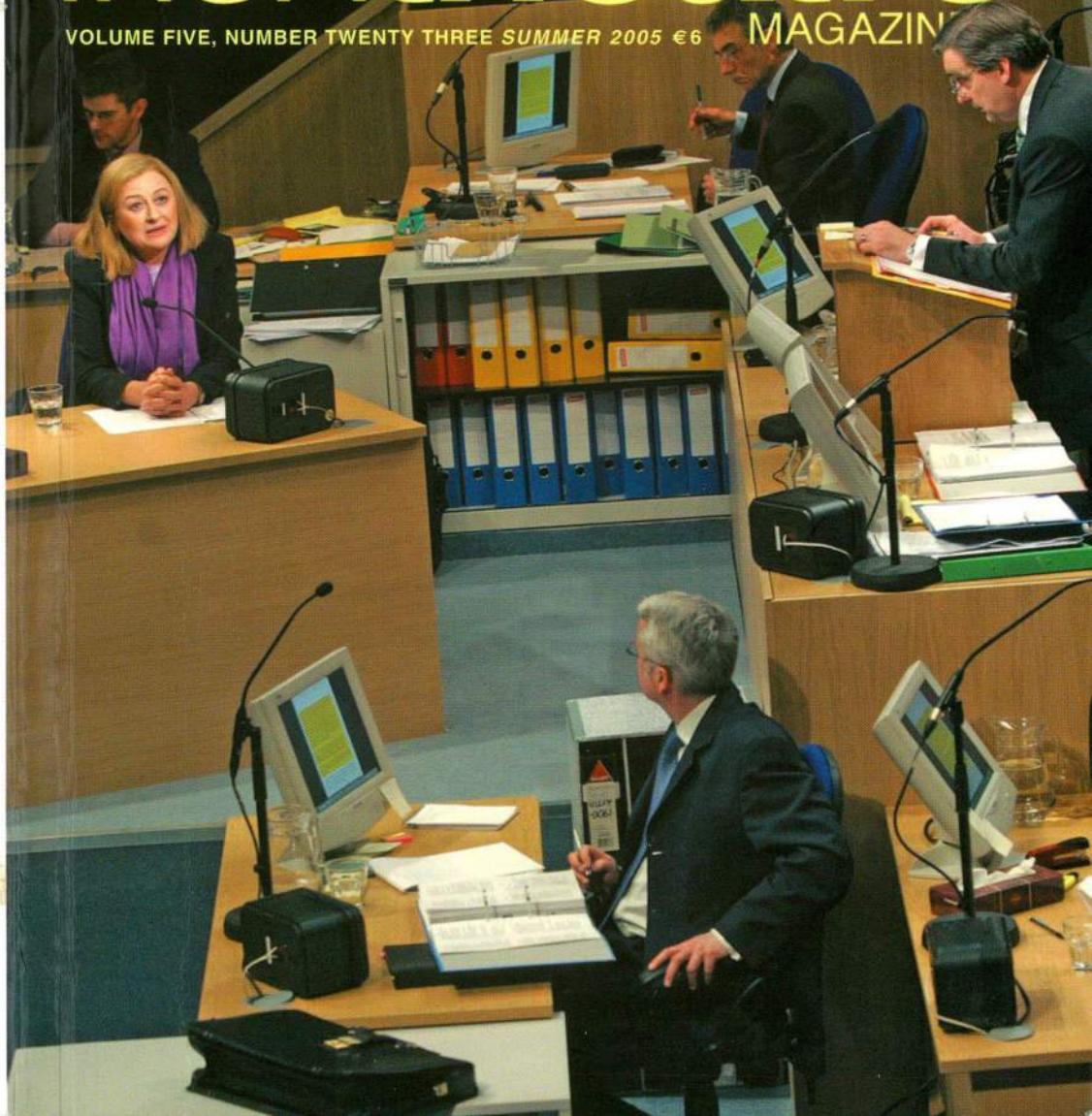


irishtheatre

VOLUME FIVE, NUMBER TWENTY THREE SUMMER 2005 €6

MAGAZINE



Cairde

summer festival

27 june > 16 july

05



theatre workshops music exhibitions

THE FACTORY PERFORMANCE SPACE, Lower Quay Street Sligo

For more information on Cairde please phone 071-9170431

email: info@blueraincoat.com www.blueraincoat.com



BLUERAINCOAT THEATRE COMPANY



TOP: PAUL McCARTHY; HEALY: CAROLE LATIMER; BOTTOM: MIKE SHAUGHNESSY



4 WHAT'S NEWS

11 HIS NAME IN LIGHTS Michael Colgan gives a rare blast of his producing philosophy.

17 OPENING NIGHTS Mark your diaries!

20 OFFSHORE What Irish theatre artists are up to overseas.

24 SOUNDING BOARD The Irish Coalition for Cultural Diversity warns of an alarming new free trade initiative.

26 SPEAKING OUT Patrick Lonergan discusses *Bloody Sunday*, a verbatim theatre production on its way to Dublin.

35 TALKIN' 'BOUT AN EDUCATION Three educational theatre experts outline the field and its concerns.

43 BLUE SUNDAY Alan Archbold offers an excerpt from his new play, *A Little Bit of Blue*.

46 BOOK REVIEWS Joan Dean reviews two new books about Irish playwrights.

50 REVIEWS See overleaf for listing.

116 EXIT STAGE LEFT

ON THE COVER: Sorcha Cusack in *Bloody Sunday*. Photo: Tristram Kenton

ADDRESS: 44 East Essex St., Temple Bar, Dublin 2 Phone: (087) 799-7989

E-MAIL: info@irishtheatremagazine.ie; karenfricker@yahoo.ie

THE CONTENT IN THIS MAGAZINE IS SOLELY THE OPINION OF THE AUTHORS AND NOT NECESSARILY OF THE EDITORS.



REVIEWS

Our critics review 35 productions:

- 50 ACCESS ALL BECKETT** Gare St. Lazare Players
- 54 AS YOU LIKE IT** Classic Stage Ireland
- 55 THE BALD SOPRANO** Blue Raincoat
- 57 BELFRY and POOR BEAST IN THE RAIN** Livin' Dred and the Gate Theatre
- 61 THE CAMBRIA** Donal O'Kelly Productions
- 64 CROSS MY HEART TEAM** Theatre Company
- 66 DEATHTRAP** Red Kettle Theatre Company
- 68 THE DREAM OF A SUMMER DAY** Storytellers Theatre Company
- 70 THE DROWNED WORLD** Randolph SD Theatre Company
- 72 ENLIGHTENMENT** Peacock Theatre
- 74 FRONGOCH** North Wales Stage in association with Project
- 76 THE GLASS MENAGERIE** Lyric Theatre
- 78 HAMLET** Gúna Nua Theatre Company
- 80 THE HOME PLACE** Gate Theatre
- 82 I, KEANO** Lane Productions in association with MCD
- 84 KIDNAPPING THE REILYS and UNDERNEATH THE LINTEL** Catastrophe Theatre Company
- 87 AN LASAIR CHOILLE agus AN CEARRBHACH MAC CÁBA** An Taibhdhearc
- 89 THE LIFE OF GALILEO and THE SUGAR WIFE** Rough Magic Theatre Company
- 93 LONELY HEARTS** Observatory Lane
- 95 MONGED** Fishamble Theatre Company
- 97 THE SELF-OBSSESSED TRAGEDY OF ED MALONE** Be Your Own Banana Theatre Company
- 98 17** Cabinteely Youth Theatre and **CHATROOM** Boomerang
- 101 THE SHADOW OF A GLEN and THE TINKER'S WEDDING** Big Telly Theatre Company
- 104 THE SHADOW OF A GUNMAN** Lyric Theatre
- 106 SISTERS** City Theatre Dublin
- 108 STUCK IN THE MUD** Barnstorm Theatre Company
- 110 THE THREEPENNY OPERA** Bruiser Theatre Company
- 112 WE SHALL SING FOR THE FATHERLAND** Thinking Image Theatre Company
- 114 WINTER** Rachel West in association with Project

VOLUME FIVE,
NUMBER TWENTY-THREE
SUMMER 2005

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

KAREN FRICKER

PUBLISHER

NIK QUAIFE

ART DIRECTOR

SUSAN CONLEY

NEWS EDITOR

PETER CRAWLEY

WEBSITE EDITOR

AOIFE FLYNN

BOOK REVIEWS EDITOR

PATRICK LONERGAN

EDITORIAL ASSISTANCE

LAYLA O'MARA

SIOBHÁN O'NEILL

DISTRIBUTION

NEW ISLAND BOOKS

SPECIAL THANKS

Siobhán Colgan,
TEAM Theatre Company,
and our subscribers

PUBLISHING PATRONS

COVER STORY

Moya Doherty

PROOFREADERS

Michael Collins
Barney Whelan and
Margaret Gowen
Peter Thomas

CORPORATE

FRIENDS OF IRISH
THEATRE MAGAZINE

Abhann Productions
Dublin Theatre Festival
Theatre Shop
Tyrone Productions

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Helen Carey, Ali Curran
Eithne Hand, Ciarán Walsh
(chair), Willie White

Turning the Page

Maura O'KEEFFE, WILLIE WHITE, AND I started up *irish theatre magazine* in 1998 because we felt the standards of theatre criticism in Ireland were depressingly and inappropriately low. The Irish theatre sector was burgeoning, and yet there was no outlet for extended, thoughtful, knowledgeable commentary. It was clear that this theatre activity required coverage; what we were less sure about was who was going to do the covering. We knew a small group of smart writers, but were we going to be able to muster and sustain a (forgive me) critical mass — were there enough good critics in Ireland to keep such a publication going?

It is a great source of pride and happiness that, as I step down as *itm*'s editor in chief, we can answer that question with a resounding yes. Over seven years the magazine has gathered a corps of talented, passionate, and skilled critics and reporters whose quality writing is at the heart of what makes it a vital publication. It has been my privilege to work with these writers, and my hope and belief that the magazine will continue to be an outlet and training ground for outstanding writing.

itm is far from the only Irish theatre or-

ganisation currently in a process of evolution: The Abbey announced a fresh crop of resignations and revelations just before press time, on which we comment in the upcoming pages. The Dublin Theatre and Fringe Festivals, the Galway and Kilkenny Arts Festivals, and the St. Patrick's Festival are all, or will soon be, under new artistic management, as are Ouroboros, TEAM, Storytellers, Prime Cut, and the Ark. These executive shifts take place against the backdrop of the Arts Council's current process of self-evaluation, which could result in a surprisingly fresh approach to arts funding in the Republic. With so much changing, a venue for independent, challenging commentary on Irish theatre is more necessary than ever.

With so much changing in the sector, a venue for independent, challenging commentary on Irish theatre is more necessary than ever. The Arts Council's current process of self-evaluation, which could result in a surprisingly fresh approach to arts funding in the Republic. With so much changing, a venue for independent, challenging commentary on Irish theatre is more necessary than ever, and *itm*'s new editorial team is perfectly positioned to provide it.

Building up *itm* with my brilliant colleagues — Willie, Maura, Susan, Peter, Ciarán, Loughlin, Aoife, Patrick, Helen, Ophelia, and Nik — has been the most challenging and rewarding experience of my professional life. I leave with full confidence in the magazine's continued success. Here's to the next chapter!

—Karen Fricker

The Price of Failure

LIKE THE SINGLE FAULTY COG THAT CAUSES A HUGE MACHINE to grind to a halt, the discovery of an additional missing million euro from the Abbey Theatre's Centenary accounts has sent its tenuous but seemingly operative change process into a tailspin. Both members of the existing executive, Ben Barnes and Brian Jackson, are leaving the organisation on the back of the revelation of an accounting error

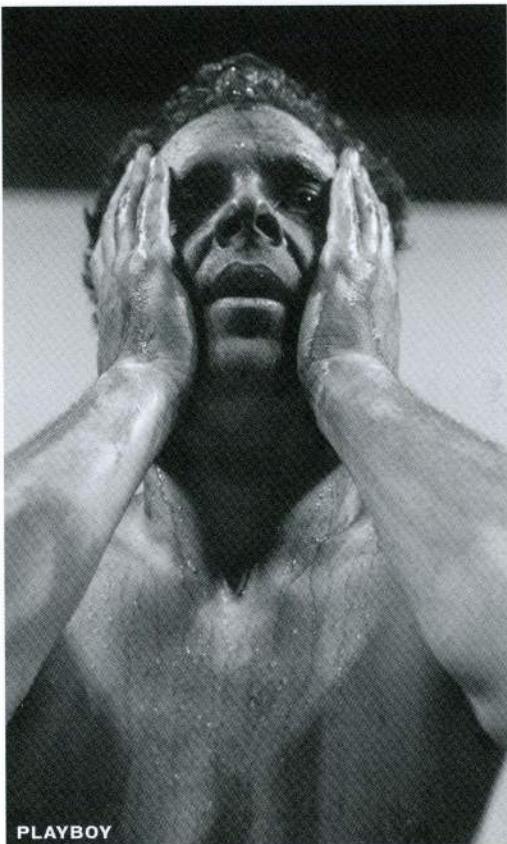
which had obscured the extent of the total Centenary debt (now understood to be €1.85 million). New Abbey director Fiach MacConghail has had to drop the "designate" from his title after less than a week on the job. Most significantly and surprisingly, Arts, Sport, and Tourism Minister John O'Donoghue seems determined to use these events as a means to clear out the existing Abbey board, and is strongly indicating a previously un signalled desire to bring the Abbey directly under the aegis of his own department and out of its

existing funding relationship with the Arts Council.

Seemingly unrelated to these unfolding events, but unfortunately attached to them via what is surely the crowning gaffe in the current Abbey board's long career of botched spin, news has simultaneously dribbled out that the epic tale of the Abbey's building woes might be coming to the end now that a site in the Docklands has been identified as its most likely future home.

These events, still unfolding as *itm*

went to press, will continue to play out in the coming weeks and months. True to form, the Abbey has thrown more consultants at a crisis, and it is possible that the new person or persons being sent in to scour the theatre's financial situation will uncover more debts. Clarity will doubtless emerge as to how it was that the Centenary left the theatre so far in the red; the most plausible story emerging out of initial reports is that the domestic tour of Barnes' production of *The Playboy of the Western World* was the primary culprit, responsible for €500,000 of theatre's "hidden losses." Hopefully the unseemly scrabbling by "unnamed sources" to call attention to the heroic intervention of a board member in uncovering the initial accounting error will quickly have its day (and doesn't that line of thinking ultimately defeat itself, given that every member of the board — and in particular those who sit on its recently established audit and finance committee — should long have known exactly where the theatre's finances stood?) MacConghail may have been done a favour given that the house has self-cleaned for him: he is now under extreme pressure to get a management team up and running, but at least the pesky issue of what to do with the incumbents has been taken off his plate. A proper presentation and evaluation of the new



PLAYBOY

Docklands site, at George's Quay near the IFSC, will now hopefully get underway.

But the emerging power struggles at boardroom level and higher are the most unexpected and potentially significant knock-on effect of the Abbey's May Madness. Over the initial post-revelation weekend, O'Donoghue started out strong and got stronger in his media appearances on the issue of the future of the Abbey's corporate governance: it has

what's news

"always been [his] intention", he told *Rattlebag*'s Myles Dungan on 13 May, to alter the existing corporate structure once MacConghail (who until April was O'Donoghue's arts policy advisor) was in place at the Abbey's helm. The present structures of governance are "Victorian," said O'Donoghue; a new structure is required which "can respond to present-day market conditions."

Dogged impressively by reporter Roisin Duffy on RTE's *This Week* two days later, O'Donoghue went further in his comments. He definitively stated that he

but he can certainly make their position untenable via comments such as this one. It is surprising that board chair Eithne Healy did not fall on her sword immediately after O'Donoghue's statement, and she and other board members still might step down in the coming weeks — or, instead, try to brave it out until new systems are set in place.

Whenever they go, it will not be before time: the Abbey board had run out of credibility long before the May revelations. But O'Donoghue's intent to bring the Abbey closer to his own department



BARNES



JACKSON



HEALY



MacCONGHAIL

will bring forward legislation putting the government in more direct control of the Abbey's finances, and clearly signalled his intent to model the Abbey's structures after the new-look National Museum and National Library, which have recently been re-formed as companies limited by guarantee run by government-appointed boards. And, dropping a quiet bombshell, O'Donoghue remarked that this "almost inevitably" means that "the majority of the present [Abbey] board will not be on the new board." As discussed in the last issue of *itm* (No. 22), under the current system the Minister does not have the power to sack Abbey board members —

really is news, and subverts the power-sharing structure carefully established in the final months of last year following initial revelations of the Abbey's financial and managerial instability. This structure, referred to at the time by both Healy and MacConghail as "tripartite," maintained the Arts Council as the Abbey's principal funder and the government body to which it directly reported, with O'Donoghue's department supervising from a respectful distance. That the discovery of an accounting error has so radically and suddenly changed this structure would seem to indicate that the balance was much more delicate and contentious

HEALY: CAROLE LATIMER

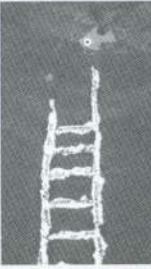


Sprechá

Fingal's International
Arts Festival for Children
at Draíocht, Blanchardstown



13-18 June 2005 - Now Booking!



theatre, storytelling, puppetry,
visual arts & much more ...

