratosphere at the thought of his "four thousand a year," and Elizabeth finds the entire Bennett brood in the unpleasant position of coming beneath the judgmental eye of one Mr. Darcy, bosom friend of Bingley, he of 10,000 a year and a stultifying pride that precludes even the simplest of dances with the prettiest of girls.

That romance ensues is unsurprising, but the road it takes is fraught with social commentary, political complication, and an unblinking observation of a period in time in which women of middling birth and no income were doomed to scrape through life dependent on the kindness of relations, or through the making of an advantageous match.

These ideas are utterly transparent on the page, making a straight translation from page to stage seemingly idiot-proof. What would be nice would be to see a production that actually makes something of the content beyond the empire waists and fluttering missives. Director Alan Stanford came close in a scene between Elizabeth and her dear friend Charlotte Lucas: Charlotte's announcement that she is to marry the pompous and toadish Mr. Collins allows the women, through the action of the text, to foreground the reality with which they were faced, that of poverty or compromise.

It was a strong and moving scene surrounded by the usual fluff that one has come to expect of such adaptations, and the lazy choice of playing the romance card is here, as mentioned before, a dead loss because Mark O'Halloran and Justine Mitchell, two of our most interesting young actors, fail to sizzle and spark in the pivotal roles. Each part is played with



POISED: *Pride and Prejudice*

almost maniacal energy, yet none delve beneath the surface to mine what are becoming far too familiar types. For fans of the genre, it's all there — the dances, the gloves, the petticoats — and there's nothing like Austen's pithy and biting turn of phrase, but James Maxwell's adaptation neither illuminates nor challenges the text. To the point, dear reader — it was all terribly, terribly vexing.

RACCOON by Thomas Hall

The Cobalt Café, Dublin and
Wexford Arts Centre

Reviewed 15 Aug. 2002 at the Cobalt Café

BY BRIAN LAVERY

ANY PLAY ABOUT A LONELY WAITRESS' search for love and belonging inevitably walks a tightrope of sentimentality over a sea of schmaltz. But with bold steps, actress Valerie O'Connor and director Victor Merriman manage to pull off the delicate balancing act in this new one-woman play from Tom Hall, an American ex-pat and writer-in-association at the Dublin Institute of Technology.

Raccoon tells the story of Saoirse, who is stuck incessantly pouring cups of "tay" for crotchety farmers in a café in an Irish country town. An orphan raised by an older woman she calls "Gran," Saoirse is a tough and resilient character, skeptical and sarcastic but fundamentally good-natured and big-hearted. Like the raccoons she saw once on holiday in Florida, she roots through the garbage of her life, looking for the pearls that she knows lie buried underneath. As the play opens, she finds a trampled rose stem on the café floor — left by a farmer whose love spurned him at the cattle mart, no doubt — and pricks her thumb picking it up. In case we don't get it, Saoirse spells it out: just like Gran used to say, there's a beautiful flower under all the thorns.

Mercifully, Hall stops flirting with such mawkish metaphors before his play ends up sounding like a farcical Tom Waits paean to the forgotten waitress. Aside from her reminiscences of the Florida holiday spent in a cheap motel outside Disney World, the guts of the play focus on Saoirse's recounting of her relationship with Seamus, a puzzling, little old man with intense eyes and a habit of staring at

Saoirse's hair. The two gradually build up a playful rapport, until Saoirse starts suspecting that Seamus might be involved in her mysterious family history.

It starts when he suggests that she put her hair up in a chignon: no ordinary Irish farmer would even know the word, says Saoirse, let alone pay attention to feminine hairstyles. From there, Saoirse fears that Seamus may be the father who abandoned her. Rather, he eventually reveals that Saoirse's mother, now dead, abandoned her newborn daughter in England, and later married Seamus; Seamus can't take his eyes off Saoirse because she's the spitting image of his late wife. By the end of the play, Hall teases us with the unknown possibilities that relationship holds, with Saoirse just barely hinting that she might fancy her mother's husband as a lover as well as a father.

The intimate setting of the Cobalt Café poses a few challenges, which O'Connor, a recent DIT drama graduate in her professional debut, and Merriman address head-on. The soaring Georgian ceilings and hardwood floors help the sound, and we can hear O'Connor's every word and whisper, even when she's not facing the audience. We are seated in the front room, watching Saoirse wander through the back half of the large space in her waitress' apron, smoking, sipping water, opening and shutting windows. Merriman might have enhanced the intimacy of the performance by using the café setting to even greater effect, with the audience seated at tables while Saoirse wandered among us, clearing our empty wine glasses and sweeping under our tables, telling her story to a host of customer confidantes.

In addition to Saoirse, O'Connor plays a handful of other parts as she imitates the voices and mannerisms of the people in her life. Her co-worker Rita and Gran,



WAITING: O'Connor in *Raccoon*

being sympathetic and relatively inconsequential, get off lightly. She does Seamus while sitting, leaning forward with an elbow on her knee, while affecting an old man's raspy voice. From the Disney World trip, she viciously and hilariously lampoons her immature ex-boyfriend Jimmy and Goofy (yes, the cartoon character, in costume).

For nearly an hour with no break, O'Connor successfully swaps characters.

And she manages Saoirse's emotional transitions particularly well. During a long rant about Jimmy's childishness in the Magic Kingdom, she suddenly hesitates as she remembers his infidelities; her lip trembles; her eyes focus on something off in the distance. Throughout the play, such moments of loss or loneliness are brief: Hall spins the tone around full-circle back to comedy to tell us that Jimmy has run off with the girl in the Goofy suit.

Ironically, the production's biggest flaw is O'Connor's intensity. The anecdotes tossed out by a waitress over a cigarette after her shift — even a naïve, 26-year-old waitress with a big heart — need the feeling of casual transience. Instead, O'Connor is constantly focused and concentrated. She delivers each line with the precise, too-perfect rhythm and intonation of an elocution lesson. She stretches her vowels, crafting each word like a storyteller trying to enchant a group of schoolchildren. A little distraction would do wonders.

REQUIEM FOR LENA

by Veronica Coburn and

WHAT THE DEAD WANT

by Alex Johnston

The Gaiety School of Acting

Project Space Upstairs

4-8 Jun. 2002; reviewed 8 Jun.

BY PETER CRAWLEY

"FROM MY LIMITED EXPERIENCE IN museums," runs Alex Johnston's programme preamble, "I understand that a showcase is an inert object which displays already dead things in the best possible light." The Gaiety School of Acting, exhibiting admirable support for new Irish writing, this year set Veronica Coburn and Johnston the tricky task of tailoring their creativity to fit a cast of young acting graduates. To reconcile the "made to order"

play demands of equal-sized parts and a scope to demonstrate the students' skills with an original drama of fascinating ideas, a well-wrought plot, and engaging execution must be the Holy Grail of the showcasers' endeavours. The plays in this case, however, readily divide into two opposing categories; one is a showcase, the other, a play. Whichever serves the fledgling actors better, there is little question which benefits the audience.

Death may be the common theme of each piece, but that's all they share. In Coburn's play, *requiem for lena*, Mary Kelly's Anna sifts through old photographs and album sleeves while reflecting on her mother's suicide and an unanswered telephone call that might have made all the difference. "I missed my mother like you miss a bus," she says. The photos conjure up images of Lena's childhood with her six siblings while the complement of actors dissolve from shakily choreographed snapshot poses to re-enact their past in a place seemingly removed from time. More prosaically, however, this simply means that there are a lot of uninterrupted speeches in which each actor gets to exhibit her range.

The consequent lack of interaction between characters forfeits the rhythm of communication in favour of staggering showboating monologues, prolonged by an inordinatefeat of over-writing. As characters leadenly muse on "the coincidence of incidence, the collision of circumstances," even an exchange between mother and daughter unfurls without furtive eye contact. Competing stories, histories, revelations, and desires amass into a formless whole and Coburn herself seems to wonder if she can tie up the loose ends, "or are we caught forever in a tangle?"