Presented by Draíocht in
partnership with
Fingal County Council



Fingal County Council
Comhairle Chontae Thír Eoghain

draíocht

phone 01-885 2622
or log on to
www.sprechá.com

what's news

than had previously been understood. Or, perhaps, such changes were planned to commence at a suitable time once MacConghail was in position, and current events triggered the process sooner than expected.

Arts Council director Mary Cloake, for her part, seemed to indicate that her organisation would not leave the equation without a struggle. "What are the advantages of moving the Abbey under the control of the Minister?" she wondered on the 13th May edition of *Five-Seven Live*. "One reason would be to ensure that a new board is put in place and new structures are brought in to modernise the Abbey. But in our change programme we have already insisted that a new board are put in place and there are

proposals about fairly radical new government structures."

Given that O'Donoghue's new plan was probably developed in consultation with MacConghail, however, the collapse of the tripartite power-sharing arrangement seems almost inevitable. The triangle is now set to become a straight line and the Arts Council may be unable to fight for its corner.

CORK MISCOMMUNICATIONS

When Shane Malone resigned as Cork 2005's director of communications in May, less than mid-way through his tenure, the significance of his departure was played down. His move, it was asserted, had nothing to do with criticism over the shortfall in commercial sponsorship for the European Capital of Culture, or the increasingly negative publicity around Cork 2005. One of his last statements in the position, however, is still proving controversial. Malone claimed that "no [Cork 2005] projects have been or will be cancelled due to lack of funding."

Paul Mercier thinks otherwise. When the playwright learned in March that his writing commission, *P*, a site-specific work, was not to proceed to production, he understood that a lack of funding was the culprit. But while representatives of Cork 2005 confirmed a lack of sponsorship to realise the production, they also insisted that no commitment had been given to a production in the first place. There seems, then, to have been a breakdown in communication.

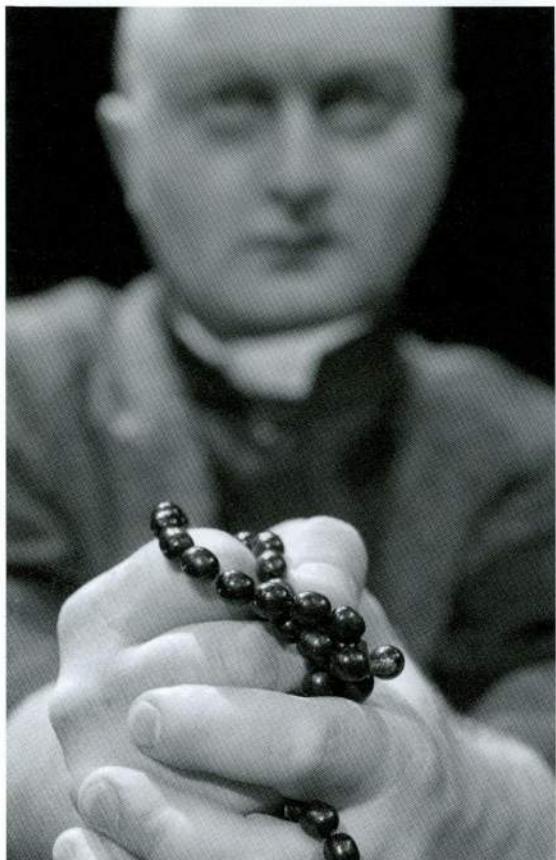
Mary McCarthy, director of programme development for Cork 2005, recalls that the commission was one they hoped to realise, "if we found additional finance. But we were really clear with the artist that we had to find additional

Cork Confab

Location is the theme of Theatre Forum's annual conference, taking place at the ICD in Cork from 16-17 June. It promises debate on notions of centre and periphery; three "psychiatrist-chair" interviews diagnosing how new generations can best manage change; and a panel discussion tracing the development of international site specific performance. In "Soapbox" sessions,

GEORGE SEREMBA asks "Irish theatre - whites only?", and Dunamaise Arts Centre's Technical Manager, **NICK**

ANTON, explains his polemic: "Irish theatre - An accident waiting to happen".



Parker's Playwrights

This year's Stewart Parker Trust Awards went to Gerald Murphy for *Take Me Away* (New Playwright Bursary), Mark Doherty for *Trad* (BBC Northern Ireland Radio Drama Award, pictured), and Darach Mac Con Iomaire (BBC Northern Ireland Irish Language Drama Award).

finance for it. We had that in writing, and verbally that was the case."

Mercier, however, had identified a non-theatrical site for performance, had moved to Cork to work on the project, and had engaged Fiach MacConghail as producer of the project. "I find it bizarre really," says Mercier. "When you're involved in a project like that, you have to be very clear about what you're looking for." Had he understood that the project was never guaranteed a production, "then I don't know if I would have wasted my time."

The programme for Cork 2005 lists Mercier's contribution in more vivid terms than most writing commissions: "*P* will be a fun-packed celebration of human conflict for all the family, plus lots of interest for the combat enthusiast and the serious student of history."

Though Cork 2005 board member Johnny Hanrahan considered *P* a "very deserving project" for production, he insists that such an undertaking was never ratified by the board. "It was one of a raft of projects presented to us at a

what's news

point where our finances would not bear any more programme," he says.

"The amounts of money available for programme are less than we would have hoped," Hanrahan admits. "Paul, in common with several other projects, has fallen foul of that."

As to the health of Cork 2005 as a civic and cultural project, Hanrahan freely admits that despite encouraging attendance figures and strong programme items, "it is a project that is bedevilled by difficulties around communication." Hanrahan signals moves to redress the situation such as a board-based "legacy group" charged with "reopening dialogue" with those left out or alienated by a disparate programme. "There are quite significant changes in the way communication will be done that I hope will kick in now."

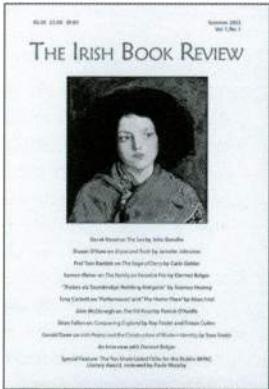
On Mercier's part, despite his misgivings he does not seem to have given up on staging *P* in its intended location. "We have no intention of just putting the thing aside and letting it go," he says.

Watch this space.

PLAYOGRAPHY MARCHES ON

The Irish Playography online archive now covers more than half a century of new Irish writing, north and south, following the completion of its second phase of research. With Phase II extending Playography's reach back to 1950, Theatre Shop's groundbreaking project to document the Irish theatrical repertoire now includes plays first staged by Gemini Productions, 37 Theatre Company and the Lantern Theatre. Check it out on www.irishplayography.com...

The Irish Book Review



The Irish Book Review will focus on high quality reviews of some of the best books published in Ireland and abroad. Reviewers for **The Irish Book Review** will include leading journalists, academics, authors and others who will provide their own lively interpretation of some of the key titles recently released. Published four times a year, **The Irish Book Review** will concentrate in the areas of literature, current events, arts and culture, history and biography, politics and contemporary Ireland. *Inaugural issue available June 10. €25.00 per year (4 issues).*

To subscribe, ring (01) 851-1459 or visit our secure website at www.irishbookreview.com

His Name in Lights

The Gate Theatre is transferring its work to the West End and Broadway at a rate of knots these days, with a very familiar name appearing on the marquee. **MICHAEL COLGAN** gives *itm*'s news editor **PETER CRAWLEY** a rare blast of his producing philosophy.

WHEN IT COMES TO INTERNATIONAL TOURS, MICHAEL Colgan has a favourite quote: "There's no profit like not-for-profit." If a Gate Theatre production is invited to the not-for-profit Spoleto Festival in South Carolina, for instance, the Festival will cover the production's budget and pay all costs involved in moving the show — from insurance to freight charges to the actors' per diems —

as well as paying an agreed fee to the Gate for the production. In short, the Gate can't lose.

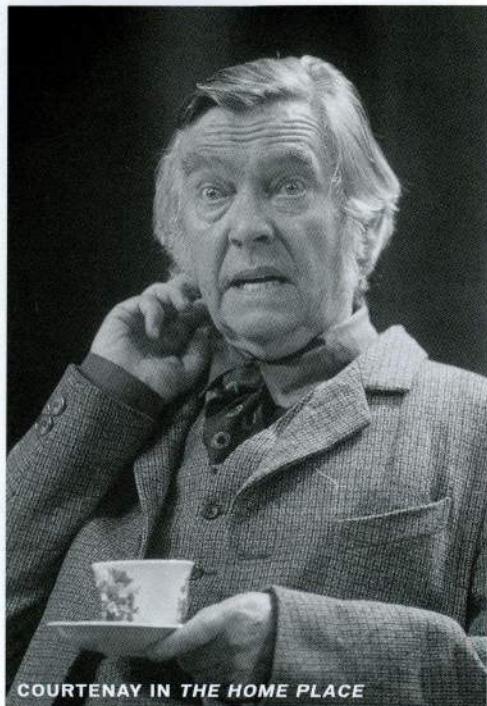
The for-profit world of commercial transfers is another story, however. Here the Gate — like any other subsidised theatre — can't afford to lose. In practice, a costly production on Broadway or the West End necessitates a partnership with commercial producers and investors, in which the originating theatre negotiates a royalty. The producers shoulder the risk, hoping to recoup their investment and



turn a profit through box-office sales and therefore, says Colgan, "essentially want to give us nothing."

Despite Colgan's wary view of the commercial world, the Gate's production of Brian Friel's *The Home Place* is currently playing in London while the theatre negotiates several other commercial transfers. Conor McPherson's *Shining City* is due to open on Broadway in October. A production of Friel's *Faith Healer* will open at the Gate in Feb 2006 before transferring to Broadway that April. Meanwhile, the

what's news



Gate also has productions of Pinter and Beckett scheduled for domestic and international performances in 2006.

Colgan variously describes the commercial producers that he will not deal with as "fly-by-nights" and "thieves." The few commercial partners the Gate has accrued over the years, albeit carefully, merely warrant his active distrust. To illustrate his wariness, Colgan outlines one potential scenario: a producer might use his or her investment as leverage to ask for changes to the production. But with enough changes to, say, cast members or set design, this producer might claim it was no longer a Gate production and deny the theatre its royalty.

Even royalties involve tricky negotiation, with the theatre seeking a percentage of the gross, while the producer offers a post-recoupment cut instead, or ushers the theatre into the Byzantine system of a royalty pool. You can understand Colgan's scepticism. But it does seem strange, at first glance, that Colgan appears to have joined the loathed ranks of commercial producers, if the credits for the West End transfer of *The Home Place* are anything to go by: "The Gate Theatre Dublin production of *The Home Place* is produced in London by Sonia Friedman Productions and Michael Colgan."

But this credit is not what it initially seems: the producers (in financial terms) of the *The Home Place* are in fact Sonia Friedman Productions, Tulchin/Bartner Productions, and Spring Sirkin — Colgan's title represents no financial investment on his part. Rather, Colgan negotiates the title of "artistic producer" to fend off the potential meddling of those he sometimes refers to as "The Money."

"That's part of the deal, and that means that I can call the shots," says Colgan, adding, "when I say 'I', I mean 'the Gate'." (He tends to use the terms interchangeably.) For example, Colgan will not allow a performance in London to go ahead with an understudy in the lead role, a condition he admits that has lost him some transfers.

Given that, conventionally, the use of the word "producer" denotes financial involvement, Colgan's use of the title in

TOM LAWLER

Eye dee dee deedle eye
Eye die die dee-dee-dum
Doo Doo Doo Dooby Do
Da da da dum da dum

Dee dee dee deedle-do
Eye tie di doodle dum
La la la ha-ha-ha
La la ti pom pom pom

La eye ti mo-beel
La hee ta hoo hah
Oo-beey doo-bey teeheeaaaaaaaaaaaaay!!!
Dydle dee dum dum

Oh yeah! yeah yeah!
Dydle-dee dum dum

**"LA DONNA È MOBILE"
FROM VERDI'S RIGOLETTO**

As performed in his bath by Brendan Dolan in Navan after hearing it on RTÉ lyric fm.

You hum it, we play it.

RTÉ lyric fm

96 - 99fm www.rte.ie/lyricfm

what's news



SHINING CITY

this context may seem misleading. But there is nothing officially stopping him or anyone else from using it this way, something at least one London publicist bemoans: "It depends on how they like it to be phrased. There's not a set rule, unfortunately."

Closer to home, however, the rules are far less vague. One of the official conditions (Condition 19, to be precise) under which the Arts Council grants support to any arts organisation states that "no director, manager or employee, shall on that person's behalf, or on behalf of any other organisation, acquire subsidiary rights in any work produced by the organisation, unless permission in writing has first been obtained from the Council." This would seem to expressly forbid Colgan from taking an actual (investing) producing role, unless sanctioned by the Council... Or does it?

When Noel Pearson produced the hit 1990 Broadway transfer of *The Abbey's Dancing At Lughnasa*, Pearson was also

chairman and acting chief executive of the theatre. The perceived conflict of interest attracted some controversy, but no censure, and similar concerns were raised last year when the director of *The Shaughraun* and former board member of the Abbey, John McColgan, moved to tour that show under the aegis of his company, River Productions.

Despite the continuing presence of Condition 19 on Arts Council contracts, Enid Reid Whyte, drama specialist at the Arts Council, told *itm* that there was no hard policy on such tours or transfers. A subsidised company is expected to stage its shows in Ireland, but then it is free to transfer internationally as it wishes. Conditions of grant-aid do not prevent a subsidised company from undertaking the financial risk of an international tour — although it is hugely unlikely that it would be financially capable of doing so. The Council can then reasonably expect that a theatre company will licence a production to a commercial producer for a



VISIT THE ACTORS' NOTICE BOARD

This is a free online service for displaying:

- Notices of upcoming auditions for stage, film and TV
- Notices of upcoming theatre, dance, festivals, etc.
- Reviews of Plays and Dance
- Information regarding actor-related training

Operated online free-of-charge by Crooked House Theatre
Company, Newbridge, County Kildare.

WWW.CROOKEDHOUSE.IE

what's news

tour. When the company submits its annual accounts, "the Council will take a view on whether or not the company has been adequately remunerated for its initial production," says Reid Whyte. "That's all."

This seems a far cry from the Arts Council's position on these matters in 2000, when, under the terms of the (now-shelved) second Arts Plan, questions were raised about the Gate's perceived emphasis on international touring over domestic activity. After the negative publicity of those turbulent days, the new Council may be loath to impose restrictions or to be seen as penalising success. Still, as one arts executive remarked, when a subsidised theatre attracts such routine commercial interest, it raises the question of whether a publicly funded production represents "a nice soft investment opportunity for somebody who's in the position to exploit a successful show."

Colgan dismisses this idea. "Our first job has got to be putting the shows on the Gate stage and for the Gate audience. We will never be a tryout for New York or for London. We would never put a play on the stage because of a touring reason."

Still, the Gate's touring policy is so expansive and vigorous that it is hard not to see the theatre building and fortifying its status as a global brand. The most recent Conor McPherson premieres have been staged in London first, Dublin second, although they have been either produced or co-produced by the Gate. Having attended six of the last twelve Spoleto festivals, Colgan is so confident of the invitation that he uses it as an incentive to attract cast members to a classic revival ("They get a three-week holiday and that could make it attractive to an actor"). And with *Faith Healer*

already bound for Broadway — almost a year before the production begins rehearsals — one presumes that Colgan doesn't always wait for an invitation to bring his work abroad.

"You tour for different reasons," says Colgan. "You tour for money, you tour for prestige and you sometimes tour because it's very good for the morale of the actors."

But the *raison d'être* of the Gate's touring policy, Colgan asserts, is the ability to attract overseas talent by maintaining a high international profile. "I don't have to explain the Gate Theatre to Ralph Fiennes," he says, "because [he sees] the work." Highly regarded directors and writers like Neil LaBute and Mark Brokaw need little introduction either. Big names and big box office go hand in hand of course and add to the Gate's prestige. But how does the Gate's import/export policy benefit Irish theatre?

"Moreso than anybody else, the Gate has subsidised the arts in Ireland with international money — more than any other organisation."

How's that?

"Because of the profits we make and the surpluses we bring in. We complement the Arts Council's grant. We top it up, not to what it should be, but nearer to what it should be by doing extra work, in Gate productions going abroad."

What's good for the Gate, in other words, is good for us. But Colgan can still sound wary of those "utterly murky" situations where people could exploit the Gate for their personal gain. It is this situation, and not vanity, that demands he assume an artistic producer role. "There's going to be a big debate sometime," he says, as we ponder the murk.

We won't hold our breath.

opening nights

NEW IRISH PRODUCTIONS coming up
in the next three months – mark your diaries!

Barabbas' latest, **...tanks a lot!** (pictured), written and performed by Raymond Keane, continues at Project through **11 JUNE**.

NO MESSIN' WITH THE MONKEYS by Roddy Doyle continues at the Ark until **18 JUNE**.

Oscar Wilde's **LADY WINDER-MERE'S FAN** runs at the Gate through July, followed by **A VIEW FROM THE BRIDGE** by Arthur Miller, opening **28 JULY**.

Galloglass' production of Tom Murphy's **THE SANCTUARY LAMP** opens at the Parochial Hall Theatre, Clonmel on **1 JUNE**.

Marie Jones' latest, **A VERY WEIRD MANOR**, plays at the Lyric, Belfast from **3 JUNE**.