Conversely, *What The Dead Want* couldn't be more sardonically straightforward. We

see dead people. Walking around like regular people. The basic laws of the universe have been changed and the "differently deceased" mill about with the living while disorientated First World War veterans show up in pubs. Exposition is breezily blasé, tongue firmly in cheek. "Where are his parents?" Katy Davis's Renee asks a soon to be bereaved Karen at the deathbed of her boyfriend. "He doesn't have any, he's an orphan." "Oh yeah, I forgot." Going against all medical and social recommendations, Karen brings Joe back home, content that if she can recall every little detail about him she will keep more than just his memory alive. This leaves rascally Bobby, played insouciantly by Matthew Keenan, to crack on to Renee, while bookish Maggie (Noni Stapleton, delivering the most assured performance of either production) pines for the stiff who never knew she loved him, and begrudgingly accepts counseling from Walter Benjamin, the German literary critic, who arrives from the foggy depths of her undergraduate recollections. For some reason.

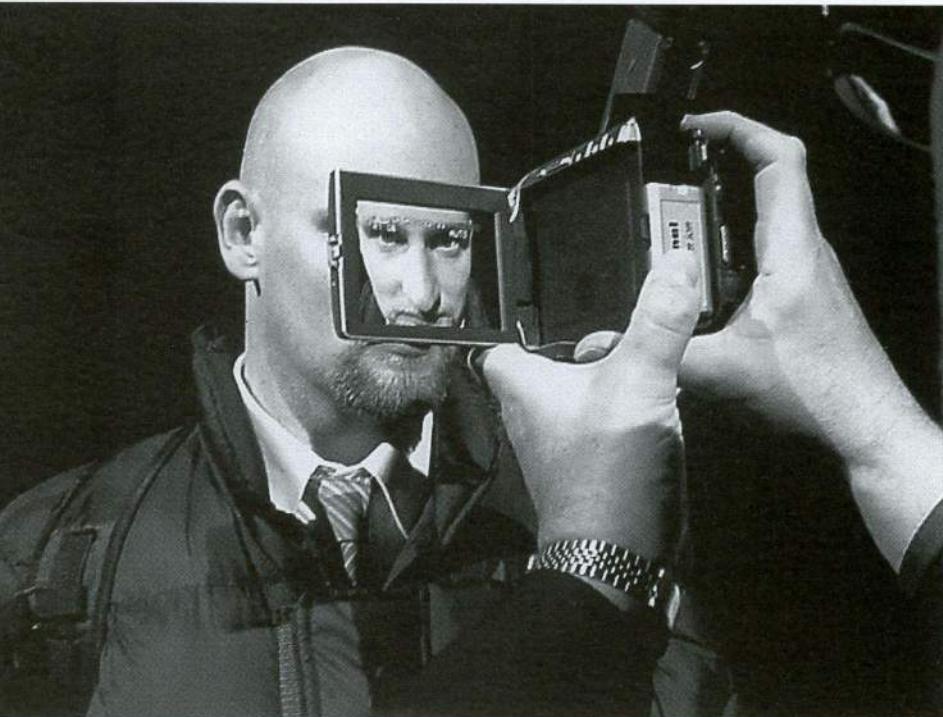
Johnston's play crackles with a mixture of surreal wit and fierce intelligence, while Jimmy Fay's direction accommodates such blissfully skewed logic with stripped-down scene changes and well-coordinated crowd scenes. In this entertaining fondue of popular culture, literary theory, historical revisionism, and political dissidence, T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" successfully translates into a Hollywood blockbuster, a suicidal Marxist critic offers erudite life coaching, and good-looking twenty-somethings discuss the illogic behind World War I ("That guy shot that guy") and the inappropriate response of the US's War on Terror.

Yet in spite of Johnston's more salient ideas and his clear affection for bookish or

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literary figures, his two-dimensional portraits of the shallow living are troublingly disdainful. Although Bobby has a passing interest in history and politics, his character note is that of an unbelievably insensitive womaniser, attempting to woo a dying man's girlfriend one moment,

the time Joe's buoyant wake detours into a Karaoke bar where the restlessly imaginative and densely allusive play decides to tie up its plots threads in one gloriously heart-felt, post-ironic moment. As Barry Flanagan's endearing pedant Walter croons along with Peter Corry's amusing-



IS THAT A POSTMODERN FRAME I SEE BEFORE ME? What the Dead Want

while shagging her friend in a toilet stall the next. Karen and Renee seem interchangeably vacuous, while Neo-Nazi Carl and besuited Neil appear to be no more than narrative afterthoughts, characterised accordingly.

Of course none of this really matters by

ly diffident Joe to Robbie Williams's soft-rock classic, "Angels," three plotlines are simultaneous resolved in its unabashed guitar solo, sublimely mimicked with the elastic string of a party hat in a pink spotlight. Resurrected for the Dublin Fringe Festival four months later, the production

G. CLELAND

had since lost some of its original cast members and, understandably, some of its offbeat freshness, but the play proved it had legs.

Emerging from the Project in June though, even while glowing with the warmth of a sublimely shared experience, the script's lingering intellectual elitism fomented a cold disdain for the dead-eyed passers-by outside. High art and pop culture. Casting agents and innocent spectators. The dead and the living... can't we all just get along?

ROMEO AND JULIET

by William Shakespeare

Second Age Theatre Company

On tour; Reviewed 17 Sep. 2002 at the Gaiety Theatre, Dublin **BY EAMONN JORDAN**

FACED WITH WRITING A REVIEW OF A production like this, a critic is faced with a number of choices. Run for the hills and offer faint praise and ask the reader to read between the lines, or endeavour to call it as it is. Even when critics claim to call it like it is, readers can often tell what is being held back. Readers know by the level of engagement.

When I sit in a theatre space, I expect to be taken in by the story, to be moved, to feel, to consider and to laugh, even to think in different ways. I go not as a cynic awaiting failure; instead, I go anticipating success. I don't expect perfection and I can overlook flaws, tolerate the limits of the venue, and don't get too fussed by mistakes such as missed lighting cues or fluffed lines, once there is a genuine attempt to be tolerably professional, to maximise the limited resources and talents available.

With Shakespeare's work I want to be excited by the force, the drive, subtlety, playfulness, complexity of emotions — the varied intensity and compression that his

plays may potentially deliver. I await the spoken language to capture that intensity, and I expect the actors' physicality to be capable of delivering lines with some force. Even for well-trained actors, whose training focus is primarily on naturalistic delivery, their vocal instruments are often not dextrous enough to get the beat and complexity of the Shakespearean line. So, I don't expect most actors to be great at that, but I want competence and compensations, like extra commitment, focus, presence, tragic pulse, and the roughness of complex and contradictory emotions being portrayed.

Romeo and Juliet is one of the most adapted and "acted upon" of Shakespearian texts: we've had cross-dressed, same-sex lovers, both male and female; we've had the Capulet/Montague feud as racial conflict, including a recent English production where the Montagues are Muslim and the Capulets Christian; we've had Baz Luhrmann's exceptional film. The question is, what version do we have here on offer to audiences in general, or more especially the significant school-going audience that Second Age productions attract. Maybe it's the casual version — because some of the actors wear casual clothing — maybe the text-message version, or maybe...?

This is part of the problem, as no real decisions have been made as to what potential template of meanings can be established in performance. Although there is a real inconsistency of styles, some of the individual acting is good and delivery of the lines is fine: Thomas Grube as Capulet, Deirdre Monaghan as Lady Capulet, John Olohan as Friar Laurence and David O'Meara as Mercutio did their best to raise the standard of this production towards the level of the mediocre. The mob scenes and the combat scenes were absolutely awful. Menace and foreboding?

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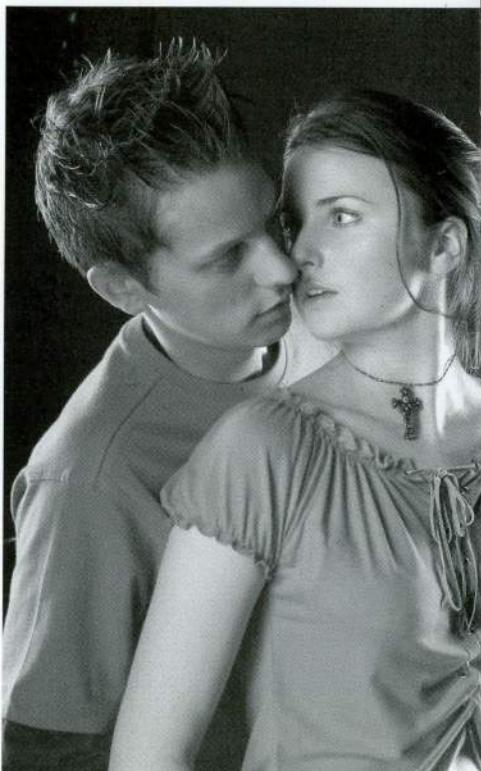
It was more like petty spats in *Grease* than gang warfare.