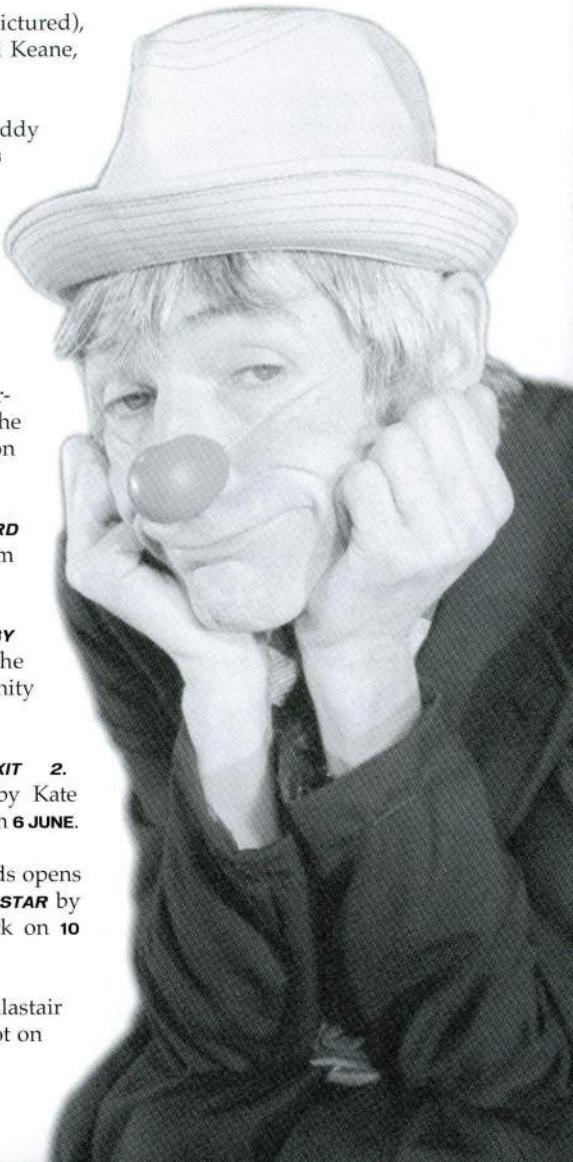
Smashing Times presents **MISSED IT BY A MINUTE** by Aoife O'Reilly at the Samuel Beckett Theatre Space at Trinity College on **3 JUNE**.

Slaughterhouse's production **EXIT 2. SURVIVING A.**, written and directed by Kate McLaughlin, plays at Project Cube from **6 JUNE**.

A CRY FROM HEAVEN by Vincent Woods opens at the Abbey on **9 JUNE**, and **DARK STAR** by Jim Nolan premieres at the Peacock on **10 AUGUST**.

THE HA'PENNY BRIDGE, a musical by Alastair McGuckian, opens at the Point Depot on **10 JUNE**.

SEAN HILLEN



opening nights

Asylum's world premiere production of **POND LIFE ANGELS** by Enda Walsh plays at the Granary as part of the Cork Midsummer Festival from **13 JUNE**.

Bang Out of Order presents **I PRETEND** by Suzanne Lakes as part of the Pride



Festival at Project from **13 JUNE**.

Playgroup, Everyman Palace Studio, and Cork Midsummer Festival present a new multi-authored production, **DARK WEEK**, at the Everyman Palace Theatre from **21 JUNE**.

B*spoke presents **FAMILY STORIES** by Biljana Srbiljanovic at Project Space Upstairs from **22 JUNE**.

COSÁN DEARG, a collaboration between choreographer Fearghus Ó Conchúir, director Jason Byrne and composer Julie Feeney, opens in Project **29 JUNE**.

Corcadourca presents **THE MERCHANT OF VENICE** as part of Relocation, a series of

international site-specific productions, in Cork from **14 JUNE**.

Locus Theatre Company premieres a devised piece, **A SPLENDID MESS**, in Project Cube from **18 JULY**.

Pan Pan presents **ONE... HEALING WITH THEATRE** at the Warehouse, 10-13 Thomas Street, Dublin 8 from **20 JULY**. **ONE** also takes the form of a 14-hour film created by Pan Pan with the cast of 100 actors, which will be screened in Temple Bar's Diversions programme and in selected other venues.

Barnstorm's production of Aesop's fable **THE TOWN MOUSE AND THE COUNTRY MOUSE** (for children aged 4-6 years and their families) opens in Kilkenny in **AUGUST** and then tours.

Focus Theatre presents the Irish premiere of **LADYBIRD** by Vassily Sigarev (translated by Sasha Dugdale) from **2 AUGUST**.

Tall Tales Theatre Company, in association with Dublin City Council and Temple Bar Properties, present **MELODY** by Deirdre Kinahan at Temple Bar Information Centre from **8 AUGUST**.

REX LEVITATES Dance Company presents a new commission by choreographer Rosemary Butcher at Project Space Upstairs from **16 AUGUST**.

BARABBAS PRESENTS

PERFORMED BY RAYMOND KEANE DIRECTED BY JUDY HEGARTY LOVETT

...tanks a lot!

TOURING

31 MAY – 11 JUN | PROJECT ARTS CENTRE | DUBLIN
14 – 15 JUN | WATERGATE THEATRE | KILKENNY
16 JUN | PAVILION THEATRE | DUN LAOGHAIRE
17 – 18 JUN | THEATRE ROYAL | WATERFORD
21 – 25 JUN | CIVIC THEATRE | TALLAGHT
26 JUN | SIAMSA TIRE THEATRE | TRALEE
1 – 2 JUL | BELTABLE | LIMERICK



offshore

What **IRISH THEATRE ARTISTS** are up to overseas.



CULTURE IRELAND IS SUPPORTING COIS-CÉIM'S VISIT TO THE EDINBURGH FRINGE WITH DAVID BOLGER AND KATIE READ'S CHAMBER MADE (PICTURED), WHICH PLAYS AT THE CALEDONIAN HILTON HOTEL FROM 20-27 AUGUST, FOLLOWING AN IRISH TOUR.

CORN EXCHANGE brings *Dublin By Lamplight* to the Traverse Theatre for three weeks during the Edinburgh Fringe.

The full **DRUIDSYNGE** programme premieres at the Galway Arts Festival on 16 July (Town Hall Theatre) before playing at Dublin's Olympia from 2-13 Aug, and the Edinburgh International Festival (King's Theatre) from 27 Aug-3 Sept.

BOOMERANG's production of Enda Walsh's *Chatroom* (reviewed on page 94 of this issue) has been selected as the best production of that play in this year's NT Shell Connections Festival, and will be performed at the Royal National Theatre on 6 July.

Dominic Dromgoole's production of **FRANK McGUINNESS'** *Someone Who'll*

Watch Over Me continues at London's Duke of York's Theatre through 18 June, featuring **AIDEN GILLEN**.

BARNSTORM, with the support of Culture Ireland, will bring its production of *The Elves and the Shoemakers* by Mike Kenny to the EU-Japan Festival of Theatre Arts for Children and Young People in Japan this August.

MEL MERCIER has written the music for Deborah Warner's sell-out production of *Julius Caesar* at the Barbican. The cast includes 30 actors and 100 extras and the show will also tour to Paris, Luxembourg, and Madrid.

George Heslin's **ORIGIN THEATRE COMPANY** will produce Mark O'Rowe's *Crestfall* in New York this summer.

JOHN CROWLEY HAS BEEN NOMINATED FOR A TONY AWARD FOR HIS DIRECTION OF MARTIN McDONAGH'S *THE PILLOWMAN*, WHICH WAS ALSO NOMINATED FOR THE BEST PLAY HONOUR AMONGST A TOTAL OF SIX NOMINATIONS. THE PRODUCTION CONTINUES AT THE BOOTH THEATRE ON BROADWAY.

SPOTLIGHT THEATRE COMPANY brings its production of *Idol* by Sinead Beary to The Underbelly as part of the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, 4-28 August.

The Galway Arts Festival production of **MARK DOHERTY**'s *Trad* plays at the Assembly Rooms from 5-29 August as part of the Edinburgh Fringe.

DYLAN VAUGHAN

DruidSynge

THE PLAYS OF JOHN MILLINGTON SYNGE

Directed by Garry Hynes

The Shadow of the Glen
The Playboy of the Western World
The Tinker's Wedding
The Well of the Saints
Riders to the Sea
Deirdre of the Sorrows

GALWAY ARTS FESTIVAL (July) | DUBLIN OLYMPIA THEATRE (August) | EDINBURGH INTERNATIONAL FESTIVAL (August)



For details on these and additional performances, visit
www.druidsinge.com

entrances & exits

PETER CRAWLEY notes the coming and goings in Irish theatre

ALI CURRAN (pictured) has been appointed chief executive officer of the Tron Theatre in Glasgow. There are no plans to fill her position as director of the Peacock Theatre... **MICHAEL CAVEN** has stepped down as artistic director of Ouroboros Theatre Company to pursue other interests. The company has established a committee comprising actor **DENIS CONWAY**, set designer **FERDIA MURPHY** and costume designer **SINEAD CUTHBERT** to manage the company's artistic affairs. **WENDY DEMPSEY**, formerly deputy general manager of London's Lyceum Theatre, has been appointed Ouroboros' company manager. This is a new position...



The Ark has appointed **EINA McHUGH** as its new director. Formerly head of project development and strategy for Welsh TV station SG4, McHugh takes over from acting director **BELINDA MOLLER** in August. The Ark has also appointed **LIZ COMAN**, previous education officer at the National Gallery, as its visual arts project manager... **JEN COPPINGER** has been appointed information and events manager at Theatre Shop, where she had

been working part-time. This is a new full-time position... **DOIRE-ANN GILLAN** has departed as press officer for Project Arts Centre to pursue work in film press and marketing. **AISLING McGRANE** replaces her...

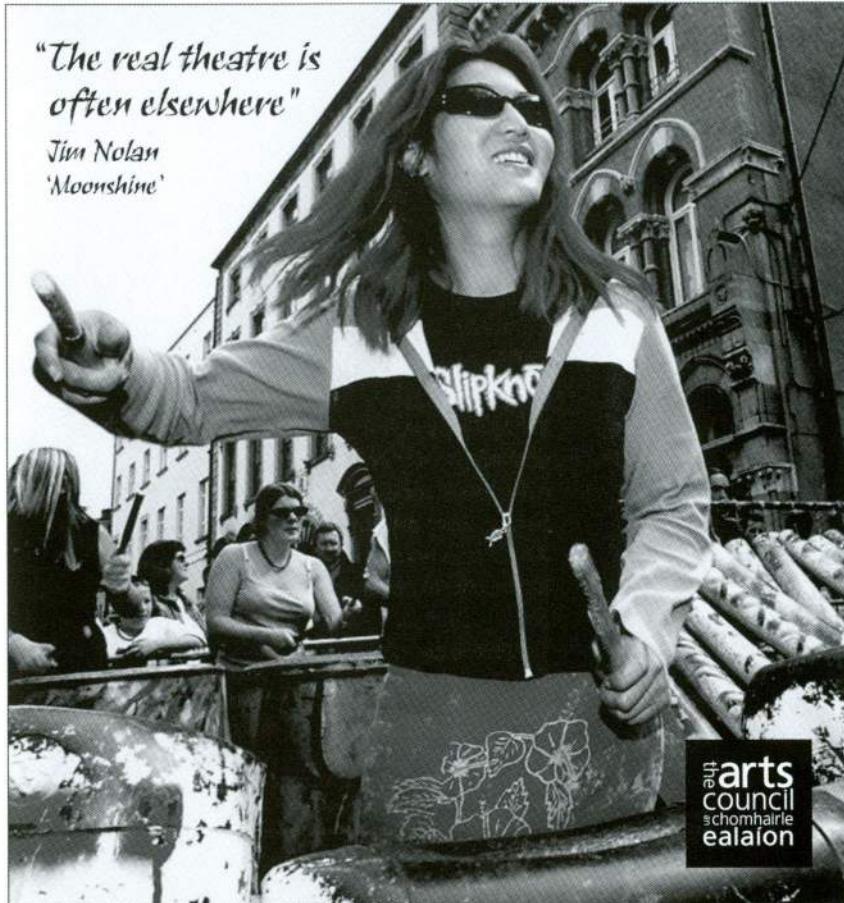
ANNE O'GORMAN, recently with the Outreach/Education Department of the Abbey, has been appointed Children's/Youth Arts Officer at Draoíocht. This is a new position... Tinderbox has appointed **DERVLA MURPHY** general manager to replace **EAMON QUINN**. She worked previously as marketing manager of the Tron in Glasgow... **AOIFE CARLIN** replaces **SHANE MALONE** as communications director of Cork 2005.

JO EGAN, producer of *The Community Wedding Play*, has been appointed creative producer of Kabosh. This is a new position... **CIAN O'BRIEN**, previously general manager with Classic Stage Ireland, replaces **ALASTAR MacAONGUSA** as the new administrator of The Focus Theatre. MacAongusa has been appointed cultural development executive in Temple Bar Properties.

www.spraoi.com

*"The real theatre is
often elsewhere"*

Jim Nolan
'Moonshine'



arts
council
éachomhairle
ealaíon

SPRAOI FESTIVAL

WATERFORD, IRELAND. JULY 29 - 31 2005

Spraoi Festival Marketing supported by Fáilte Ireland

sounding board

We all need to work together to keep cultural products out of the free trade arena, argues **IRELAND'S COALITION FOR CULTURAL DIVERSITY**.

AT THE LAST ROUND OF NEGOTIATIONS of the World Trade Organisation (WTO), the United States was keen to have cultural industries on the agenda for trade liberalisation; in particular it hoped to see state aids for cultural support, such as screen quotas, tax schemes, and direct government supports, removed or weakened, on the basis that they constituted an unfair impediment to the free movement of U.S. cultural goods.

If the U.S. was to be successful in this, individual countries would be limited in their ability to award preferential treatment to their domestic culture. TV and film drama would be purchased from Hollywood, and with the exception of news, sports, talk and magazine shows, audio-visual culture would wither and die.

To put this in context — entertainment is the largest U.S. export industry. Hollywood may be based in America but it is a billion-dollar global business. While film may be at the coalface, it is only a question of time before other artforms which also benefit from cultural policies (public funding or any other state aid) are affected. Theatre is certainly included in this.

The relationship between the U.S. and the rest of the world is not the only

While film is at the coalface, it is only a question of time before other artforms which also benefit from cultural policies are affected.
Theatre is certainly included in this.

instance where cultural policies come into conflict with trade policy. Within the EU it is increasingly the case that the development of a single market comes into conflict with national cultural policies.

It was in this general context that a coalition of arts and cultural organisations was founded in Canada and then in France several years ago. The Coalition for Cultural Diversity (CCD) advocates for the development of a new international agreement on culture that would be administered outside the aegis of the WTO. A UNESCO Convention (agreement) on the protection and promotion of Cultural Diversity has been drafted, and could be passed in October 2005. Individual countries have formed their own CCDs, with professional cultural organisa-

tions grouping together to lobby governments and raise awareness. Ireland's CCD was formed last October. We urge anyone interested in the future of the arts in Ireland to educate themselves on this issue and join us in building the critical mass of countries notwithstanding U.S. pressure at the WTO. No less than our livelihoods are at stake.



For more information on Ireland's CCD contact david.kavanagh@script.ie.



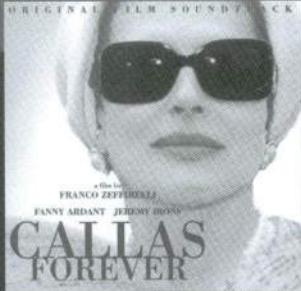
**Join the Friends of the National Concert Hall
this Summer and receive a special CD Gift***

The choice is yours...



Vengerov

Virtuoso Violin Works



Callas Forever

A Franco Zeffirelli film soundtrack

A 12-month membership to Friends of the National Concert Hall costs €100 and offers you many benefits and privileges including:

PRIORITY ADVANCE BOOKING

DEDICATED FRIENDS TICKET BOOKING LINE to the Box Office

Invitation for two to the annual FRIENDS GALA CONCERT and reception

LECTURE SERIES, open rehearsals and other Friends events and receptions

EXCLUSIVE FRIENDS MUSIC TOURS

TICKET DISCOUNTS

SUBSCRIPTION TO FANFARE, our quarterly newsletter

Calendar of events RECEIVED IN ADVANCE of other patrons

ANNUAL FRIENDS SUMMER TOURS of the National Concert Hall and the Iveagh Gardens

COMPLIMENTARY PROGRAMME at all National Concert Hall promoted events

FRIENDS 10% DISCOUNT at the Terrace Café and The Music Box

For more details call the Membership Office on 01 408 6778 or email Friends@nch.ie.

www.nch.ie

** while stocks last*

Music for members

FRIENDS
OF THE NATIONAL CONCERT HALL



Speaking Out

Irish audiences will get a look at a much-talked-about new theatrical form when the Tricycle Theatre's latest verbatim production, **BLOODY SUNDAY**, visits the Dublin Theatre Festival in October. **PATRICK LONERGAN** argues that this production may mark a turning point for British theatre about Ireland – and wonders how Irish audiences might respond to the show.



N A LONDON COURTROOM, SOLDIER F IS BEING cross-examined about his actions on Bloody Sunday. His answers are depressingly repetitive. What were his orders for that day? He doesn't remember. What was the atmosphere like in his platoon after the shootings? He has no recollection. He accepts that the evidence shows that he killed Barney McGuigan, Patrick Doherty, Michael Kelly, and perhaps William McKinney. But he has no memory of doing so. He is adamant, however, that the people he shot were all armed — an assertion contradicted by all available evidence. A lawyer asks the obvious question: if Soldier F can't remember anything that happened on Bloody Sunday, how can he claim with such certainty that everyone he shot had weapons? And with that, he bluntly accuses the soldier of falsifying his evidence.

We're in London's Tricycle Theatre, watching a dramatisation of the Saville Inquiry — the tribunal established by Tony Blair in 1998 to investigate Bloody Sunday. The interior of the theatre has been designed to recreate Derry's Guildhall, where much of the Inquiry took place: there are shelves of ring-binders, weary-looking lawyers, tearful witnesses, and blinking computer screens placed around the room. And we, the audience, are the public gallery. We strain forward, waiting to hear how Soldier F will respond to the lawyer's accusations. He shrugs. "I have nothing to add," he says.

This is a brilliantly theatrical moment: perfectly timed, perfectly delivered, and presented in a way that maximises the scene's dramatic impact. But what makes it particularly powerful is our knowledge that these events actually happened: the real "Soldier F" gave this evidence in November 2003. The Inquiry itself only concluded in November 2004, and its final report will not be published until later this year (at the earliest). In the meantime, the audience at the Tricycle is being given the chance to make up their own minds about what happened in Derry in 1972.

Bloody Sunday is the latest in a series of plays about legal tribunals to be staged by the Kilburn-based Tricycle. Since its dramatisation of the Arms to Iraq scandal in 1994, it's tackled the massacre at Srebrenica, the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry, the Hutton Inquiry, and the plight of British prisoners in Guantanamo Bay. The series has been a great success for the theatre's artistic director Nicholas Kent, and for Richard Norton-Taylor, the *Guardian* correspondent who has edited the transcripts for many of these productions, including *Bloody Sunday*. That success has inspired other docudramas, many of them by leading British practitioners. In recent months, David Hare has used the form to tackle the British rail system in *The Permanent Way*, and the invasion of Iraq in *Stuff Happens*; while Alan Rickman has just finished directing *My Name is Rachel Corrie* at the Royal Court — a play about the 23 year-old American peace activist who was killed in the Gaza Strip in 2003. Such is the enthusiasm for the medium that *Financial Times* critic Alastair Macaulay recently declared that the most significant movement in contemporary English drama is not the violent in-*yer-face* theatre popularised by the Royal Court — but the Tricycle's docudramas.

Whether that claim is justified remains to be seen, but *Bloody Sunday* quickly reveals why these plays are so well regarded. The production succeeds both as drama and as a political intervention, a difficult combination to achieve. It works as drama because it deals with life-and-death issues of national significance — but presents them from the perspective of everyday people. It works politically because the production respects its audiences: they're given the evidence, offered competing sides of the argument, and are then trusted to decide where the truth lies. At a time when politics is

Financial Times
critic Alastair
Macaulay
recently declared
that the most
significant
movement in
contemporary
English drama
is not the
in-*yer-face*
theatre
popularised by
the Royal Court —
but the Tricycle's
docudramas.



marked by spin-doctoring — and when many dramatists celebrate postmodernism's claims that there are no objective truths — this gesture is significant: the Tricycle is asserting that individuals can engage with a public inquiry, and uncover the truth about events of national importance. Of course, other media — such as newspapers and books — can also allow people to do this. What makes verbatim theatre different is that it can take a five-year inquiry and distil it into two-and-a-half hours of theatre. And because that distillation is transmitted through live performance, events takes on an immediacy and urgency difficult to achieve in print. Verbatim theatre thus has the potential to be enabling, as well as informative.

But it's also vulnerable to accusation of bias. The fundamental problem with any verbatim theatre is that material must be made stageable, a process that starts with editing. In the case of the Saville Inquiry, the need to do so is obvious: it lasted for five years, and resulted in millions of words of documentation. Transforming this into an evening's theatre requires a lot of cutting and shaping. Norton-Taylor is ideally suited to this job, since he's both a political journalist and the author of other Tribunal plays. He didn't change a single word of testimony, he says; nor did he add any material. Nevertheless, any editor's decisions about what to omit and include will necessarily involve judgements about what is relevant — and this leads inevitably to suspicions that the author has some kind of agenda. The Saville Inquiry heard statements from

**THE REVOLUTION
WILL BE
TELEVISIONED**
Bloody Sunday

The play argues forcefully that Bloody Sunday is not just about Ireland, but goes to the heart of British society: its army, its legal system, its government. For this reason alone it marks a fascinating new development in British drama about Ireland.

505 civilians and 245 soldiers, but in Norton-Taylor's dramatisation, we have five civilians and five soldiers. Does it matter that it's not an accurate reflection of the real figures? Probably not — it makes narrative sense, presenting the case as a clear "for" and "against" argument. But this focus on the British army has led some commentators to suggest that the production distracts attention from the IRA's actions since 1972. Former Tory MP Michael Portillo grudgingly praised *Bloody Sunday* in his *New Statesman* review, and suggested that the Inquiry will offer closure to the Bloody Sunday families. But he wondered what closure there'll be for the families of the "hundreds of soldiers murdered by the IRA." "Where is the truth for Robert McCartney's loved ones?" he asked.

Of course, every form of media involves the angling and shaping of material. But the medium of theatre adds another complication: it aestheticises material too. Disparate events must be turned into a narrative, which must then be represented visually, in a way that will hold people's attention for a whole evening. In *Bloody Sunday* the house lights are left on for the entire production, and no effects are used for dramatic emphasis (although there are blackouts between witness statements). The actors don't return to the stage to take a bow at the end of the performance — presumably feeling that doing so would trivialise the experiences they've been representing. In other words, the aesthetic at work here is that there are no aesthetics — the production's creators do all they can to maintain the illusion that we're not in a theatre. Which is of course highly theatrical.

Despite the reservations expressed by Portillo and others, *Bloody Sunday* has been widely praised since it opened in London — even though many newspapers have criticised the Saville Inquiry itself, with its £155 million pricetag, and its divisive debates about whether soldiers could testify anonymously. Remarkably, the most common reaction to the play's revelations about the British army is not shock, but recognition: journalists see clear parallels between Bloody Sunday and events in Iraq and Guantanamo Bay.

The Tricycle's success in generating such intelligent and well-informed debate about Northern Ireland sets its production apart from earlier stage treatments of the Troubles. The most infamous production on the subject must be Brian Friel's *Freedom of the City*, which dramatised Bloody Sunday and the 1972 Widgery Tribunal that quickly followed it. The findings of Widgery are now widely dismissed, but Friel's attack on the tribunal was deeply unpopular when his play premiered in London in 1973: there were bomb scares at the theatre, accusations that the play was IRA propaganda, and many other difficulties.

English writers also encountered problems when dealing with the Troubles. In 1972, six British dramatists — including David Hare, Howard Brenton, and David Edgar — collaborated on *England's*



Ireland, a provocative take on the history of these islands. The writers attempted to tour their play around Britain but, as Edgar wrote in *The Guardian*, "once they read the script, theatres... found an urgent need to install new machinery or overhaul their central heating (though one theatre said it would take the play if we could add a scene showing the British Army doing something good). As a consequence of this spinelessness... the show did a few Sunday nights and a short run at the Roundhouse [in London]."

Since then, Gary Mitchell and Owen McCafferty have written about the north for London-based theatres, and Martin McDonagh's *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* — with its psychopathic INLA cat-loving hero — showed that English plays about the Northern conflict are no longer taboo. What makes *Bloody Sunday* stand out is that it doesn't attempt to explain Ireland to an audience presupposed to know nothing about the Troubles. Nor does it use exoticised language or rural settings to mark out Irish characters as different from the English audience. Rather, the play argues forcefully that *Bloody Sunday* is not just about Ireland, but that it also goes to the heart of British society: its army, its legal system, its government. For this reason alone, it marks a fascinating new development in British drama about Ireland.

All of these issues make the prospect of an Irish run of *Bloody Sunday* particularly tantalising; it's scheduled to appear at this year's Dublin Theatre Festival, and tours to Belfast and Derry

BEARING WITNESS

Charles Lawson as Michael Bridge in Bloody Sunday

I found it challenging to encounter figures that seemed stereotypical in a work purporting to represent fact — but it was just as challenging to see a British play that transformed my awareness of Irish stereotypes.

are also being discussed. It will be interesting to see how audiences here respond. The play was, after all, originally designed with a British rather than an Irish audience in mind, and does not distance itself entirely from past stage representations of Irish subjects. Watching *Bloody Sunday*, I was struck by how some of the characters reminded me of stock Irish stage figures — there's a priest, a grieving woman, and a charismatic but reckless man with a penchant for gallows humour. Indeed there is a British Army general whose buffoonery is also very familiar. There were times when I wondered if this production was using audiences' familiarity with these figures as a narrative shortcut, relying on our predisposition to react to such characters in particular ways in order to convey the material more efficiently. Yet this suspicion soon gave way to disorientation: these characters all represent real people, and their initial familiarity is quickly replaced by an awareness of their complexity, their uniqueness, and (in most cases) their dignity. I found it challenging to encounter figures that seemed stereotypical in a work purporting to represent fact — but it was just as challenging to see a British play that undermined and transformed my awareness of Irish stereotypes.

This was particularly noticeable in the play's treatment of republicanism. The most chilling line in the production is delivered by Bernadette McAliskey, who in 1972 had recently been elected an MP on a Civil Rights platform, and who was one of the leaders of the Bloody Sunday march. As a result of Bloody Sunday, she says, she has never raised her voice against "the arming and taking of the war to the British government" by the IRA. "I did not have a belief that death was an integral part of the equation of seeking justice in this country" before Bloody Sunday, she explains. Since that day, however, she has believed that death is "part of the equation" in Ireland. "The British Army declared war on the people seeking justice in this country on that day. Three thousand and more coffins followed and years of imprisonment and torture and pain... I cannot forgive the British government for that."

McAliskey appears to suggest that the British government made a deliberate decision to shoot the Bloody Sunday protestors, and that subsequent actions by the IRA should be seen as a response to this "declaration of war." These thoughts are shared by many of the other witnesses at Saville, but McAliskey is the only person brought on stage to utter them. Why her? Why not Martin McGuinness? Or a convicted terrorist? One explanation might be the need to work against Irish stereotypes. People who believe that "death is part of the equation" in Northern Ireland are typically characterised as barbarous psychopaths on British and Irish stages — just look at Mad Padraic in *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* or the

entire dramatis personae of Stuart Carolan's *Defender of the Faith*. Having such sentiments uttered by a woman who is well-spoken and well-dressed works strongly against such typing. Then there's the fact that McAliskey is played by Sorcha Cusack, whose celebrity — and whose brilliant acting — places even more distance between audience and subject matter. This distance makes sense in some ways: if audiences are going to deal with this material with an open mind, then the production has to overcome their assumptions about Northern Ireland. I was excited by this production's movement away from clichéd representations of republicanism — but the material still left me feeling uncomfortable: challenging assumptions is one thing, but perhaps there are times when this production risks eliding or even sanitising republican violence.

We're back to the issue of aesthetics and editing here. Putting in one character, omitting another, casting well-known actors — all of these actions raise troubling questions. But being provoked to consider troubling questions, and being made to feel uncomfortable are not necessarily bad things — especially when it comes to politicised material. What we're seeing here are practitioners' attempts to tackle a new theatrical form — working out how to direct, perform, and respond to it. The sense of experimentation and novelty generated by this makes verbatim theatre extremely exciting. And if Norton-Taylor is using received images of Irishness to convey his points, he's also challenging those images, by placing them in unfamiliar contexts. Watching *Bloody Sunday* thus becomes an extended exercise in rethinking one's assumptions, not only about the Troubles, but also about British theatre about Ireland.

For these and other reasons, the production is likely to reignite an already vigorous debate about verbatim theatre in Ireland: in the past nine months we've had newspaper coverage and a Theatre Forum event on the subject. Much of the discussion has focussed on whether the form could and should be undertaken by Irish theatres and artists. Some reservations have been expressed — about audience conservatism, suitable subject matter — and particularly about funding. The power of verbatim theatre lies in its topicality, but making theatre that responds quickly to public



CREATORS Richard Norton-Taylor (top) and Nicholas Kent

events requires massive resources, and a stable audience. In his Theatre Forum interview, Nicholas Kent illustrated this by discussing the timeframe involved in producing *Guantanamo – Honor Bound to Defend Freedom* in 2004. The last research interview for that play took place on 12 April, rehearsals began on 23 April, and it opened a month later. How many Irish theatre companies have the resources to pull together projects of this complexity on such a short timeframe?

However, there have already been some Irish attempts to tackle the form. Joe Taylor and Malcolm Douglas had some success re-enacting the Flood and Mahon Tribunals as *The Tribunals Show* — presenting material that's often compelling, but which also tends towards humour. Such material is unlikely to have the impact of the Tricycle's work, however. As *Bloody Sunday* shows, audiences respond positively to verbatim theatre when it presents important issues from the perspective of everyday people, to whom audiences can easily relate. Irish audiences are unlikely to identify with any of the main players in the Flood or Mahon tribunals, whose activities are more the stuff of farce than drama. But so many other aspects of Irish life demand dramatisation. What about the inquiries that have attempted to uncover the truth about the sexual abuse of Irish children? Or the transmission of Hepatitis C to Irish women? Or the many other inquiries of national importance? With the exception of a once-off dramatisation about the Dublin/Monaghan bombings, such events have rarely been given theatrical attention, and it's hard to accept that lack of resources is the sole explanation. The arrival of *Bloody Sunday* could do much to encourage Irish companies to take up these opportunities.

So what can Irish audiences expect when *Bloody Sunday* arrives? First and foremost, they will see an extremely impressive piece of theatre. But the production's most important achievement is that it reveals the ongoing hold that Bloody Sunday has over life in Ireland — and, fascinatingly, it shows its impact on Britain too. Is it informative? Unquestionably — but it's also deeply affecting and thought-provoking. So *Bloody Sunday* deserves to be seen, not only as a fascinating experiment in theatrical representation, but also as an urgent intervention into the life of Ireland and Britain. It will certainly further the debate about verbatim theatre on this island — and let's hope that it also inspires work of similar stature from practitioners here.



*Patrick Lonergan teaches in the English department at NUI Galway, and is working on a book about Irish theatre and globalisation. He is *itm*'s books editor.*

So many
aspects of Irish

life demand
dramatisation.

What about
the inquiries that
have attempted
to uncover
the truth about
the sexual
abuse of Irish
children? Or the
transmission of
Hepatitis C to
Irish women?

Or the many
other tribunals
of national
importance?

Talkin' 'Bout an Education



PAST GLORIES (top to bottom)

TEAM's Sugar and Spice
and Rats and Snails (1976),
Replay's Hiring Days (1992), and
Graffiti's Drink the Mercury (1984)

Educational theatre – that is, productions brought into schools – is a longstanding and vibrant part of Ireland's artistic life, and yet is often left out of narratives of professional theatre activity. **KAREN FRICKER** meets the artistic directors of Ireland and Northern Ireland's leading educational theatre companies to swot up on what they do, and why.

EMELIE FITZGIBBON (*founder and artistic director, Graffiti Theatre Company, Cork*): Graffiti was founded in 1984. I was working with the Cork Theatre Company (CTC) and doing teaching work at UCC, and CTC had the good idea of looking to the theatre in education movement, which was becoming quite a force in Britain. At that stage the Irish government was running the Teamwork scheme, because there was very high unemployment. I put together a company of six to try a pilot project for six months — to see if there was a need for an educational theatre company in the Munster and South Leinster region. It was clear after six months that there was a need, so we continued to a full year... and now 21 years!

KAREN FRICKER: You were the second educational theatre in Ireland, after TEAM?

EF: Yes — the second one that survived for a long period. TEAM has been around for 30 years, and grew out of the Young Abbey.

THOMAS de MALLET BURGESS (*artistic director, TEAM Theatre Company, Dublin*): Yes, the Young Abbey was started by Joe Dowling in 1970 — they were inspired by the TIE movement that Emelie was talking about, and the likes of the Belgrave Theatre

TALKIN' 'BOUT AN EDUCATION

It's important for playwrights and aspiring playwrights to note that there are a lot of opportunities in the educational theatre area. TIE companies were commissioning new work before there was a vogue for new Irish writing.

in Coventry. The Young Abbey was not a TIE company as such, but was founded to introduce young audiences to theatre that was particularly focussed on them. In 1974, the Young Abbey was disbanded, I think chiefly because of lack of finance, and certain individuals went on the following year to form TEAM.

EF: John Lynch was the original director. The name TEAM shows the company's roots — it means Theatre in Education Amharclann na Mainistreach — the Irish language name for the Abbey Theatre.

TdMB: That was the original idea behind the name. Now it also means "to educate and motivate."

KF: And TEAM was created to cover the Leinster area?

TdMB: Back in the '70s TEAM covered almost the whole country — in the 1980s under the artistic directorship of Martin Drury, they focussed their activities because they were being spread too thin. We focussed on Counties Donegal, Sligo, Leitrim, Roscommon, Longford, Westmeath, Offaly, Cavan, Monaghan, and Dublin.

KF: And that was a *narrowing* of focus? (*laughter*)

TdMB: Back then, they went all over the place — even beaches.