The set and lighting designs work very well; you got a reasonable sense of where the story is going, if you were unfamiliar with the tale. Does it offer anything else? Not much, I'm afraid. The rhythm of the line is ultimately missing; this of course ensures that the tragedy is not the heartbeat. There is nothing to shift the play along, apart from the general action — no configuration of intensities, urgencies and improbabilities that will bring doom.

Romeo and Juliet is a play about intransigence, violence, vendettas, blood and lust, about the victory of impulse over logic, about the ascent of intimacy over life, about the erotics of pain and the deviance of pleasure. Between false adolescent invincibility and tragic inevitability this play must sway. This production got little or nothing of these. The youthful Ailish Symons, who obviously has potential as an actress, just does not have either the skill or range to carry off the role of Juliet. Tadhg Murphy's Romeo is more defined, but very limited when it comes to the more demanding moments; his emotional transitions are neither earned nor elaborated upon. The tragic sensibility, the sensation of doom is never articulated between the lovers. Theirs is a hasty marriage of tribal inconvenience. The nuanced, fanatical denial of where things may go is lost on both of them.

Verbally, the doom-marked doombat of the tragic iambic line is missing from the collective energy of this production and emotionally, tragedy's unreasonableness is non-existent. If I didn't know better, I would not have known that this was a tragedy: we do get dead bodies, but none of the journeys

matters, and none of the deaths matters. And what about a despoiled, default, notion of empathy through tragic "pity and fear," nothing here I'm afraid, but a critic's self-pity. Who am I? Why am I here? It is not existential angst. Just get



STAR-CROSSED: Romeo and Juliet

me out of here. The critic as "misfortune's fool" is bad, but for a young audience, it is worse.

Eamonn Jordan works for the Institute for the International Education of Students.

SEE YOU NEXT TUESDAY by Francis
Veber, adapted by Ronald Harwood

The Gate Theatre

26 Sep.-9 Nov. 2002; reviewed 1 Oct.

BY HARVEY O'BRIEN

THE FUNNIEST THING ABOUT *SEE YOU Next Tuesday* is the programme notes. Ardal O'Hanlon's biographical note tells us "Ardal O'Hanlon first appeared at the Gate at a performance of *Waiting for Godot* in 1989. It was great." Most people will come to this show to see O'Hanlon, and if that is all they expect from the evening, then they will not be disappointed. The actor, making his theatre debut, runs through the staccato delivery, stiff neck movements, and incredulous facial expressions which made him famous on television. By and large these are appropriate to the character he plays in this translation of Francis Veber's satirical farce *Le Diner de Cons*. There is not a lot of force to the production, though. It never delves deeply into the slippery psychological and thematic material which underlies the comic action. Though O'Hanlon's wide-eyed stupidity is amusing in the Fr. Dougal manner, he cannot infuse the play with the ferocity it really needs. The result is polished but toothless.

The action takes place in the apartment of Pierre Brochant (Risteárd Cooper), a successful publisher whose circle of friends holds a regular dinner party to which each brings a dope. On this particular evening Pierre has put his back out, and before he can cancel the date, tax inspector and avid matchstick model maker François Pinion (O'Hanlon) arrives at his home. Initially eager to proceed with the ritual humiliation in spite of his infirmity, Pierre suddenly finds the joke turning on him. His wife Christine (Fiona Bell) leaves a phone message stating that she is leaving

him, setting off a chain of events in which the well-meaning François constantly intervenes and makes progressively worse. The paradoxes and reversals of fortune continue with the carefully staggered introduction of additional characters including Pierre's psychic, nymphomaniacal mistress Marlene (Fiona O'Shaughnessy), his estranged friend Le Blanc (Michael James Ford), and a menacing auditor played by John Kavanagh.

Veber specialises in satirical farces. His work has been adapted across languages and media, resulting in a long but not necessarily illustrious list of films in French and English including *The Toy*, *Buddy Buddy*, *Three Fugitives*, and *The Man With One Red Shoe*. He was also among the writers of the stage version of *La Cage Aux Folles*, remade in Hollywood as *The Birdcage*. Many of these (Anglicised) films suffer from a case of "high concept": they boast of nice ideas and nice scenes but the overall result is less than satisfying. Something invariably gets lost in translation, not least of all the sense of collision between "high" culture and "low" comedy which makes them funny in French.

This may explain why adaptor Ronald Harwood decided not to dispense with the French setting for the current production. It steers the production away from territory covered in *Lovers at Versailles* and *That Was Then*. Perhaps that ground has yet to yield nourishment though, and setting the play in contemporary Dublin might have actually given it an edge. Veber's skeptical cocked eyebrow might well have been thrown at the jaundiced hauteur and casual cruelty of contemporary Irish culture with effective results. But in a not entirely comfortable melding of textual and metatextual elements, the Irish cast play their French characters with primarily Anglophone accents,



THE DOPE: See You Next Tuesday

draining it of context and leaving the audience with only the basics to cling to.

Liz Ascroft's rendering of Brochant's apartment effectively suggests the tone of topsy-turvy unreality necessary to set the scene. Props assume heightened significance just prior to the introduction of Kavanagh's character, a particularly thorough auditor from whom all items of value must be hidden. Robin Lefèvre directs at a steady pace, but relies heavily on the cast for comic energy. Cooper gives another in a set of performances as a well-to-do character finding himself in

awkward situations. In this case he has the additional quirk of a bad back to work with, from which he gets some mileage. O'Shaughnessy adds a touch of bile to her usual wispy characterisation, but with her Jennifer Tilly-type voice and penchant for pouty vamping, there is not much she can do to deepen the satire. O'Hanlon does what he is there to do, but the scene-stealing turn comes from Kavanagh. His skilful timing, controlled movement, and wonderful range of variants on a narrow-eyed stare allow him to draw both pathos and humour from his character, making him both touchingly human and comically exaggerated in a manner befitting Véber's ambitions.

SIVE by John B. Keane

Druid Theatre Company

Town Hall Theatre, Galway and on tour
Reviewed 12 Oct. 2002 at the Olympia
Theatre, Dublin BY ADRIAN FRAZIER

IN GALWAY AT THE TOWN HALL, THEN AGAIN in Dublin at the Olympia, the audience was slow to tune in to Garry Hynes' new interpretation of *Sive*. They thought they were seeing the good old John B. Keane, where the melodrama, folk superstitions, country "characters," and bygone ways are often played up for the sake of nostalgia and laughs. Not here, however.

When Thomasheen the matchmaker praises the merits of Sean Dota (senile, dotting in his lust) as a husband to schoolgirl Sive, he says that in this rich farmer's house there's "a pot, by all accounts, under every bed." Ho ho ho, the audience roared, what poor impoverished fools our grandparents once were. Gradually, however, the Shakespearean grandeur of this production impresses itself on the stalls.

Shakespeare in a cottage, of course. TONI LAVIGNE

Francis O'Connor follows the stage directions but the execution of details — the lath showing through the plaster in three areas, where the thatch leaks; the limed walls streaked where they sweat — creates a sense of people living together in a dirty box. The side-walls diminish rapidly toward a vanishing point not far behind the back wall, squeezing the human occupants. A low ceiling crushes down on them, especially vividly in the Olympia, with its lofty vault and tiers of gold-leaved boxes.

The set's being closed at the top threw a problem at the lighting designer, but Davy Cunningham was equal to it (he also did wonders with Hynes' recent production of *Big Maggie* at the Abbey). Though he could not entirely remove shadows cast by the lights at the front, he made subtle use of the hearth-light (masked from the audience by a wooden crate), oil lamps on the mantel and table, a glow through the window at the back, and sometimes through an open door to signal shifts of time and mood in the drama. Most spectacularly, when the drowned body of Sive is laid out on the kitchen table in a final tableau, a supernatural illumination comes in shafts down through the broken lath in the ceiling, as in a religious picture of the high Renaissance.