EF: We pretty much cover everything south of the areas that Thomas is mentioned. Galway and Mayo aren't very well covered, though — they fall out of both of our circuits. There are a few TIE outfits starting out there even now, to try to and provide something for those areas.

RICHARD CROXFORD (*artistic director, Replay Productions, Belfast*): Replay's story is that it was founded by Brenda Winter in 1988. Brenda had been working with Charabanc, but Replay was not an official offshoot of Charabanc. There had been some small TIE companies in Belfast before, but those didn't last long. Brenda had kids of her own at this stage, and realised there just wasn't any theatre around Belfast for children and young people. The first piece was called *Under Napoleon's Nose* — they got the money together to put on a show about the history of Belfast. From there, Brenda called upon her friend and collaborator Marie Jones, and Marie wrote some plays for the company, and things grew from there. We tour the whole of Northern Ireland. I became artistic director four years ago, having first worked with the company ten years ago as an actor.

KF: And how did you come to TEAM, Thomas?

TdMB: After Martin Drury, there were several excellent artistic directors of TEAM — Ronan Smith, Patrick Sutton, Suzie Kennedy, then Martin Murphy, who has only just left. I've been with the company since January. I came here from Cincinnati where I was living for four years — I had a position as visiting professor of opera at the College-Conservatory of Music, and I have been an opera director for 14 years. I am English, and I worked a lot in TIE when I left university, and all through my



time working in opera I've directed in education and outreach programmes. One of the things attracted me to this was the possibility of dealing with new work. I was getting frustrated in opera because we were revisiting great works, but I felt like the genre was closing in on itself.

KF: Well, that brings us neatly to one of the areas I was interested in discussing — what kind of works are done in the theatre in education area, and to what extent your companies commission plays?

EF: We are huge commissioners of new work. We have done 33 new plays since our founding, and over 20 commissions. All three of our companies commission. That's something I hope that playwrights and aspiring playwrights would note — that there are a lot of writing possibilities in the educational theatre area.

TdMB: And that really goes back in time. It seems like TIE companies were commissioning work before there was a vogue for new Irish writing. Between us we can lay claim to many writers that are well-known now.

KF: Are there special qualities or qualifications that a writer must have in order to write a good play for educational theatre?

E: They have to be able to write a good play.

KF: Yes, we expect what you'd expect from any good writer — the added pressure is really knowing the target audience. A misconception of work for children and young people is

NOT THE FALLEN POP STAR

The cast of TEAM's Jacko (1979)

TALKIN' 'BOUT AN EDUCATION

The TIE movement began at a time when there was a larger debate in society about the relationship between various social services and the community – about the curriculum, and the need for education to be more child-centred.

that it's very clearly segmented for the six-to-12s, the 12-to-14s, and so forth, but the point is that it has to be a good piece of theatre from the bottom age right up to the top age. It has to be a good piece of theatre, full stop.

EF: I always say to a writer that the play must decide itself. If I have to move a play back in the schedule because it's not ready or working yet, I will. The play has to be true to itself.

TdMB: There is a tension in TIE plays: there are some that are very strong on consciousness-raising and message-bearing, while there are some other pieces that have a language all of their own and stand on their own as works of art. Those are the two extremes, of course — most TIE plays inhabit the grey space between them.

KF: Is there a canon of TIE plays?

EF: Yes, I've certainly returned to plays that we've done before, and produced plays that other companies have produced.

TdMB: It's interesting, that thing about the canon — it raises all the larger questions about canon-building, such as publication failure: if good plays aren't published, then there's no going back to them. And there's also the question of what makes a play important at any one time. Some plays that were considered seminal might not work in any other time. The problem about working with people below the age of 18 years is that the world moves so fast for them: it's hard to keep up.

EF: Yes, particularly where teenagers are concerned. Things change so quickly — it's so easy to make a mistake, like with your backing tracks. Something that is "in" now is "out" three months later. And then it will come across as patronising — here are these adults having a view on what we are like, which is an instant turnoff.

TdMB: Theatre is a medium that can respond quickly to change, which is to our advantage. Educational policy, for example, has to go through any number of governmental hoops before it is even ratified. Educational theatre can respond quickly and not just to short-term trends. We can get in there with new issues and ideas.

KF: You're adult theatremakers; how do you keep up with what's "in" and "out" for young people?

EF: At Graffiti we have the advantage of working with youth theatres — we've two youth theatres attached to us, and we do a lot of outreach in schools, so we tend to keep up that way.

RC: You have to work directly with kids, or you don't stand a chance. The show I mentioned that we are doing in the autumn — we had workshops to gauge language and levels, to find where the kids are in their culture about relationships and It was a *real* eye-opener.

TdMB: We would do a similar thing — bringing the writer into the school and workshopping material. The process can be challenging for a writer, but almost always positive. There is always some degree of facilitating and discussion that needs to take place.

EF: But the writer has to bring the shaping spirit to the play, and if necessary ditch some of the things that have turned up in workshops — they aren't slaves to the feedback.

KF: I'm hoping we can go back a bit in time, and you can tell me about the history of educational theatre. You mentioned the Belgrade Theatre in Coventry...

EF: They were the pioneers in what was originally a British movement. They were founded in 1965.

TdMB: There was a broader debate at the time about the relationship between various social services and the community — about the school curriculum, the need for education to be more child-centred and experiential, and there was also the growth of arts centres and community centres at the time.

EF: Drama in education was growing as a methodology, which deeply influenced the founders of the TIE companies. That is a classroom-based and process-based practice, in which you take the children into the drama: they are brought into the material. There was a classic one where they explored the life of a medieval monastery — they went into role for a length of time. Some of the strategies used by TIE companies were developed out of drama in education.

TdMB: This was the age of '60s idealism, when art had a social and political role — it was beyond art simply for art's sake. The initial TIE projects took place as wings or offshoots of repertory theatre companies. Some groups got so fired up that they formed separate independent companies, specifically geared



A BOY AND HIS AXE *Replay's* That Driving Ambition (1995)

Overall, children's and young people's theatre is considered second-rate and as coming below the rest of the professional sector. Actors would rather work for adult companies – but the work in educational theatre is as good if not better.

towards TIE programmes.

EF: They would have been left-wing, and in some cases they got into extreme polemic, which probably led to their downfall — and then of course Thatcher came in, and that was just about the end of them, the decimation of TIE in England.

TdMB: My first job was with a TIE company. It's true — a lot of those companies were shutting their doors, but still, there was some activity towards the end of the '80s. That idea about the polemic, is part of the tension of how message-bearing and consciousness-raising a TIE programme is or should be.

EF: The form has developed differently in Ireland, though. There have been very few "classic TIE" pieces in Ireland, those being the ones where the play is broken up by interactive encounters during and after the play in which the children are invited into the story, invited to go into role and engage with the issues and themes. I think young people in Ireland love the completed story. They yearn for the thing to be finished artistically, rather than broken.

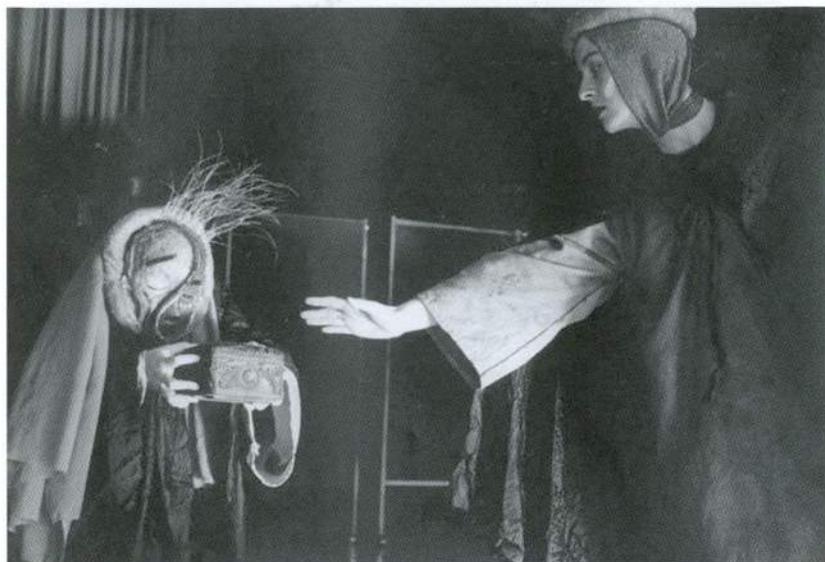
KF: It is amazing to think that TEAM has been around for 30 years, Graffiti for 21, and Replay for 17 — and yet educational theatre might not be considered part of the standard story of how Irish theatre developed. Do you have the perception of being outside the mainstream?

TdMB: We have to accept who we are, what we are, and what we do. The reality is we go into schools. There is a strong focus on performing in and transforming the school environment, and a close and bare contact with a small audience. It would be great for more awareness of the brilliance that does go on in educational theatre, but there is the reality of the intimacy of how we work. But there is also a larger political and social issue, which is the rights that children and young people have. They have a right to theatre specifically for them. Their needs and requirements should be considered as part of the overall strategy of society and the care of its members.

RC: The media has a role to play in getting the word out about what we do. At Replay we are lucky to get a fair amount of coverage in the media, but we do play at least four venue performances per tour, which helps generate coverage. Overall children and young people's theatre is considered second-rate, and as coming below the rest of the professional sector. Actors would rather work for adult theatre companies — but the work in educational theatre is as good if not better than adult theatre. It's certainly more inspirational.

KF: Can we talk about criticism of educational theatre — what the best circumstances are in which to review your work?

EF: It's funny, some critics have a resistance to coming to schools to see theatre. But they'll go see theatre in a wareh-



or a car. "Site specific" doesn't seem to apply to schools.

TdMB: The process of critical analysis for educational theatre is not established. There are specific issues, as there are with other particular forms of theatre. It's tricky to try to invent criteria for criticism at this stage. I guess a starting point would be considering whether the play is the whole event, or if the workshop afterwards counts too. I would say both parts are part of the overall performance. But a lot of critics will only come to the play.

EF: Yes, there's a whole debate to be had on this. The theatre event alone can and is reviewed on its own. But I would like someone to come see the whole thing, and to take in the resource materials. But that might not be everyone's cup of tea.

TdMB: And there is a related argument which asks why this kind of work should be reviewed at all. What is the point of someone coming in and reviewing the production and sticking the review in the newspaper when "no one can come see a performance"? — even though 11 to 15 weeks' worth of schoolchildren are coming to see it. We're back at the issue of how children are valued in society.

EF: In conceiving this interview, we at *itm* made a conscious choice to only include educational theatre companies — companies whose principal role is to work in schools. In doing so we left out several Irish and Northern Irish companies who

PRECIOUS CARGO

Graffiti's Teanga
(1986).

TALKIN' 'BOUT AN EDUCATION

make theatre for younger audiences in venue-based settings. Have we created an artificial distinction in doing so?

TdMB: It seems to me as if boundaries are breaking down a bit in Ireland. The Ark, for example, has started to go into schools as well as perform in their own theatre. Barnstorm's most recent show, *Stuck in the Mud*, had the feel of an educational theatre show because it was very issue-driven. TIE, educational theatre, children's theatre, young people's theatre, youth theatre... the boundaries are breaking down. Everyone is looking all the time to try different things. You can see how, in the '80s in Britain, with the political climate changing as we were discussing, TIE companies

were dying out, but venues and theatre companies were starting to add programming for children. I can see that starting to happen here in Ireland. Different companies are looking at the schools market. There are educational and outreach programmes at adult theatres, which traditionally have been used to put bums on seats in the main houses. Educational theatre has to



EDUCATORS
*de Mallet Burgess
(left), Croxford,
and FitzGibbon*

think about how it responds to those pressures. Our companies could be squeezed by the combined pressure of these things.

EF: I take Thomas' point, but I don't feel pressured at the moment. I know what you mean about the growth and possible cynical use of outreach, when it just means putting bums on seats. That is disrespectful, and the Arts Council needs to start looking at that. They also need to consider that each of our companies has enough potential audience to double our workload. With more investment, we could really extend the service. At Graffiti, we are sold out before our first performance. There are certain schools we know we can't service. We have waiting lists for schools.

RC: It's similar with us. There are 930 primary schools in Northern Ireland; there is no way we can get to all of them. But the Arts Council thinks that Replay go into schools, Cahoots NI do venue-based stuff, Young at Art is the festival — they are ticking all those boxes, rather than thinking what the sector needs.

EF: There is a certain attitude there — not shared by everyone in the Arts Council — that theatre for children is cheaper than theatre for adults, which is very untrue. It costs an awful lot to do a big production for 19 children. But that attitude is in the back of the head. If people really valued children and young people at government and societal level, they would definitely be pouring money into this kind of area.

Blue Sunday

ALAN ARCHBOLD offers an excerpt from his new play **A LITTLE BIT OF BLUE**, which plays in a Passion Machine production at Andrew's Lane, Dublin from 15 June.



ALAN ARCHBOLD WRITES: *A Little Bit Of Blue* tells the story of Sam (in his 40s), and the trials and tribulations of his life, which mirror the fortunes of the Dublin Gaelic football team he supports. The play takes place over one summer campaign, with a lot of the action taking place on the terraces of Croke Park (Hill 16). Having started the summer well (with Dublin winning), Sam's life starts to crumble around him, forcing him to re-evaluate and try to rebuild his world. Sam remains onstage throughout the play, and stays in light during scene changes, to give the effect of one scene morphing into another around him. In this sequence, Sam has returned from a game to the realisation that when his wife Mary said she was going to her sister's Leonie's, she may have meant it to be a more permanent departure. He sits alone in his house when his 19-year-old daughter Clare calls round. She is aware that when her mother goes to Leonie's it usually means there was a row beforehand.

(Sam sits alone in his house. He stares blankly at the note Mary has left him. "The Sunday Game" plays on the TV in the corner. Clare enters.)

CLARE: Dad.

SAM: Didn't think you were coming over.

CLARE: How long have you been sitting here?

SAM: I don't know. I don't where your

mother is either. Which is odd.

CLARE: She's gone to Leonie's.

SAM: Yeah?

CLARE: You knew she was going?

SAM: Yeah, she mentioned it, but...

CLARE: Jesus...

SAM: What?

CLARE: What happened?

SAM: Nothing happened. (Beat) How long is she staying, did she say?

CLARE: She doesn't know.

play excerpt

SAM: Well she obviously had some shagging idea. You two seemed to have discussed it at length.

CLARE: Why didn't you say something?

SAM: Look I don't know what she said to you.

CLARE: She wasn't happy.

SAM: She wasn't happy. She told you that?

CLARE: No. It was obvious.

(Sam laughs.)

SAM: Listen to me love. Have I ever put you wrong? Have I? Trust me. Your mother and I have known each other all our lives. We're not like...

CLARE: Like what?

SAM: Nothing.

CLARE: Like me?

SAM: No not like you. It's just we don't have a row and break up and go find somebody else. That's all. That's not passing comment. It's not the first time she's run off to Leonie's at a moment's notice. She never tells me anything. Jesus we were engaged for a month before she told me. Had her mother congratulating me. I didn't know what she was talking about. Don't worry about it.

(Pause.)

CLARE: You sure about that?

SAM: Of course. Sure she's always been like that. (Sensing he is starting to convince her) Remember her 40th. Big surprise. She took a vagary.

(Clare laughs.)

CLARE: Well I don't think drinks in Bridget's clubhouse was what she had in mind.

SAM: No. And the balloons said Happy 50th, which didn't help.

CLARE: That was your fault.

SAM: Always is sure. So is this... what-

ever it is. She just waits until I work out what it is I did this time. (*Lost for a minute, he reaches into his pocket and hands her money.*) Here. You go get chips. I'm watching Pat Spillane. I missed Mass. I need the penance.

(Pause)

CLARE: Actually I could use...

(*Sam automatically hands her more cash. She smiles and goes. He stands for a moment counting what's left of his money. The TV still plays.*)

SAM: What you think Pat? Huh? Analyse that.

(*"The Sunday Game" music plays and swells. The lights fade and rise again with a different hue. In the fade the music on the TV changes [ideally to a Dublin commentary from the '80s featuring the name Barney Rock.] It is the early '80s. Sam finishes counting his money. Mary, heavily pregnant, comes in and out, carrying clothes and packing her overnight bag.*)

SAM: Here sit down will you.

MARY: I'm fine.

SAM: Sit down.

(*She sits. He starts to pack her bag for her.*)

MARY: Not that. Leave that here. And get another nightdress.

(*He exits and re-enters almost immediately, looking lost.*)

MARY: On the radiator in the kitchen.

(*He exits again.*)

SAM: (offstage) How about Barney?

MARY: You're joking.

(*Sam re-enters with a nightdress.*)

MARY: Barney Maguire?

SAM: Yeah, has a ring to it.

MARY: It makes him sound like one of your dad's drinking buddies. And a toilet bag.

SAM: (As he exits) Well we're not calling him Bobby.
(He exits.)

SAM: (offstage) Or JR.
(He enters again with a toilet bag.)

SAM: Where did you get this?
MARY: Karen gave it me.

SAM: Karen that you work with ?
MARY: Do you know any other Karen ?

SAM: That was nice of her. Is that it?
MARY: I don't know.

SAM: Do you have underwear?
MARY: Yes

SAM: Towels?

MARY: I'm not going on holiday Sam.
SAM: Right. You want tea or something?