Kathy Strachan's costumes are functional symbols as well. Husband Mike Glavin (Gary Lydon) is out digging in the bog when he's not going in circles with anxiety over what his wife Mena (Derbhle Crotty) is bringing him to do — for two hundred sovereigns, matching his dead sister's child with an old farmer who doesn't want to die a virgin (he wants to die with a virgin.) Mike's life as a work-slave is written in sweatstains under the arms, brown and wet down his front and

back. Anna Manahan is in black heavy clothes, a huge round boulder in the way of her daughter-in-law Mena.

In Act One, Scene Two, Mena charges out of her bedroom to break up an illicit conference between Sive and her grandmother. The text calls for a long nightdress to her toes, but in this production she's wearing a knee-length peach nylon chemise; with Derbhle Crotty inside it, it's sexy. The last we'd seen of Mena, her husband Mike — still hating the matchmaking plan — had said he was going to bed without his dinner; he's deserting the field. But Mena says she could do with sleep herself, unpins all her black curly hair, and turns down the lamp. But wouldn't mother need her tea? Mike asks. "There's no fear of her," Mena shoots back, turning toward the bedroom, "Hasn't she her pipe?"

The lavish womanly sexuality of Crotty's Mena makes this remark into something more than a double-entendre; it says, your mother has her substitute, but you are mine, and the real thing. If it weren't for her, we'd be mighty happy together. Later, when she reemerges in that slinky nightdress, we know that in the dark she's been persuading Mike to go along with her to that new future. So often Keane's swift certain depiction of sexual force is underacted in the name of comedy or nostalgia; not here.

The triumphant use of symbolic costume, however, is in the dresses of Sive herself. First, she is in a brown school-girl's uniform with a round white collar, and a red kerchief. That streak of scarlet is an overture to an interpretive theme. This is a story of little Red Riding Hood and not one Wolf, but a pack of wolves. Later, prepared for wedding, for sacrifice, Sive wobbles forward on her high-heels not in the Virgin Mary blue dress

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the script calls for, but in a bright red coat, which she unbuttons to show a still redder form-fitting dress. Suddenly, we recognize the symbolism of colour in the fairy tale: a girl now menstruating, a girl now the target of men. Having that revealed to all the passing public, and to

ensemble. They use their whole bodies when they point in accusation or sit hunched in fear at another's curse. Mostly the playing is a supercharged old Abbey realism, but that of the two travellers is not: they march ritualistically in step, the short-legged father keeping time with his



BIG BAD WOLF: Ruth Bradley in the title role and Derbhla Crotty as Mena in *Sive*

her uncle, humiliates Sive; it drives her to drown herself in a bog before Sean Dota can get his bony hands on her, and before Mena, Mike, and the matchmaker can claim the bag of sovereigns.

All the performances are first-rate, but the harmonious way the cast gives force to ancient speech-acts — curses, prophecies, blessings, oaths — makes them into a real

ashplant, the son behind, strangely leaning his head on his father's back, while beating his drum. It's no surprise the others stop and watch them, as one would a parade. They are made to seem as if they come from another world, people of the roads who are comparable to a deus ex machina in their knowledge of human secrets and implacable destinies. This is all stipulated

ANDREW DOWNES

by Keane, but the magic of his intention is realised by Hynes. She's certainly a great director. How does she bring to time-worn texts a fresh experience of their greatness, and make reviewers of a play by John B. Keane say, "Syuge! No, Shakespeare"? Production values: set, lights, costume, acting, ensemble playing — everything is intelligent and truly theatrical.

Adrian Frazier is guest editor of the forthcoming issue of *The Irish Review* on theatre.

STOLEN CHILD by Yvonne Quinn
and Bairbre Ní Chaoimh

Calypso Theatre Company
Andrews Lane Theatre, Dublin
and on tour

Reviewed 10 Sep. 2002 at Andrews Lane
BY EAMONN JORDAN

THE CALYPSO REMIT IS TO CHALLENGE "injustice and social exclusion in today's rapidly changing world," believing that theatre "can be a crucial catalyst for change." I want to believe in the integrity of the aspirations of companies like Calypso: I want them to succeed, given the lack of social obligation in most productions mounted in Ireland, and I am alert to the real need of Irish theatre to diversify its audiences. Yet theatre that serves as political consciousness-raising can lose out, because it can be over-reliant on exposition, obliged to be solemn and to display integrity. Earnestness is dangerous in theatre, because it consolidates around the importance of being innocent. Co-written by Yvonne Quinn and Bairbre Ní Chaoimh (who also directs), *Stolen Child* tracks Angela's difficult quest to find her birth mother Peggy, beginning in the late 1980s, just after the death of her adoptive mother. It is not part of Angela's expectation that her

mother had been in an Industrial School.

Harrowing details are revealed of a father who attempts to drown his children like newborn pups in a sack; of the humiliations of bed-wetters; of institutional violation of all kinds; of a child who dies, having been forced to eat her own vomit; and of a fire that resulted in the death of 35 children at an industrial school in Cavan — these children were kept in dormitories, motivated by a perverse need to preserve their modesty. All of this is disclosed by bringing together information from various sources: from history unearthed by the quack defrocked priest-turned detective Mick Treacy; from Angela's relationships in the here and now; and from Peggy's articulation of her personal story mainly through narrative. The play is tightly written and always diligent.

Seamus Moran is convincing in a script-limited role, as the narrative-swelling doctor, with whom Angela has an affair; Malachy McKenna, as the uncouth detective, generates many laughs. Cathy Belton plays her character Angela with a brilliant mixture of poise, uncertainty, and vulnerability (apart from one drunken scene). And Rosaleen Linehan gives a performance of breathtaking complexity and conviction as Peggy. Every shift of perspective is made count, every inflection or impersonation is marked by an easy brilliance. The moment of reunion between the two women is stunning as both characters take huge risks.

In some ways this play is highly theatrical, while in others it seems driven more by the need to document, and nowhere is this tension more apparent than in the language. At times the verbal exchanges are brilliant, and more often than not the narrative sequences are hugely emotional and affecting when an easy lyricism is jettisoned. But occasionally the dialogue is

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driven by a compulsion to provide information. The opening moments of the play, which capture Angela's decision to make that initial call for assistance to track down her mother, for example, fail badly to set the mood. The play does not need to be so persistently soft-focus and emotion's victim; the trauma needs to be framed in a different way — the distinction is between easy and hard-earned emotion. The play flits between these two positions. In one key scene, when Peggy is before a tribunal investigating the industrial school fire, the recorded voice of an unseen barrister is used to interrogate the young girl, while throughout the play, Peggy's narrative is brilliantly peppered by impersonation. Why drop that convention now? And the ritualised naming of some of the dead is utterly unearned.

Other production choices were very strange. Robert Ballagh's delineation of multiple spaces in his design proves to be seriously problematic and results in three cramped, obtrusive, detailed spaces and the prerequisite, judiciously placed bottles of alcohol. By satisfying quasi-realistic conventions, performance potential is seriously inhibited. The sound design, sometimes of a music box variety, used to underscore the big moments was utterly inappropriate. Problems with both set and music are symptomatic of something greater: the tendency to over-state, over-emphasise, over-elaborate, out of a need principally to urge the audience to over-empathise. The production was trying too hard to be convincing. The director needed to trust her actors more.

The play protects an audience from the more traumatic contemporary details of the play. The survivors of horror do well, as the only evidence of unbearable dysfunction is delivered only by way of narration. Angela's conception was an act of



BREATHTAKING: Linehan in *Stolen Child*

rape: the audience knows this, but such details are withheld from her and she is not required to deal with it. We can take up positions on historical abuse, but less easily on contemporary violation. We know with whom we must side, as there is absolutely no justification for the degradation and horror. We know its root source and we know its victims. Continually, pain is substantially defined by its "pastness," but never either enthusiastically or sufficiently contemporised. Theatre cannot

treat such trauma as almost wholly anachronistic. If it is not anachronistic, tell me about the here and now as much as about the past.

The dead/stolen/absent child has become an utterly convenient prop in the establishment of meaning in our theatre. The slippage from victimhood to innocence is what is most problematic here. Innocence as a structure of meaning should be inconvenienced. The quest for the natural parent is a quest for natural justice — but I want theatre that also queries the unnaturalness of contemporary justice. Innocence, primarily historicised, is the gateway to indignation only. This is a theatre ultimately of consent, a type of buddy theatre, and I would have assumed that this is something that should be made problematic by a theatre company with such a radical agenda.

TALES FROM OVID by Ted Hughes,
adapted by Michael Caven

The Theatreworks Company
The Samuel Beckett Theatre, Dublin
4–21 Sep. 2002; reviewed 12 Sep.

BY DEREK WEST

THEATREWORKS HAVE A POLICY OF producing works "rarely if ever seen in Ireland" and this year's offering they accepted the challenge of turning a narrative poem (Ted Hughes's muscular rendition of Ovid's "Metamorphoses") into a play.

Director Michael Caven has shown a consistent commitment to exploring the potential of theatre, but here he is engaged in a kind of Chinese whispers exercise that obliges him to work at several removes from the original. The Gods of Greco-Roman mythology — Jupiter and June, Echo and Narcissus, Diana and Actaeon — require ingenious stage management if they

are to appear credibly to mortals. Caven opts for physical energy, vehemence in the speaking and a high level of inventiveness in the use of music (he has designed his own haunting "soundtrack"), lighting (Ray Duffy), and selective use of props.

The trouble is that he does not find a convincing and sustainable dramatic correlative for Hughes's clanking, visceral verse. There is a lot of dynamic movement and Ferdia Murphy has cleared the floor of the Beckett to allow maximum access to spaces high and wide. The mystic silence that greets us on entrance, promises a serious and philosophical evening. The opening procession of players, slowly descending the stairs upstage, and indeed the closing moments when the cast moved forward behind Denis Conway in candle-light, are stunningly beautiful.

But if there was stark simplicity in the design, there was also some forced gimmickry: a bucket of paint hurled at a sheet (to give us the green of bleeding, violated trees); harness and pulley invoked to simulate flight; a child mannequin stripped of red fabric entrails, followed by the sacrificial roasting of limbs on a heated shovel. Here inventiveness was too ponderous to be wholly successful.

The narrative style and visual presentation were drawn from conventions which have already been well established. The third-person narrative, shared by the cast, the frequent use of reported speech, as opposed to direct dialogue, preserved the integrity of the text but placed the action at some remote level. This has been the hallmark of Storytellers' Theatre Company's technique.

There has to be a strong justification for using this method and there has to be delivery of a high calibre. Conway seems to form a backbone to Theatreworks but this production gave reduced scope for his

talent. He has a great capacity to deliver verse. His voice is a marvellous instrument, full of modulation and inflection, light and shade. It was his voice that made the opening so full of promise and the closing tinged with regret.

The rest of the speaking was vigorous and, except for some blurring of words in the choral speaking — arresting. Emma Colohan (Echo) and Peter Gaynor (Narcissus) struck a rapport that was moving and effective; Liz Schwarz played a passionate, striking Juno.

It was a production of movement and one could sense the growth in confidence of the ensemble members as they filled the space with fluid sweeping physical gesture. There must be more potential for this form of narrative on our stages.

The costumes were uniform white, with no indication of period or character. Shared Experience (Mike Alfreds) has made similar use of clothing (loose-fitting silky jumpsuits) but Sinead Cuthbert's *Ovid* designs didn't quite make the cut in a series of stories which were erotic, rapacious and violent by turns. While violation and violence had to be stylised, rather than naturalistic, it might have helped if the cast had shed more restraint.

Caven is to be applauded once again, for edging his company into new territory and bringing the audience in on the exploration. He has paid homage to both Ovid and Ted Hughes, as weavers of fabulous tales, adapting their work to attain a dramatic impact and to highlight the universal significance of their themes. If he does not succeed 100 per cent, it is perhaps because he needs to give his actors and his support crew more opportunity to exploit the theatrical conventions they have embraced. This marks a shift of style for Theatre-



SWEEPING PASSIONS: Tales from Ovid

works and it may take more time than one annual production allows and more exposure to invention and rehearsal to bring this mode of expression to maturity. Caven has moved boldly; he deserves the support to intensify his search for new ways to tell old tales.

10 ROUNDS by Carlo Gébler

Tricycle Theatre, London

19 Sep.-19 Oct. 2002; reviewed 23 Sep.

BY IAN SHUTTLEWORTH

THE SEX IS SECONDARY. THIS MAY SEEM a strange thing to say about a play which is, in terms of structure at least, a version of Arthur Schnitzler's *La Ronde*. But what's transmitted along the copulatory daisy-chain here is not syphilis, as with Schnitzler — the price of illicit sex, as it were — but a nugget of information which becomes the price of peace in post-Agreement Northern Ireland.

When a maverick republican paramilitary kingpin couples with a prostitute, she remarks innocently that he smells, like her father, of the farm. But no wholesome rural reek, this: rather, the smell of fertiliser as used in massive car-bombs. This fact becomes pillow talk (or sofa, or wherever) in a series of further assignations as the terrorist then has it off with a German au pair, then she with the student son of her host family, and so on, and thus it convolutes its way through the journalistic, political, and security communities of the province. (It's a very un-Chinese whisper, though, and doesn't materially alter in the telling and re-telling.)

But the thing is, the information can't be acted upon. "Ten Rounds" Milligan's outfit is officially on ceasefire. He's clearly collaborating with dissidents, but nevertheless, if he were to be "lifted" by the security forces without incontrovertible and ostentatious evidence, it would look to the nationalist community like victimisation, leading to popular discontent and the shattering of the fragile peace. It is presumably this element which Gébler derived from the ombudsman's report into police handling of the Omagh bombing (and as I write this review on

the day of the suspension of the devolved Stormont government, I am acutely conscious of the other senses in which life now threatens grimly to imitate art). The unpalatable complexity sneaks up on us indirectly, as it weaves in and out of the relevant ears rather than proceeding steadily towards the inevitable climax.

So the sex is secondary. But the dynamics of seduction, of power play masquerading as romance, are none the less comprehensive and unflinching in their portrayal. Clare Holman as the Wife casts about desperately for an excuse to let herself be coaxed into bed by Michael Colgan (no, the other, younger Michael Colgan)'s predatory Student. Victoria Smurfit's Model stoically submits to a seeing-to from Tim Woodward's unappetising journalist (with an atrocious circuit-of-Ireland accent which serves to render Holman's phonemes tolerable), because he promises her media exposure. Bríd Brennan as a republican politico is sexually Machiavellian yet also a little playful as she reels in Stephen Boxer's comically oh-so-English government official.

The mating dances are sometimes trivially diverting, sometimes cynically entertaining, sometimes perplexing (as one wonders what A could possibly ever see in B), but all shown in the same deliberately neutral moral light as Schnitzler's original. And in a sense, this moral neutrality extends not just to the couplings but to the treatment of the crucial information: how should the characters — how should we — square the circle between principle (between competing principles) and pragmatism? For if we think that this is just a rewrite of *La Ronde* with a Troubles background, we're mistaken. Rather, the circle of trysts is a pretext for the really unpleasant stuff: the



THE SEX IS SECONDARY: Ten Rounds

intricate and distasteful compromises of building a house-of-cards peace process that accommodates even those who want nothing to do with it. (Here comes the bitter irony of current affairs again.) The sex, as I may have mentioned, is secondary.

THAT WAS THEN by Gerard Stembridge

The Abbey Theatre

21 May–29 Jun. 2002; reviewed 28 Jun.

BY MAURICE DUNPHY

RISQUÉ, IRREVERENT SUMMERTIME satire makes a nice change from the

Abbey's annual tourist-targeted blarney, and the latest offering written and directed by Gerard Stembridge, *That Was Then*, certainly fits the new bill. It's a fast-moving, quirky, and topically incisive jibe at us and our neighbours across the Irish Sea and, despite a few minor difficulties, its punches connect bang on target.