MARY: No.

SAM: You sure ? I can...

MARY: Sam. Stop.

(Sam sits.)

SAM: How are you feeling?

MARY: How do you think? What time is this taxi coming?

SAM: Any minute.

MARY: We could have got a lift off Mum.

SAM: (Adamantly) No.

MARY: So what am I supposed to do?
Avoid them? Ignore...

SAM: Look let's not...

MARY: Why Sam?

SAM: (Suddenly) They don't like me.

MARY: That's not true.

SAM: Really? They don't look at me like I'm some sort of consolation prize you got stuck with? Like a glorified goldfish in a plastic bag?

MARY: We haven't got time for this.

SAM: No. We never do.

MARY: Have you money?

SAM: Yeah.

MARY: Clare.

SAM: What?

MARY: I like Clare. If it's a girl.

SAM: Clare? That's not a name.

MARY: My cousin is Clare.

SAM: Yeah but you might as well christen her Louth or Waterford.

MARY: Kerry is a name.

SAM: Yeah but Clare?

MARY: I like it.

SAM: Okay. That's if it's a girl. (Pause) I love you.

MARY: What?

SAM: I love you.

(Mary laughs.)

SAM: What?

MARY: I know.

SAM: I'm sorry.

MARY: For what?

SAM: I don't know. Everything. This kip. Money. You know. Everything.

MARY: It's okay.

SAM: I'm sorry.

MARY: Will you stop saying that ?

SAM: Things will be okay though. They will. This job lasts and we get back on our feet. It's all downhill then. Get out of this place.

(She laughs ironically.)

SAM: I'm telling you. I worked it out. Another five years, keep things tight, we can have it all cleared off. Then we can do what we like.

MARY: And what would that be ?

(Pause. A doorbell rings. Sam helps her up.)

SAM: Have I ever let you down before?
(She looks at him, smiles wearily and kisses him.)

MARY: Get the bag will you?

(Mary exits. He watches her go. Music fades up as the lights change around him...)

The play continues...



Live Subjects

Irish publishers have recently issued two new studies of Irish dramatists. Both writers worked during the Abbey Theatre's "dark years" of the last mid-century. One of them – Sean O'Casey – is world famous. The other – Louis D'Alton – is hardly known at all. Yet 40 years ago, it was D'Alton whose plays filled the Abbey, while O'Casey struggled to get his work produced. In this special books feature, **JOAN DEAN** examines these publications, and asks what these playwrights have to say to contemporary Irish audiences.

SINCE 2000, A RASH OF BOOKS celebrating the Abbey Theatre centenary has appeared. As if to balance things out, these publications tackle the years that attract least interest from theatre scholars — the 1930s to the 1960s. Christopher Murray's biography of Sean O'Casey is a comprehensive study of the author, running to nearly 600 pages. Ciara O'Farrell's *Louis D'Alton and the Abbey Theatre* is a more modest consideration of a neglected but once hugely popular Irish writer. Both authors offer perspectives on the intricacies of the mid-century period of Irish drama, which are

informed by remarkable research and lively writing.

Although Sean O'Casey was the subject of dozens of studies in the 1970s and '80s, he has attracted surprisingly little critical attention since then, despite the fact that his Dublin Trilogy — *The Shadow of a Gunman*, *Juno and the Paycock*, and *The*

Plough and the Stars — has been produced regularly. Garry O'Connor's uneven *Sean O'Casey: A Life* and Michael Kenneally's analysis of O'Casey's *Autobiographies* appeared in 1988; the most important works since that time were the final two volumes in David Kr

SEÁN O'CASEY:

WRITER AT WORK,

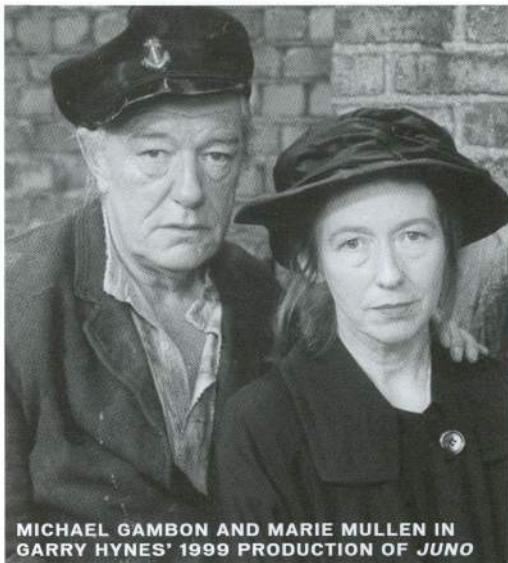
A BIOGRAPHY

by Christopher Murray
(Gill and Macmillan, 2004)

LOUIS D'ALTON AND

THE ABBEY THEATRE

by Ciara O'Farrell
(Four Courts Press, 2004)



MICHAEL GAMMON AND MARIE MULLEN IN
GARRY HYNES' 1999 PRODUCTION OF JUNO

Collected Letters. So the time is right for Murray's new study — which builds on earlier achievements, while making excellent use of recently discovered materials, such as the Abbey promptbook for the premiere of *The Plough and the Stars*. It also brilliantly synthesises Irish politics and world theatre history to produce a definitive, beautifully written biography.

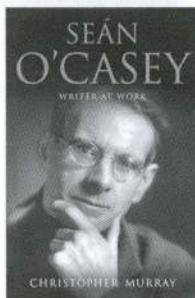
O'Casey's was a long life, spanning tumultuous change in Irish society, theatre, and culture. Perhaps the most fascinating insights offered by Murray appear in his portrait of the first four decades of O'Casey's life: with elegance and precision, he moves from O'Casey's birth in 1880 to his emergence as a playwright in

the 1920s. He shows how, as O'Casey neared the age of 40, he became increasingly isolated: his sister Bella and his mother Susan had died, and he had burned his bridges with the Irish Citizen Army, with both mainstream and advanced nationalists, and with James Connolly too. O'Casey then "drifted aimlessly" for a time, but in 1918 — with the newfound security of a job as a caretaker for Delia Larkin's Irish Women Workers' Union — his attention turned to theatrics, first in amateur benefit productions and then in submissions to the Abbey.

O'Casey remains most celebrated for the Dublin Trilogy, which soon followed. This is well-trodden ground, but Murray's handling of it is adept. He reveals how much of O'Casey's later work was already in evidence in the Trilogy, and shows how the events that led to O'Casey's departure from Ireland in 1928 — after *The Silver Tassie* was rejected by the Abbey — were set in train years before.

That departure was significant: in the space of only two years, O'Casey had gone from living in Dublin, the only city he had ever known, to being a celebrity in London, married to a glamorous woman.

Murray then shows how O'Casey reinvented himself in the 1930s. He did so not only through *The Autobiographies*, but also through such activities as his publicity tour to America in 1934 in support of his



book reviews

play *Within the Gates*. It was here that O'Casey first attracted censorship. *Within the Gates* was banned in Boston and Toronto, and the remainder of a potentially lucrative American tour was cancelled. Later that year his collection of prose, drama and poems, *Windfalls* was banned in Ireland. From this point onwards, censorship affected much of O'Casey's work.

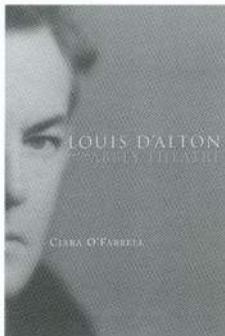
Murray carefully plots the evolution of O'Casey's experimentation with theatrical style from the 1930s onwards. His Dublin Trilogy had been largely naturalistic, but in his later works O'Casey committed himself to a dramaturgy that moved well beyond realism, while he also developed political convictions that set him at odds with the commercial theatre. He did eventually gravitate back to specifically Irish settings, but his experiments with theatrical form are often harshly criticised and dismissed. O'Casey's self-imposed exile in England — and even the happiness of his family life — are sometimes cited as causes of the alteration in the quality of his work. Another problem might have been his resentment of the commercial theatre, which was deepened when he discovered that his wife Eileen was earning more acting in Noel Coward's play *Bittersweet* in 1929 than he was receiving in royalties from his own work. This resentment probably deepened his commitment to explicitly non-commercial dramaturgies. Had Joan Littlewood's enthusiasm for his 1949 play *Cock-a-Doodle-Dandy* materialised in a production, O'Casey's stage

history might be very different. But the tar of censorship, O'Casey's decisions about where and how his plays should be done, and the fickleness of show business conspired against him. Murray charts these problems interestingly, and gives readers cause to regret that these late plays never enjoyed the inventive direction and production they merited.

Despite his obvious respect for O'Casey, Murray refuses to sanitise or elide his subject's irascibility, penchant for controversy, and prodigious grudge-bearing. O'Casey's life was shot through with paradox and contradiction. His attitudes to Irish nationalism changed in a matter of years, but other ideas, like his unrepentant admiration for Stalin, were cast in stone. He could be fiercely loyal

to people like Jim Larkin, but could terminate long-standing friendships with stunning finality — and his personal animosities sometimes spanned decades. He was an avowedly Irish playwright, yet he chose to live in England. He battled negative reviews in every forum available, but declined public kudos when universities offered honorary degrees. Murray's biography presents these contradictions and paradoxes clearly, showing O'Casey's strengths and weaknesses — while also revealing how they relate to his work.

In contrast to the prolific, prolix, long-lived O'Casey, Louis D'Alton died at the age of 50 and left a far less visible mark on Irish drama, producing two novels and only nine plays. If D'Alton's works have disappeared from the repertoire, it is as an individual even more obscure.



O'Casey left essays, journals, autobiographies, and correspondence to help biographers, but there are no such resources for a study of D'Alton. In *Louis D'Alton and the Abbey Theatre*, Ciara O'Farrell therefore concentrates on two issues: D'Alton's career as a fit-up actor and manager of a touring company in the 1930s and '40s, and his popularity at the Abbey from the '40s onwards. However, her study provides little sense of what D'Alton may have been like as a human being.

Born in 1900 to a family of touring actors, D'Alton was one of the few Irish playwrights to achieve popularity at the Abbey during WWII. Although Ernest Blythe is often criticised for the poor quality of the Abbey's output during those years, he did produce D'Alton's comedies and psychological dramas to great commercial if not critical success. Some of D'Alton's works were produced posthumously; others retained their popularity right up to the 1960s. They have largely been forgotten now, not least because this period is so often dismissed by Irish theatre scholars as fallow and uninteresting. This book gives readers an opportunity to reconsider that dismissal.

O'Farrell's finest chapters document D'Alton's career before he arrived at the Abbey. D'Alton both acted in and managed a touring company, and O'Farrell's work here interestingly documents the history of theatre touring in Ireland. Particularly noteworthy is her discussion of how Irish touring companies entertained troops during WWII under the auspices of the British Entertainments National Service Association. O'Farrell's discussion of D'Alton's involvement in these activities fully contextualises his stagecraft, and helps us to better understand Irish audiences and theatre during WWII.

D'Alton's plays of the 1940s are (rather like O'Casey's during the same period) often dismissed by critics. He wrote about characters who are destabilised by the weight of society's expectations, but O'Farrell argues that, time after time, Abbey audiences misunderstood this aspect of his plays — and were all too willing to laugh at the social issues D'Alton set out to expose. His early plays were particularly misunderstood, especially whenever they veered in the direction of tragedy. This prompted him to turn towards a deeply ironic comic mode, and he achieved great success with the interestingly titled *They Got What They Wanted* (1947) and the posthumously produced *This Other Eden* (1950). There are some disappointments here. Fidelma Farley's study of *This Other Eden* is not mentioned; the only analysis of his 1937 play *The Man in the Cloak* appears in a footnote. Nevertheless, its treatment of D'Alton's work as a manager of a fit-up company makes this study groundbreaking.

Researchers will discover in both publications a wealth of resources about the interplay between Irish theatre and Irish society up to the 1960s. Contemporary theatregoers are most likely to be struck by O'Casey and D'Alton's attempts to move away from the tradition of rural Irish peasant plays that so forcefully asserted itself at the beginning of the 20th century. The books reveal that work by both writers — which has been dismissed and forgotten for so long — might deserve another look.

Joan Dean is the author of Riot and Great Anger (Wisconsin, 2004) and the Dancing at Lughnasa volume in the Ireland into Film Series (Cork, 2003)

ACCESS ALL BECKETT

Gare St Lazare Players Ireland

WORSTWARD HO

Cork Public Museum (6–15 Apr)

TEXTS FOR NOTHING

Masonic Lodge (8–10 Apr), and

ENOUGH

The Other Place (11–16 Apr), Cork

Reviewed 9 Apr BY ANNA McMULLAN

"THERE'S GOING TO BE A STORY, someone's going to try and tell a story." (*Texts for Nothing* III). Beckett's late prose presents with extraordinary immediacy a consciousness in the acts of imagining, remembering, and uttering in the present moment. It is therefore not surprising that there is a performance history of theatre directors and actors, including Jack MacGowran, Joe Chaikin, David Warrilow and Mabou Mines, Barry McGovern, and Billie Whitelaw, who have embodied Beckett's prose narrators on stage, sometimes with accompanying *mise en scène*, however minimal. Since, following Beckett's death, his estate endorses only a "recital" of the text, this leaves directors and creative teams with only the body and voice of the performer and the space of the event to play with. In their presentation of three prose texts as part of the Cork 2005 European Capital of Culture celebrations, Gare St. Lazare Players created compelling theatre from exactly those quintessential ingredients.

All three performances, directed by Judy Hegarty-Lovett, shared a strong sense of the act of speaking in the present moment before an audience, creating a heightened theatrical awareness of time and space, the here and now opening onto other times, spaces and bodies. All of the three non-theatre

spaces were adapted for the performances, and the resonances of their habitual functions were both exploited and transformed.

The first piece in the triple bill was *Enough* staged at lunchtime in the Other Place, with the audience cramped round the small upstairs bar. This piece, performed by Ally Ní Chiaráin, premiered at the National Gallery in Dublin in October 2004, but was rather lost in the large formal space there. Here the spatial intimacy functioned well to foreground the presence of the audience as listeners. Of the three prose selections, this one most resembles a coherent story or fable, told in the first person, of the narrator's life as intimate companion to an older man, obeying his every order and desire until asked to leave him and the prelapsarian landscape of flowers they have been wandering in. Ní Chiaráin's understated vocal tone (sometimes a little under-enunciated), and her uneasy acknowledgement of the audience kept attention shifting from the story, where the gender of the narrator is left ambiguous, to the present conditions and context of her telling it, as she stood on a white box (like a defendant or a moving statue) just in front of her listeners, in total contrast to the scenes of her story. While the performer embodied the prose narrator as definitely female, the potential of this performance context to fictionalise its huddled audience in ambiguous ways (as listeners, witnesses, or perhaps judges) kept the relation between tale, teller, and hearers shifting and unstable.

Worstward Ho took place at 6pm gallery of the Cork Public Museum Fitzgeralds Park. Entering through museum, we were led into a calm

ENOUGH ALREADY

Delong in Worstward Ho



LENA PAA SKKE

exhibition room overlooking the Park and riverbank. Music by the group Autorickshaw created a meditative ambience while the audience settled into the space. When Lee Delong entered, her first act was to draw the curtains, creating a Beckettian "closed space." *Worstward Ho* is paradoxically both dense and spare: it proceeds through permutations of words and images generated by the attempts to "fail better worse now". It is a challenging choice for performance as it doesn't have a strong sense of an embodied narrative persona, as in *Molloy* or *Malone Dies*, and is much more halting and hesitant in tone than *The Unnamable*, all three of which have been previously performed by Conor Lovett for Gare St. Lazare. The "story" is about the narrator's failing attempts to create "A body. Where none. ... A Place. Where none." Delong was dressed in an oddly hybrid layering of elaborate headband and purple fleece over a loose black martial arts-style costume, a mixture of the familiar and the stylised, contrasting with the ghostly traces evoked by the text. But from the moment she started to speak, the audience was in her hands, or rather in her voice. She captured the sense that for Beckett's narrators, words are their breath, their sustenance and support, so every syllable was given its aural and semantic resonance. She inhabited the performance space, creating images and bodies out of airy nothings in front of us, using her hands or posture to give emphasis or underline the patterns and processes of composition and erasure (since the narrator keeps restarting, like an artist rubbing out marks on the canvas, except that the

traces from each erasure seep back through). Moments of irony and shifts in tone were clearly articulated, like the reference to "joy" which erupted in an expansive movement, or stilled moments of grave contemplation.

For the last show of the day at 8pm we were ushered into the Masonic Lodge, a powerful experience, as the audience looked around at the insignia, coats of arms, symbols, and ornate furniture of this ritual chamber, under the eyes of two wardens who left just before the performance began. Although at the opposite extreme to Beckettian minimalism, the room functioned magnificently as an ontologically suspended, enclosed place, the "pseudo-sepulture" referred to in the text. The performance was announced by a chime, reminiscent of *Footfalls*, as was the strip of light from the door to the performing area, pointing to the way out that eludes the narrator: "time has turned into space and there'll be no more time till I get out of here." The steps, ornate Master's chair and stool were all used as props for imagining. Conor Lovett has honed the discipline and humour of his Beckettian performance skills even further in this programme of *Texts for Nothing III, VIII and XI*, well chosen for variety of tone and coherence of shape. Wry, self-deprecating or elegiac, he convincingly embodied the narrative voice in search of a body or other bodies.