London-based entrepreneurs June (Julia Lane) and Julian (Nick Dunning) nervously await the arrival of Irish builder-turned-developer Noel (Stephen Brennan) for dinner, five years after their first encounter in Dublin. They run a

consultancy agency that helps smooth over the financial difficulties of business folk. At the time of their previous dinner meeting, they were on the crest of a wave, making wads and on the way up. Noel needed a substantial loan, due to difficulties created by his property development shenanigans. Having sought the dynamic duo's help, the dinner evening descended into farce with the drunken Noel in rabid anti-English form. Noel's "baggage" from his earlier life in London still irked, causing him to chastise and insult his guests, while still begging for their help. Having eventually managed to get the money, he agreed to repay it through circuitous illegal channels. However, in the process of clinching his deal, May, his wife and moral compass (Marion O'Dwyer), discovered his illicit dealings, which effectively wrecked the trust in their relationship.

Back to the present (slightly in the future, actually) and Noel has dropped, or been dropped by, May and taken up with the younger April (Jade Yourell), a charity events correspondent for TV3. They are in London for a "Michael Flatley premiere." However, Noel is a reformed man: April-groomed and on the wagon for exactly 1,326 days, he's now bordering on the suave. The worm has turned and June and Julian are now down at heel "pariahs," exposed as financial frauds. They must escape from London but need Noel to facilitate their move to Ireland, where scamming is the norm. They claim to have "made" Noel by bankrolling his survival in the past and now it's payback time. However, in a quirky reversal of fortunes, Noel now owns the building they live in and feels free to treat them with polite contempt about everything. Noel is nobody's fool

and wants to make amends for his insulting behaviour five years earlier (or so he says) and agrees to bankroll their escape, reaping his own rewards in the process.



SUAVE: Stephen Brennan in *That was Then*

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What makes Stemberger's play unusual is that both stories are played out simultaneously on a single set, while the dialogues are interwoven but separated by location (London or Dublin) and time (past or future). It's a pot-pourri of topical, incisive observations about the changing nature of Irish society, business and the Ansbacher set. It's a revenger's comedy, replete with the ultimate postcolonial twist. The characters are well-observed, finely drawn stereotypes who share the same jingoistic traits and are, sadly, very close to reality.

Despite their different national character traits, they share the same inferiority complexes, racism, and notions of national supremacy. Their lifestyles are defined by the latest Jamie Oliver or Darina Allen soundbite. Stemberger exposes an Irish grotesquerie potentially worse than anything Thatcher's children could muster, and amounts to a premonition of Ireland in the near future. The homely, considerate and morally upright May certainly represents traditional Irish values, while April (and now Noel) epitomise the Republic of Bad Taste, all ersatz cultural icons and tasteless affluence.

The intercutting dialogue, however, caused difficulties for both cast and audience, due mainly to the time lapses between the crosscutting lines, which hampered its natural rhythm and pace. It's unclear whether Stemberger intended this as a distancing technique but, if not, it's a lesson for writers intending to direct their own work. A little separation is always a good thing. However, the high-energy input of the cast, particularly Stephen Brennan's Noel, suggests otherwise. He and the rest of the cast worked extremely hard throughout and, despite occasional problems splicing

dialogue, were uniformly excellent.

Es Devlin's apt design consisted of one apartment set, oddly accommodating two separate kitchens upstage, while downstage housed the communal living space. This served simultaneously as both households, equally cold, clinical, and functionally modern, designed for those whose main concern is to be seen, rather than home comfort. The English kitchen was a cold, icy blue throughout, while May's kitchen was warm, like a beacon in the impersonal wilderness (the food was actually cooked during the performance, much to the lip-smacking delight of the audience). The primary action happened in the communal space, while the separate kitchens defined exact location and time. Paul Keogan's lighting accurately plotted the changing moods and locations of the piece.

That Was Then is vintage Stemberger (almost) at his best, in this comical, highly entertaining social commentary that, despite the occasional lapse and predictable gag, worked extremely well.

THE VAGINA MONOLOGUES,

by Eve Ensler

SFX City Theatre, Dublin

9 Sep.-26 Oct. 2002; reviewed 10 Sep.

BY SARAH LING and 26 Sep.

BY BRIAN LAVERY

SARAH LING WRITES: Michael Scott must be a feminist. As a feminist, and a man (complete with trousers and penis), he bravely attempted to put his personal stamp on a contemporary women's play that is taking place simultaneously in eight hundred venues around the world. What a task!

The Vagina Monologues are popular because of the monologues' political content and the very poignant personal

stories. They are entertaining as well as consciousness-raising. It is also a very simple piece to produce, needing only three performers and three high-backed chairs. The monologues have been performed in the Philippines, Antarctica and Zaire. Audiences of women and men around the world are gathering in theatres to chant the word "cunt"! Surprisingly, an evening of *Vagina Monologues* involves no man-hating, no explicit language, and no nudity. There is no "Vagina Painting" à la feminist perform-

play, V-Day is a worldwide movement that claims the 14th of February as Vagina Day, and raises money and consciousness for important women's causes. V-Day Ireland has been working for Irish women's charities for some time now, and staged four benefit performances earlier this year in Galway, Limerick, Cork, and Dublin.

Performed on 10 March, Mother's Day, at the Radisson Hotel in Galway (starring Mary Coughlan), V-Day Ireland's production highlighted Ensler's political mes-



VARIOUS VAGINAS: Dillie Keane, Cathy Tyson...

ance artist Shigeko Kubota (as seen in New York in 1965). This education in the female body and of female identity is sensitively approached. The vagina is celebrated with humour and joy.

However, the power of this piece is not in the writing. Its power is in the exposure of all the facts and figures regarding women's abuse including rape, female genital mutilation, and sexual slavery.

Following the success of Eve Ensler's

sage, and so the audience knew that they were present at an important community event. I can also recommend *Les Monologues du Vagin* at the Comédie de Paris, just down the road from the famous Moulin Rouge; this is a production done with style and excellence.

So: *The Vagina Monologues* as a charity event; *The Vagina Monologues* as fine piece of theatre. What Michael Scott is attempting is something else: *The Vagina*

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Monologues as commercial blockbuster. His production fell into some obvious traps.

Dillie Keane, Adele King, and Cathy Tyson arrived on stage with exposed cleavage and thighs, high-heeled shoes and the sparkle of diamonds. The male construct of femininity remains intact in modern Dublin. Also, all of the evening's showbiz glamour remained on stage — the SFX is cold and uncomfortable.

The Vagina Monologues is not a play, but rather a public reading of a short book,

story. Their stories simply told would have had much greater effect. King's mistakes were in the attempted accents. They made many of the monologues practically indecipherable. She congratulated the other very capable performers for their efforts throughout; this again was her downfall. However, I also must stop myself from patting Dillie Keane on the back and saying well done for a very enjoyable performance.

The new script included Irish slang, and King's local words "There ya are.



MORE VAGINAS: Adele King and Mary McEvoy...

compiled from over two hundred interviews. Therefore, those on stage should present and not relive the experiences of the women featured. This is not realistic drama where violence is reproduced on stage; it is a forum for debate and a platform for a new female voice.

King's attempt to relive the experiences of a Bosnian woman from a rape camp was quite unbearable. The forced tears undermined the value of the personal

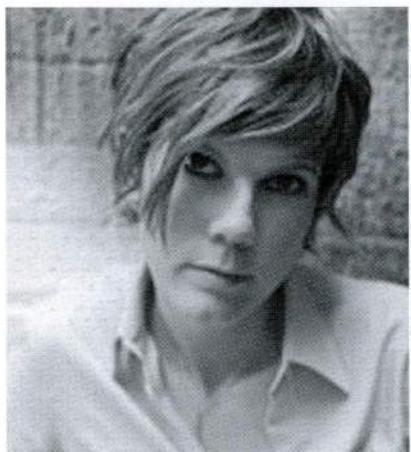
"How's your gee?" were familiar to all. But, asking the audience to simultaneously repeat a "vagina happy fact" three times gave the whole evening an air of pantomime. I did enjoy the great humour and the local spin, but in this case, what can be a wonderful piece of theatre was hijacked by showbiz.

Sarah Ling worked this year as an administrator for the Dublin Theatre Festival.

BRIAN LAVERY WRITES: "Cunt!"

Despite the opinion of the over-quoted *Sunday Times* reviewer in the ads, this three-cunt cabaret, styled like a nouveau-feminist self-help workshop, is really not for people who don't have cunts.

It's also not for people who don't like cunts, and it's not for people who don't like the word cunt. In fact, people who don't like reading "cunt," or don't like thinking about cunts, would have been well advised to steer far clear of the SFX Theatre during the *Monologues*' hit run, because after every



FINAL VAGINA: Juliet Turner

performance, the streets were full of gussied-up vaginas, milling about, pleased as punch to be cunts.

The show panders to overconfident feminist pussies who enjoy publicly celebrating their clit, labia, and the rest; and to shy and repressed pussies who want to stop using "front-bottom" when talking about their cunt. Self-respecting, intelligent pussies in the audience will probably be embarrassed, not by the content, but by

the company they're in.

To be fair, what right does a penis like me have to judge an ego-boosting session that is really intended only for pussies, even if its occasional moments of wit and pathos are entirely overshadowed by gaudiness and tacky humor? Most of the audience knew why they were there, and enjoyed it. When I went, vaginas outnumbered penises in the audience by at least 10 to one, and only one crotchety old penis walked out early.

Still, the audience roared with approval when Mary McEvoy praised the merits of the clit over the phallus, and this particular prick was quite glad to be hiding with another penis in the back, far from the pint-chugging, spiky-haired cunts in the front row.

That night, singer-songwriter Juliet Turner democratised the word "cunt," as Glenn Close and countless others have done before, by making all of us scream it, even the penises. The unfortunate weenies up front had no choice but to shout loudly and laugh conspicuously: the pint-chuggers were watching.

Those enthusiastic twats also kept their eyes on Dillie Keane, whose diva skills are sustained by her flirting — she took every opportunity to show a little more leg and cast a sultry glance at the front row. She asked McEvoy, "Have you heard that cunt Juliet Turner's new album?"

Turner promptly swiveled on her stool and shouted, "Did you call me a cunt? Hey, thanks." (All this "cunt"ing doubtless had more oomph when the *Monologues* were performed in America, where the word is so obscene to be almost never heard.)

The individual monologues are meant to be down-to-earth examples of hilarious, sometimes brutal, honesty from women who opened their souls and vaginas to Eve Ensler, the Queen Cunt (or

Queynte, for old English scholars). Why, then, present tales of grass-roots, proletarian Citizen Cunts as a glam-rock show, with emcees wearing form-fitting black dresses that were specially designed for the occasion? The flashy lighting and booming introductory voice-over would have been more appropriate at a monster truck rally, or the Abba reunion tour at the Point Depot. ("Ladies and gentlemen — or actually, just ladies — puh-LEEZ welcome...the VAGINNA MONOLOGUES!") Surely Ensler's crusade doesn't mean to idolise the perfect vaginas, who deliver the gospel while perched onstage in stiletto heels?

The show proves Ensler's merits not as a playwright but as an editor, and she shows off with lists, delivered item by item rapid-fire among the three actors. The humour is based on women who anthropomorphise their vaginas, giving them names, wardrobes, catch phrases, probably even a favorite character from "The Simpsons."

Qualifying vaginas in that way clearly shows how women can deny that they even have one. And hearing the stories of women who suffered horrendous abuse must have reminded most of the audience to be grateful for their functioning, healthy twats.

Keane, the best actor in that September trio, got the spotlight for the unfortunate closing list, a catalogue of women's orgasmic moans. Molly Bloom works, my dear punani, because she's on paper and in our heads, not writhing on a bar stool and groaning into a microphone.

The show's social agenda does work; women clearly feel better about their vaginas afterwards. For lancers, witnessing the audience's psychological transformation can be more interesting

than what happens on stage. At least that was entertaining, since for all this talk about vaginas, this prick didn't even get to see one.

WHAT — A FESTIVAL CELEBRATING THE GROUND-BREAKING THEATRE OF THE 20TH CENTURY

The Granary Theatre
2-12 October 2002; festival reviewed
BY BERNADETTE SWEENEY

AS EARLY AS 1953, IONESCO ARGUED that the term "absurdism" was "vague enough to mean nothing any more and be an easy definition of anything." This two-week Festival scrutinised the theatrical legacy of the absurd, asking if the theatre of that time presents any challenges to contemporary audiences and practitioners. The programme of productions, rehearsed readings, and talks (curated by Carolyn Duggan, Oonagh Kearney, and Mary Noonan) placed the work of leading absurdist playwrights of the 1950s and '60s — Beckett, Ionesco, and Pinter — against that of contemporary writers who, it could be argued, are extending their legacy — Caryl Churchill, Bernard-Marie Koltès, and Enda Walsh.

Ionesco's *Salutations*, a short but demanding piece, was directed for the What Festival by Marcus Bale. Three female actors each physicalised a progressively playful text, moving/dancing on three white discs like pools on the black floor. The almost nonsensical language developed into an exchange, each actor moving to the rhythm of the language they spoke in answer to interjections of "And you?" As the performance continued, a few members of the audience grew restless; one complained that *Salutations* is just an excuse for the actors to show off. Another shushed him. The

device became apparent, and the exchange expanded to include these pseudo-audience members; they finished by all confronting their "real" audience. *Salutations* was visually simple, but strong. There were some slight hesitations as the movement and language became increasingly demanding, but this may have been due to the improvisation of free-form movement to such an exacting spoken text.

At the end of the piece, a black scrim dropped to reveal quite a striking image. On a bench on the floor sat three little girls in baseball caps and dressed one in blue, one in pink and one in yellow; with their feet swinging, not quite reaching the floor. Directly above them were three women, also sitting on a bench, dressed in blue, pink, and pale yellow, in long skirts, cardigans, and brimmed hats. Seated on the top level, about 12 feet up, were three men heavily made-up and dressed as women, to the same colour code as the others — only the style of their dresses was older, with a slight floral pattern. This was Beckett's *Come and Go* in three versions, as directed by Oonagh Kearney (assisted by Kate McCarthy).

The three women, on the second level, performed first — a well-measured performance, but always the overall image dominated, and we knew what was coming next. The three little girls then performed their rendition, mirroring the movement of the women above, but speaking much faster and giggling. The play took on the children's energy and seemed to be about something else entirely. In the third version, the performances were strong, but they seemed at odds with the fact that these men were in drag. The audience laughed — the overall image became top-heavy.

This was an extraordinary bold interpretation of Beckett's text, given that his work is so strictly controlled by his estate. *Come and Go* in three versions was well designed and beautiful to look at; the production raised some interesting questions, but the third version especially closed down the text. This was three concepts in one, and *Come and Go* itself seemed lost somewhere in the mix.

The final play in the first week's programme was *Landscape* by Harold Pinter, first broadcast on BBC radio in 1968 and staged by the RSC a year later; here, Ali Robertson directed. In comparison to the preceding productions it was simple, and more or less faithful to the (bare) staging as specified in Pinter's text. At one end of a long table, Gary Murphy as Duff sat on a hard-backed chair facing the other end. There, Cal Duggan as Beth sat on a large rocking chair, facing the audience. Already they seemed at cross-purposes. Duff spoke to Beth throughout, without necessarily hearing her. Beth did not directly address Duff, but spoke out to the audience, without engaging with us either. She was wistful, nostalgic, lost in a memory of a day at the beach with her lover. He was cajoling, belligerent and insistent — but their relationship was unclear. Was he that lover? Her husband? Her brother?

Ultimately, to me, *Landscape* was an evocation of loss and, as such, did not seem dated. Like the other plays in the What festival it seemed out of time, and yet relevant to contemporary audiences. Despite its simplicity, it was not untheatrical, the staging heightened the fact that Murphy, as Duff, and Duggan, as Beth, were right there with us, but failing to reach each other.