Both the *Texts for Nothing* and *Worstward Ho* take the reader into the narrating consciousness as it scrutinises itself ("there in the sunken head the sunken head" — *Worstward Ho*). In performance, we watch the narrator from the outside. The body and its spatial environment do not have to be imag-

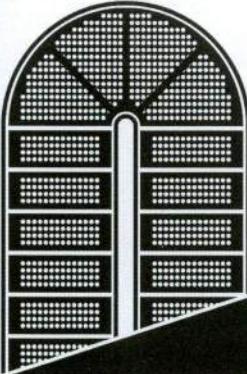
ined and continually re-imagined into being: they are there before us. Yet, as Beckett's drama and directorial practice demonstrate, the peculiar ontology of theatre presents the body as both actual and virtual, present and conjured by illusion, seen both from the outside, and from the fractured interior and visceral spaces of memory, desire or loss articulated through words. As well as foregrounding the orality and vitality of the prose, these recital-performances confirm that staging Beckett's prose has the potential to complement and extend the performative laboratory of Beckett's theatre of the body. At the same time, undoubtedly a significant part of the overall experience of this programme derived from the site-specific aspects of the performances: the formal qualities

and particular features of the decidedly "fringe" bar, the museum, and the usually restricted space of the Masonic Lodge, created in themselves a visual environment which set up rich echoes and contrasts with Beckett's texts. While remaining within the parameters of a Beckett "recital" complete with musical introduction in the evening shows, *Access All Beckett* provided access to some of Beckett's most elliptical and interiorised prose works, and to new perspectives on some of Cork's everyday and not so everyday public spaces.

Anna McMullan is senior lecturer in the School of Drama, Trinity College Dublin and author of Theatre on Trial: The Later Drama of Samuel Beckett.

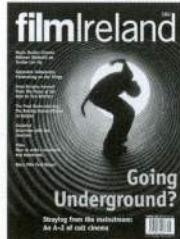
 **filmbase**
New Curved Street Premises

Spaces to hire for auditions,
casting, rehearsals and
exhibitions.



Contact
Filmbase
Curved St.,
Dublin 2
(01) 6796716
info@filmbase.ie
www.filmbase.ie

Irish and international cinema magazine



www.filmireland.net

reviews

AS YOU LIKE IT By William Shakespeare

Classic Stage Ireland

The Helix, Dublin

7-26 Feb 2005; reviewed 25 Feb by

BY LOUIS LENTIN

"A CAST, A CAST, MY KINGDOM FOR this cast" — largely untried. But what a joy to hear them speak the text so "trippingly on the tongue" with a clarity, understanding, verve, delight, precision, and understanding that I haven't heard in an Irish Shakespeare production since the golden days of the Gate. If the essence of the play was denied, the fault lay elsewhere.

Large rosettes to Emma Colohan for a captivating, pert, knowing, intelligent Rosalind. To Patrick Joseph Byrnes for a humane Jacques, the famous "All the world's a stage" speech so full of simple sense and sensibility; for Sean

SENSE AND SENSIBILITY

Byrnes in *As You Like It*

Duggan's gloriously sharp-witted, ingenious Touchstone; and to Stephen Kelly for his vigorously befuddled Orlando. To Elaine O'Dea for her quiet, cynically observant Celia. Others to Art Kearns and Peter Halpin for their several roles, particularly Kearns for his ridiculous but hilarious Audrey the goatherd.

But, "if it be true that a good wine needs no bush" why did director Andy Hinds have to place so many along the way? Do the CSI's productions really need "A commitment... to effect a meaningful marriage between the Irish cultural imagination and the great classic texts"? Please allow audiences imaginations of their own. Need we really be led up the airy mountains down the rushy glens via St. Patrick's Day Tostolian kitsch to meet the little people, in our very own Tir na n-Og? Meaningful bedamned! Hinds is



undoubtedly a fine speech coach, but as a director lacks a sense of what one of the loveliest of Shakespeare's comedies is about.

A forest clearing, a rusting flatbed lorry courtesy of Baron Goodman (frequently found throughout this Emerald Isle) provided a tiring house for a French Duke and followers driven from his court — seemingly one badly in need of a few official enquiries — by a usurping brother. Hence to be followed by his daughter (in disguise) and another ill-used brother.

The Arcadian forest of Arden, the fashionable classical pastoral retreat of innocence, time for reflection, for philosophical discourse, for apt song and dance; for friendship, for lovers to untangle their skeins, for all to retrace their paths back... where? To true love, rightful ownership? Would it were so; but sooner or later once the call comes, we all revert, to the real world. In Arden you may if allowed, learn, but what has Tir na n-Og the land of eternal youth got to offer in this or in any respect? What understanding can this banal superimposed pastiche of contemporary Oirish showbands, jigs and reels at the crossroads, allow but guffaws from the groundlings?

As You Like It treats us to a most human examination of the complexity, the almost elusive impossibility, of love, of happiness all "sighs and tears... fantasy, passion, adoration, duty and observance... all humbleness..." This wonderful dance of bliss brought to a rude end by Rosalind's pithy "Pray you no more if this; 'tis like the howling of the Irish wolves against the moon." Nor is this "play" simply a game of find the lady! Ganymede is the

Duke's daughter's disguise — he doesn't exist. But does Orlando know this? Who or what does he fall for, the boy Ganymede, the woman Rosalind, or really the boy? Things are indeed seldom what they seem.

More the pity that this production, though played with an infectious brio, lacked the necessary multi-layering, the subtle swing from danger to fun to joy to love, the tinge of underlying sadness that would have made the realisation of pure happiness when it comes as it does, all the more blissful, the more poignant. More's the pity to saddle the production with such twaddle: a gallimurphy (sic) of costumes. Foils with jeans. Lighting that simply lit. More honesty, happiness, and less of the hookey please.

Louis Lentini is a theatre director and independent television producer-director.

THE BALD SOPRANO by Eugene Ionesco

Blue Raincoat Theatre Company

The Factory, Sligo

22 Mar-2 Apr 2005; reviewed 29 Mar

BY PATRICK LONERGAN

THERE IS NO BALD SOPRANO IN *The Bald Soprano*, Eugene Ionesco's first play. This is a work that is all surface and no substance: its characters tell meaningless stories, use empty gestures, and enact pointless social rituals. What makes the play so rich is that its vacuity is so familiar: Ionesco forces his audience to realise how much of our lives are governed by absurd conventions and, in doing so, may encourage us to adopt more meaningful ways of living. This Blue Raincoat production illuminates Ionesco's themes with intel-



FEELING IT O Malley
and McCauley in *The
Bald Soprano*

ligence and wit. And the company's mode of presentation turns this *Bald Soprano* into a stylish but considered meditation on performance, theatre, and acting.

The play involves six characters — the Smiths (Ciarán McCauley and Sandra O Malley), the Martins (John Carty and Elaine Fox), the Smiths' maid Mary (Kellie Hughes), and the captain of the Fire Brigade (John Lovett). The action takes place in the Smiths' living room, in a well-appointed house in

London's suburbs. The Martins are visiting, but have arrived late; Mary chastises them for their lack of punctuality. When the guests have assembled, polite conversation begins — to be interrupted by the arrival of the Fire Chief. "Have you by any chance got a fire in the house?" he asks earnestly. When he's told that they don't, he offers to tell stories, which are listened to patiently, despite the fact that they're very bad. He leaves, and the action concludes chaotically. As the lights fade, we have gone right back to the start of the play — now with the Martins playing the Smiths' role.

Ionesco's point was that the polite social rituals of wealthy society force people to occupy roles which are restrictive and perhaps oppressive. There is some brilliant satire in his characters' efforts to behave "appropriately" — exchanging insincere greetings, asking questions when the answers are of no interest to them, and so on. Ionesco also shows how language can reinforce social hierarchies: the language of polite exchange is a carefully choreographed dance that excludes people like Mary, the maid. So *The Bald Soprano* is an interesting consideration of how language can be empty but powerful simultaneously.

What makes this production special is how Niall Henry has directed his cast to use movement and enunciation to

KIP CARROLL

bring out Ionesco's text fully. The actors show that gesture, facial expression, dress, delivery of lines, stance, and even theatrical conventions can be as clichéd and restrictive as speech often is. Hence, the authoritative manner of the Smiths is realised by McCauley and O Malley through slow-paced, deliberate movements. Both characters seem physically weighed down; interestingly, both actors deliver their lines in a tone lower than we normally hear from them in Blue Raincoat productions. The Martins' interactions involve a brilliantly choreographed series of facial gestures and movements, with Carty and Fox nodding and smiling at each other with impeccable pacing. The Fire Chief, dressed in clothes that are too large for him, looks quite literally as if he doesn't fit into this society. And the highlight of the performance has to be Kellie Hughes' delivery of a poem about polyandrous. Movement up to this point has been restricted, but Hughes recites her poem rushing around the stage in a gloriously chaotic and inelegant dance. It's a wonderful affront to the politeness of the Smiths and Martins, and Mary has to be dragged off the stage. This is hilarious stuff, but it's also affirmative and oddly moving. In an interesting way, the production thus becomes an exploration of *how not to act*: the attention paid by these characters to how they must perform before others is shown to be a restriction that should be overcome by spontaneity, creative self-expression, the overflow of feelings.

Lighting and set design play an important role here. In the play's final moments, Jean Connolly's set moves backwards and forwards, the cast rush-

ing around it shouting "not that way, this way" — another example of how every element of the production works to draw out the absurdist qualities of Ionesco's script. Lighting by Barry McKinney is also impressive, especially with the production's use of projection: when, for example, Mrs. Smith, answers a knock at her door, she does not see the streets of London but the cosmos — planets, stars, space: the lot. This situates the action in a deeper context, showing that these characters are to be understood as utterly insignificant. The combination of all of these qualities makes this *Bald Soprano* an excellent fusion of script, performance, and production.

BELFRY by Billy Roche

Livin' Dred Theatre Company

On tour; reviewed 24 Feb 2005 at the

Ramor Theatre, Virginia

and

POOR BEAST IN THE RAIN

by Billy Roche

Gate Theatre, Dublin

7 Apr-7 May 2005

Reviewed 14 April BY BELINDA MCKEON

IN 1992, WHEN LONDON'S BUSH Theatre staged Billy Roche's Wexford Trilogy in its entirety for the first time, something came to life for Irish theatre. Something new and resilient was fused in the gene pool, and the era of the Irish playwright in England, which would take Conor McPherson and Martin McDonagh as its primal sons, was born.

In stretching his portraits of life in an Irish town across a small canvas, and in sketching only the most mundane of events and anxieties, Roche seemed to regress from the way laid for Irish play-

reviews

wrights by his elders. The Trilogy plays resisted any of the sense of the absurd or the impossible from that imagining of worlds and times unlivid which had been legitimised by previous Irish writers for the stage, in particular Murphy and Friel. In the pool hall of *A Handful of Stars*, the betting shop of *Poor Beast In The Rain*, and the sacristan's quarters of *Belfry*, there seemed little magic, little of the heightened stuff of drama, at least in the sense in which such things had, up to now, been understood. Here, instead, were heroes gladly mired in the provincial, conflicts fought on scales so shrunken that they ought hardly to rival a sparrow's fall.

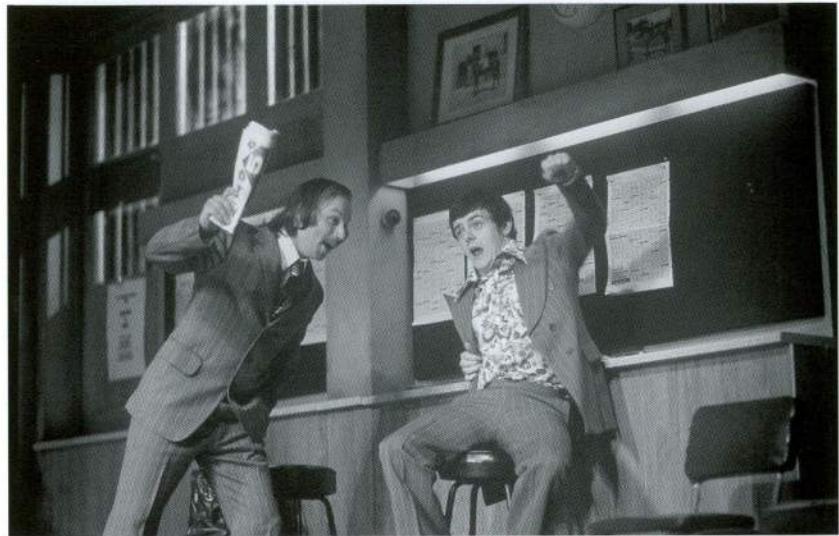
Yet there was providence in these simple lives: they were mundane from the outside, yes, but from within, they comprised — and cost — the whole world of experience. And if there was not magic, yet there were ghosts: of the past, of the lives squandered, of the young days lost. McPherson's *The Weir* and *Port Authority* and McDonagh's Trilogy of another small town would take up and deepen this sense of the ghosting of starkly ordinary lives, and they would deepen too, in different ways, Roche's ironising, his gentle satire, of those little streets. Almost 20 years after the first of the Wexford plays, *A Handful of Stars*, was premiered, to see its partners on the Irish stage once again — *Belfry* in the Ramor Theatre, Co. Cavan, and *Poor Beast In The Rain* in the Gate — allows a reassessment. Now that we are *here*, how interested can we really be in seeing and hearing the stories of when we were *there*? Now that we see great purpose in our Irish lives, how easily can we dismiss those Wexford lives as anything but emblematic or evocative, perhaps petty, even pointless? In this age, won't they crumble to dust?



Arguably, a staging of *A Handful of Stars*, with its underdeveloped central character of town rebel Jimmy Brady, and with its weary denouement, which effectively gives up on Brady's life, might justify such criticism. But the same cannot be said of *Belfry* and *Poor Beast*, and in staging them with feeling and with conviction, these two fine productions show that Roche's art still means something, and ever will. It may not change the world; but it may reveal what shapes that world, slowly and impalpably, no matter how altered that world becomes.

Love and betrayal, the struggle of blind belief against physical longing, the emotional endurance of childhood: these are the shaping forces dramatised by Roche's 1991 play, *Belfry*. This is the Trilogy's most significant play, going deepest in its explorations to consider areas untouched by the others, and this production from the Cavan company

MARY HANLEY



Livin' Dred plumbs those depths with sensitivity and intelligence. As Artie, the church sacristan who lives one of those Roche specialities, the little life, and as Angela, the married flower arranger with whom he embarks on a somewhat unlikely affair, Brendan Conroy and Deirdre Monaghan take on with measured skill the standard issues of the Wexford plays: loneliness, rebellion, and infidelity, and the painful loss which invariably follows. Left to their own purposes, these characters would capably bear the play through a perfectly competent journey from conflict to resolution, with peripheral characters such as the priest, the altar boy, and the cuckolded husband providing local colour, but Roche's technique is to render no character truly peripheral, to give each character a full and difficult story all their own.

WEXFORD LIVES Adams
and Morris in *Belfry* (left),
and Wycherley and Kinlan
in *Poor Beast*

Under Padraic McIntyre's direction, it is *Belfry* which best showcases the wisdom of this writerly approach.

Perhaps the sense of authenticity lent by the setting of the Ramor Theatre — itself a former church, with a graveyard in its grounds and stained-glass light falling across the stage — plays some part in the fullness of McIntyre's realisation, but in truth the church setting is not all that apparent in performance, and Steve Neale's design is likely to have proven equally evocative in the more conventional theatres in Longford and Dundalk to which this production toured. Built on two tiers, it set the womb-like cavern of the belfry itself — complete with bell rope and chimes — in gentle contrast to the lively social space of the sacristy below. In truth, the success of this production lies partly in Roche's

understanding of the complexity of the everyday, and partly in the superb performances which McIntyre elicits from his cast. Even the slightest of *Belfry's* characters, Angela's husband Donal, lives half in shadows which suggest that he is much more than just a cuckold; in his frowns, in his pauses, in his ultimately gentle presence, Frank Laverty points to the layers of goodness, of insecurity, of understanding which make up the man. As Dominic, the altar boy from a broken home, meanwhile, Anthony Morris is endlessly watchable, enriching the insolence and energy necessary to fuel his character with a marvellous wit, with a sense of timing that hints at this young actor's enormous comic gift.

But for Roche, merely to laugh is the

easy way out, and McIntyre understands this, drawing from both Morris and from Malcolm Adams, as the troubled parish priest, tender and brilliant portrayals of minds — and, indeed, of masculinity — in crisis. Dominic's deepest fear is an unspoken one, for he is still a child, yet in Morris's handling it becomes clear as day and deeply affecting; it is the fear shared by the priest, portrayed in utterly captivating fashion — the voice, the gesture, the walk — by Adams. Dominic wets the bed, the priest turns to drink; Dominic hates the food at the industrial school and longs for chips; the priest prepares the eucharist and craves the company of a family, of a woman. Both are, in a sense, orphans, and the crossover between their worlds is expertly handled in this pro-



**Get your own
subscription
to Ireland's
number one
theatre
magazine!**

For as little as €32 per year you'll get full coverage of everything that's new on the Irish theatre scene, as well as analysis of trends that are shaping Irish theatre today.