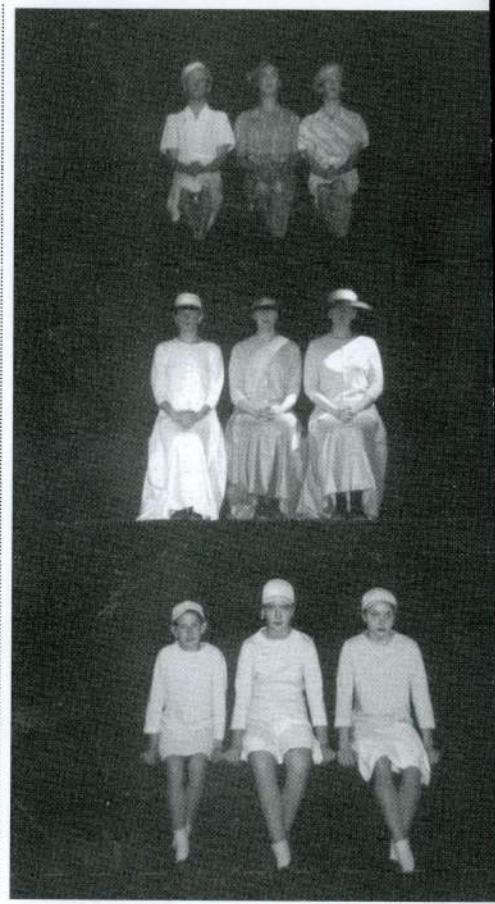
As with the other Pinter production, Cal Duggan's staging of *The New World*

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Order in the second week's programme was simple but effective, suggesting that perhaps Pinter is the least theatrically "absurd" of the three playwrights staged. But thematic festivals such as What bring playwrights to light relative to each other, not only in terms of the texts chosen, but also the productions; it can be tempting to make narrow comparisons. What *What* highlighted for me is that the energy of the work often lies not in the evident similarities, but in the differences.

Thomas Conway (assisted by Kate McCarthy) staged Beckett's *What Where* – a late version of the play, reworked for television. First, out of the darkness, we saw a circle of purple light; then a voice spoke. When Dominic Moore as Bam appeared, facing us, all we could see was a white, shaven head — his neck and shoulders were blacked with a black screen at shoulder level. Gary Murphy as Bem appeared to his left and then Myles Horgan as Bim, further left again, both also facing out. The three shaven white heads, each harshly spotlit, looked disembodied. On the night I saw the production, early in the week, the interaction between the heads and the lights was unclear: sometimes the light snapped on and off each face, at other times the head moved away, and then the light snapped. Overall the piece had timing, control, and great impact, but this lack of precision was a concern. The voice of Niall Ó Siordáin framed this powerful production.

Finally, Mary Noonan directed Ionesco's *The Chairs*. Unfortunately, due to ill-health during the rehearsal period, Kevin Power as the Old Man had to carry his script throughout the performance of this comparatively lengthy



TRIPLE DECKER: Come and Go-go-go

piece. Máirín Prendergast worked especially hard as the Old Woman to offset this with an extraordinarily energetic performance. The ambitions of *The Chairs* were evident, and there were moments — the building frenzy of fetching the chairs, the old woman squeezing past the absent "guests," the

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shocking arrival of an actual person as the Orator — which suggested the potential of an unhampered version of this production.

What also offered a series of rehearsed readings of more recent works. The festival opened with a reading of Caryl Churchill's *Far Away* directed by Adam Curtis. This reading provided its Cork audience with an insight into Churchill's later work with its absurdist resonances — the breakdown of language, of order, of accountability, maybe even of truth.

In the second week a large cast directed by Tom Creed read *Roberto Zucco* by Bernard-Marie Koltès, and Donal Gallagher directed a reading of Enda Walsh's *bedbound*. This was wonderful work given the shortage of time and resources, and suggested connections between the earlier work and recent playwriting and theatre practice. Of course a reading doesn't offer much theatrical scope, so the links made here between the earlier writers and the contemporary ones were thematic, and especially evident through the use of language.

I was left wondering what the addition of a full production of each of these texts would have added to the festival and to a reappraisal of the term absurdism. Public talks contextualised the work of Ionesco, Beckett and Pinter, and postshow discussions also bridged the gap between the audiences and the performances.

An exciting aspect of What was the production of entirely new work: two new pieces were premiered. "Aria 51" was composed John Godfrey and performed by him on piano before *The Chairs*, throughout week two. While he played behind the set, the stage was dimly lit; the distance between Godfrey

and his audience was closed when the music he played was echoed on two tape-recorders, one at each door into the auditorium. These seemed deliberately low-tech, and a musical dialogue of sorts developed between the live music and the recordings.

A play *Ice Soon*, "an homage to Ionesco with apologies to Beckett," was written by Ger Fitzgibbon and directed by Emelie Fitzgibbon. *Ice Soon* placed the Author (Jack Lysaght) in a Beckettian landscape, confronted by the foolish but dangerous duo Crumb (Jack Healy) and Bassett (John McCarthy). Crumpled papers littered the stage with text, the text was littered with references; the "death" of "the author" was followed by a shower of his words as little scraps of paper rained down on the stage and the audience.

The What festival concluded with an open forum on the Festival's ambitions and on the concept of absurdism, and was rounded off on Saturday evening with Conor Lovett's performance of his acclaimed adaptation of Beckett's trilogy of novels. The notion of absurdism and its relevance was staged, discussed, and interrogated throughout the festival; it was an exciting forum. The timing was unfortunate, however, given that there is such a glut of festivals, and not only theatre festivals, at that time. While it was well attended and received, the scheduling of weekend workshops and talks was especially problematic; *What* impoverished itself and its audience by clashing head on with so much. I would love to see the return of *What* — maybe some other time.

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might work well — theatre created at local level with the specific needs of the locality in mind. This approach needs to be debated, resourced and funded, and it needs to be supported with educational and acting expertise. But it's a good place to start.

It's hard to know what the future holds for Second Age. It established a good reputation for itself in the early 1990s, its production of *King Lear* starring Timothy West being particularly well received. It seemed to lose its way somewhat in the second half of the decade, with a series of productions notable mainly for being gimmicky — an *Othello* in which Othello was white and Iago black, a *Macbeth* in which the three weird sisters were played by 12-year-old girls (more witch-tinkering!). When Second Age was founded, few companies or venues could mount or host productions for schools, and they deserve credit for pioneering work. But things have now changed: as Crooked House and Prime Cut show, co-productions at local level could be the new way forward. Certainly, Second Age seems unsure of its place in this new environment.

The unique relationship of Second Age to its audience makes their regeneration difficult. A good guarantor of quality in theatre is a company's need for repeat business but, unfortunately, repeat business isn't really necessary for Second Age — and this is probably their biggest problem. A touring company producing work mainly for Leaving Certificate students, they have little need to build audience loyalty, and are largely impervious to bad reviews. Although it should be noted that many schools show great loyalty to the company, returning to its productions every year, the pressure on teachers and students to achieve good exam results means that Second Age should always find an audience. If this year's crowd

hates the production, it doesn't matter — few of them will be returning next year anyway. And if audiences in Galway hate it, that doesn't matter either: tickets for the Dublin shows will still sell well. Essentially, there are no rewards if the company does well, and no immediate consequences if they fail. This is an unsustainable and demoralising situation for any company, and it shows in the poor quality of Second Age's recent productions. The company receives a great deal of money from the Arts Council — its grant offer in 2002 was 157,000. It will become difficult for the company to justify receiving this kind of money unless it can reinvigorate itself — soon.

It is indisputably the case that theatre for schoolchildren *matters*. At the productions I attended, I heard mobile phones going off, wolf whistles at Lady Macbeth, and the usual clatter of Coke cans and sweet papers. But I also saw teenagers who were riveted; I listened to them talking animatedly at the intervals; and I watched them applaud each performance sincerely and enthusiastically. Too often, the focus in discussions of school audiences is on audience development, but students represent an audience *right now*, and ought to be treated with an appropriate level of respect. Although theatres are dangerously exposed to being accused of exploitation, their biggest problem seems to be that they do not understand the needs of schoolchildren. Nine different *Macbeths* in a 12-month period really is just unimaginative programming — but what's important is that so few of the nine would have represented a positive educational experience for a school audience. It's time to get serious about theatre for schools.

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



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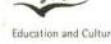




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