Subscribe online at info@irishthemag.ie Or call 087 799 7989

duction. That *Belfry* is the only part of the Trilogy to brave the subject of a child's death marks it out as Roche's most confident and careful piece. However, even this masterful production could not mask a flaw inherent to the play: the premature peaking of its strongest emotions, from love, through fear, to grief. As if impatient for these lives to take on meaning beyond their apparent constraints, Roche hurries his characters into situations — affairs, confrontations, sudden deaths — to which, you feel, they would much more comfortably arrive in their own time.

The same is true of *Poor Beast In The Rain*, in which the sudden appearance of the town boyo, Danger Doyle, at a moment when anticipation of a different sort fills the air will always smack of the contrived. This problem of rushing to climax is evident throughout the text of *Poor Beast*, but it is ably defused by director Conor McPherson's decision to pace this production slowly, to imbue it almost with the sense of dreaming or drunkenness, as signalled by the opening scene in which, somewhat unnervingly, nothing at all seems set to happen for a long minute or two. This place, after all, is just a betting shop, and this time just another day. But the lives gathered in this place and time soon ignite; even without the rebel's return, the relationship between Eileen, daughter of the woman with whom he ran away, and Molly, the girlfriend he left behind, bears a poisoned edge, while the emptiness of the life lived by Steven, the abandoned husband, acts like a reservoir for suffering. Garrett Keogh's portrayal of this man, desperately quiet, desperately withdrawn into himself, is a masterclass in restraint, while the play of innocence and bitterness performed by Dawn Bradfield (Eileen) and Andrea Irvine (Molly) is

superb in its starkness and unpredictability. Eileen's young admirer Georgie, the only other representative of a generation which, it soon emerges, will be no different to the last, is played with tremendous insight by Laurence Kinlan, whose performance moves easily between a lightness of touch and a terrible weight of foreboding. As his older friend, and Danger's former sidekick, Joe, Don Wycherley is a knowing blend of the painfully funny and of simple pain; Wycherley's almost uncanny feel for the bleakly hilarious touches and turns of middle-aged manhood ensures that he will always get the laughs, but in this production, while never stealing the limelight from Liam Cunningham's menacingly attractive Danger, he gets much more. Like all of Roche's characters, he gets respect.

And respect is hard to get. Set in a place where dreams are made and mangled, *Poor Beast* constructs a sort of waiting-room of the soul, a place wherein lives can change — through the mere stroke of a pen. Danger's return ups the ante and forces a taking of stock, and as it does so, it changes the dynamic of this town. Not in a huge way, not like a win in the All-Ireland final will seem to change it, but in one of those little ways that Roche knows to be so powerful, so enduring — and so apparently mundane.

Belinda McKeon writes about theatre and culture for *The Irish Times*.

THE CAMBRIA by **Donal O'Kelly**

Donal O'Kelly Productions

On tour; reviewed 4 Apr 2005 at the Town Hall
Theatre, Galway BY PATRICK LONERGAN

DONAL O'KELLY'S *THE CAMBRIA* DRAWS together many of the strands from his career to date. Like *Catalpa*, it's set on a



boat, and is a fine example of O'Kelly's performance style of using movement and found objects to bring his text fully to life. And *The Cambria* takes up where *Asylum! Asylum!* left off: that earlier play ended with the deportation of one asylum seeker; this new one describes the arrival of another. *The Cambria* is thus a reminder of how much O'Kelly has contributed to Irish theatre over the last decade: he's expanded our view of performance, while poking insistently at our consciences. That said, this play is not entirely successful, and it raises troubling but important questions.

It recounts how escaped slave Frederick Douglass fled the U.S. for Ireland after his famous autobiography was published in 1845. His passage

AHOY! Donal O'Kelly and Sorcha Fox in *The Cambria*

across the Atlantic was on a ship called the Cambria (hence the title); upon arrival in Ireland, Douglass was given a hero's welcome, largely thanks to Daniel O'Connell, who spent much of his political career campaigning against American slavery.

O'Kelly, together with Sorcha Fox, enacts an imagined version of Douglass' crossing, showing his interactions with other passengers and crew members. These are your standard bunch of melodramatic characters. There's the ineffectual but ultimately heroic Captain Judkins. There's the cute hoor Dub who, when Douglass' identity is revealed to the passengers, assures Douglass he's "just doing his job" while locking him in chains. There's Cecily, the feisty damsel from the Northern U.S., who demands

TOM LAWLER

that Douglass be freed. There's the evil southerner Dodd, who's the cause of all this trouble; and there's his adorable daughter Matilda. The action is framed by a story about a contemporary asylum seeker in Dublin, sending a clear message: we accepted one of the world's great thinkers when he was an asylum seeker, and should be careful about rejecting more recent arrivals.

The play can therefore be praised because it reminds us of an important aspect of Irish history, which is rightly celebrated. But perhaps it's oversimplified too. O'Connell may have welcomed Douglass to Ireland, but he lost support from Irish-Americans for doing so: up to (and after) the U.S. Civil War, Irish-Americans were regarded as highly racist, and the same was true of many living in Ireland itself. No society is ever entirely racist; no society is ever entirely free of racism. Perhaps O'Kelly doesn't want to overcomplicate his message by getting into this material; he might also argue that if Friel can rewrite history, so can he. But this play presents a view of history that is somewhat utopian. Perhaps that should have been made clearer to the audience.

Also slightly troubling is that this story is told as melodrama — a form which seems to dominate recent Irish dramatic treatments of race. The problem of racism is rarely analysed or treated with any complexity on the Irish stage — instead, it's usually just a lever in a melodramatic plot. The genuinely racist are punished, the ignorant learn a lesson, and order is always restored — as we've seen in *Done Up Like A Kipper, Guess Who's Coming To The Dinner, Hurl, The Buddhist of Castelknock*, and so on. Racism in *The Cambria* is per-

sonified by Dodd, who's little more than a pantomime villain — he gets his come-uppance, and racism is no more. The play's messages about freedom are mostly conveyed by the symbolic release of Matilda's doll. Even the selections from Douglass' writings appear to have been chosen for their sensational rather than their intellectual impact. Again, O'Kelly might argue that few racist people are likely to be convinced by an appeal to their intellect. But why must Irish theatre continue to use melodrama to explore questions about otherness? What does it mean for the white O'Kelly to play an African-American liberator? Is O'Kelly's conflation of the contemporary asylum seeker and Douglass fair to both?

To come away from a play with one's head spinning with such questions is not a bad reward for a night's attention. O'Kelly and Fox engage that attention fully, moving skilfully and amusingly through the play's 11 roles. The stage is almost completely bare when the play opens, but under Raymond Keane's direction, they use white sheets, rope, plastic, and crates to realise the action vividly. Does *The Cambria* work as theatre? Absolutely, though the pace wanes somewhat in the second act, which features a lengthy riff on Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner*. Does it work as politics? Yes, because it deals with the issue of otherness not by problematising it, but by celebrating it. But it left me wanting to see an Irish play that would show us where we are now. A revival of *Asylum! Asylum!* might be a nice start. A musical about our current Minister for Justice could be interesting. But certainly it's time for Irish drama to move beyond melodrama in its treatment of race.

CROSS MY HEART

by Mary Elizabeth Burke-Kennedy

TEAM Educational Theatre Company

On tour; reviewed 7 Apr 2005

at Our Lady of The Wayside N. S.,

Bluebell, Dublin

BY PÁDRAIC WHYTE

FOR THE PAST 30 YEARS, TEAM has provided children and young people all over Ireland with access to drama and theatre as a form of expression, a method of entertainment, and as a means of education. By touring to schools across the country it very often provides children with their first taste of the theatre world.

Cross My Heart is aimed at 7-9 year olds and places thematic emphasis on the concept of secrets. What is a good secret? What is a bad secret? When is it right to break a promise? Four actors attempt to explore these issues as they reveal the story of an island community somewhere in the distant past. When a ship is wrecked on its shores and the islanders work together to assist the crew, two young people, Clara (Aoife Duffin) and Frankie (Stephen O'Rourke) form a special friendship. Along with Ruth Sherran as Clara's mother Emma, with Will Irvine giving a superb performance as Frankie's elder brother Oliver, the four actors present the story through a combination of narrating and re-enacting. The cast work extremely well together, playing a number of minor characters along with their major roles, making seamless transitions through swift costume changes. Director Martin Murphy also makes inventive use of Chisato Yoshimi's intelligent set design as the actors manipulate a wooden platform

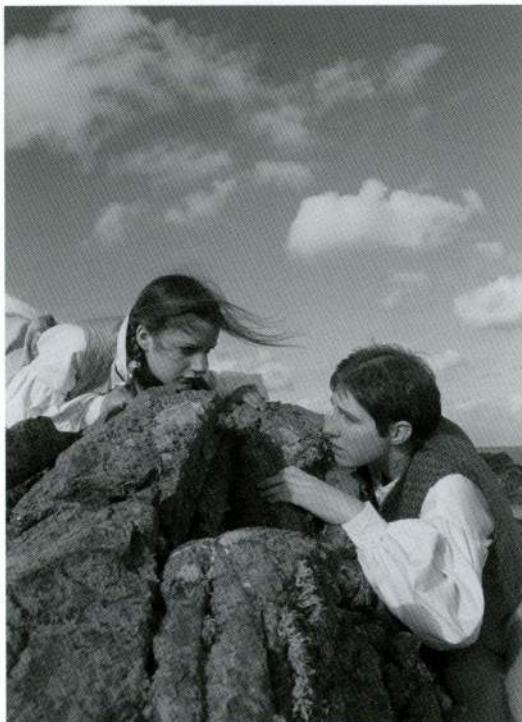
to re-enact a shipwreck, row ashore, work on the land and rebuild a ship. While these ensemble scenes are extremely energised, it is Irvine's outstanding immersion in his role and confidence on stage that carries the production. Irvine's singing ability, booming voice, flawless transition from one role to another, and interaction with members of the audience sustained the spectators' interest. Many of the scenes between Duffin and O'Rourke, however, were less engaging as there was little evidence of character development in O'Rourke's portrayal of Frankie.

However, all of the responsibility does not lie with O'Rourke, but is part of much larger problems with Burke-Kennedy's script. The play conforms to stereotypical gender roles that are never challenged, as the men work in the fields and the women bring them food. Also, the most disturbing element occurs during the denouement, as the central theme of the play is explored. Frankie has been hiding from his brother Oliver, Captain of the ship, because Frankie does not want to be a sailor. He pretends that he was lost at sea and waits for the others to sail off again once their ship is fixed. On discovering Frankie, Clara agrees to keep his secret, but is motivated to tell her mother when she realises how upset Oliver has become over his brother's apparent death. Unfortunately, there is no examination of what may result from her actions and by the end of the play Clara loses Frankie's friendship forever. While the programme raises issues of "good" and "bad" secrets, there is no exploration in the play as to how a secret should be revealed or the consequences of breaking a promise; are

there ways to reveal the truth and save a friendship? Sometimes in order to disclose a secret, a promise does not have to be broken.

But this is not what we get in the text. There is no problematisation of the issue and no alternative is suggested. On finding Frankie again, Oliver simply tells him to get onto the boat, do as he is told, and they will discuss it when they get to the next port. Frankie never forgives Clara and Clara loses her friend forever. Conservative adult-child power relationships are simply reinforced in the play as it ends with no exploration of the child's viewpoint. It is possible that the child spectator is left with the idea that adults must always be told the secrets, despite the consequences it can have on children and childhood friendships.

However, with emphasis on education, the performance itself is but one part of the programme that TEAM offers schools. One week before a performance TEAM provides the school with resource material for teachers, introducing the children to the themes of the production. Following the performance in the school, TEAM offers workshops to examine some of the issues that the production raises, while also supplying a teacher's resource pack for further



LOST AT SEA
*Duffin and O'Rourke
in Cross My Heart*

exploration of the ideas and concerns raised. Although the performance ended with such unsettling ideas, perhaps they were discussed and complicated in the following workshops. Ultimately, TEAM's performances are but one element of a wider programme, a factor that distinguishes them from other theatre companies for children. This also complicates the writing of reviews for the performances alone.

Pádraic Whyte is writing a PhD in children's literature and film at Trinity College.

DEATHTRAP by Ira Levin

Red Kettle Theatre Company
On tour; reviewed 14 Feb 2005
at the Theatre Royal, Waterford

BY LISA FITZPATRICK

THE LATE-VICTORIAN THEATRE ROYAL, a small ornate house with a proscenium arch, is an interesting venue for an old-fashioned thriller. It offers the possibility of camping up the performance by emphasising the rigid plotline and stock characters typical of the genre alongside the inflexibility and overt theatricality of the performance space. However, this requires a strong vision of the overall work, and Red Kettle's production of *Deathtrap*, directed by Terry Byrne, does not manage it. This is a pity, because the play's over-wrought plot and the presence of characters like Helga Ten Dorp would lend themselves to a kitsch, melodramatic production.

The setting of the play is given in the programme as "Late 1970s. The home of Sidney Bruhl in a remote location in the Connecticut countryside." The action is set entirely in Bruhl's study, off of which are the front door to the house, and French windows opening into the garden. Bruhl, played by Keir Dullea, is a middle-aged playwright who has not had a hit in a long time, and is now teaching creative writing. In the expository opening scene he discusses his lack of inspiration and financial worries with his wife Myra, played by Mia Dillon. He tells her that one of his students has sent him the draft of a very promising play. Together they decide to tell the young man his play needs work and offer to collaborate with him, a ploy which will net Sidney half the profits from the production. Then, jokingly, Sidney intro-

duces the idea of killing the young man and selling the work under his own name. Myra plays along, reminding him that their psychic neighbour, Ten Dorp, will surely uncover their guilt. The atmosphere becomes more tense, however, when Sidney begins preparing to put their plan into action. From that point onwards, the play twists and turns, piling reversal upon reversal. The key surprises are that the plan all along has been to kill Myra, and that the young man, played by Clifford Anderson, is Sidney's lover. The final body count would be a credit to a revenge tragedy.

The acting is always solid, but rarely exciting. Tadgh Murphy gives the most vivid performance as the younger writer, Clifford. The strongest element of the design is Conleth White's lighting, which marries naturalism with the thunder-and-lightening dénouement of the traditional thriller. Similarly, the sound, by Dave Curran, includes stereotypical horror violins, which are suitably OTT. In comparison, Alan Farquharson's highly naturalistic set, while it is in keeping with the costumes by Valerie Kelly, does little to enhance the atmosphere. Instead of the garish orange and brown swirls, elephant flairs, wedge heels and flapping collars that would have lent the show a knowingly retro element, the costumes and set are timeless and frumpy. This choice highlights the script's weaknesses.

For it is difficult to see the rationale behind the choice of play. Levin is a very skilled writer, best known for the film versions of his novels *Rosemary's Baby* and *The Stepford Wives*, but *Deathtrap* is not one of his best works, and has dated badly. The references to the New York theatre of the 1970s are meaningless to most Irish spectators,



and references to "smoking grass" and homosexuality no longer create a frisson. Red Kettle's naturalistic approach to set and performance means that the outrageous character of the psychic, played in camp style by Brown, becomes a mere caricature with a ludicrous "Dutch" accent. Similarly, the ridiculously convoluted plot teases the audience with ideas of fiction and reality, a quality that a good production might enhance. Here, however, it becomes merely confusing.

The decision to perform a thriller is not necessarily a bad one; this genre can usually attract a large audience. Since all the publicity material mentioned Dullea's role in Stanley Kubrick's film *2001: A Space Odyssey*, he was presumably also seen as a strong selling point.

TARGET PRACTICE
Dullea in Deathtrap

However, as with other recent shows by the company, the choice of text is problematic and the direction lacklustre. Although Red Kettle continues to present itself as grounded in the community — by publicizing the Autumn production, *Lord of the Flies*, as a synthesis of the company's professional and youth work, for example — there is little sign here of any particular connection to Waterford. Although there are no reasons, artistic or socio-political, why Red Kettle should not aim at commercial success, there is a need for the company to articulate a vision of what it is currently doing and where it expects to go in the future.

Lisa Fitzpatrick lectures in drama at the Waterford Institute of Technology.

THE DREAM OF A SUMMER DAY by Storytellers Theatre Company

On tour; reviewed 7 Apr 2005
at the Civic Theatre, Tallaght

BY FINTAN WALSH

AS SOON AS THE GHOSTLY SILHOUETTES emerge from a frosty blue light at the beginning of this production, and start to roll, one by one, down the concave set towards the audience, you get the feeling that we're in for something a little bit different. Haunting a boy's bedroom somewhere in Victorian Dublin, these shape-shifters, who seek out new experiences, new acquaintances and new worlds, set the tone for a play about the Gothic Irish writer, Lefcadio Hearn, who all his life, attempted to do just the same.

Born in 1850 on the Greek island of Lefkas, to an Irish father and a Greek mother, Lefcadio Hearn was also known as Patrick Hearn and Koizumi Yakumo at various points in his peripatetic life. During his many travels, which took him from his Mediterranean birthplace to Dublin, America and finally to Japan, Hearn worked as a travel writer and as a journalist. His literature, much of which was published posthumously, was chiefly influenced by the work of better-known writers like Sheridan Le Fanu and Bram Stoker. And it is from one of Hearn's powerful tales — "The Dream of a Summer Day" — that Storytellers' collectively created production takes its title.

Under the direction of Liam Halligan, the play (somewhat ambitiously) attempts to document as many different phases in the writer's life as possible. The adventure begins in Dublin, where the young boy (Conan Sweeny) is under

the care of his aunt, Mrs. Brenane (Aoife Maloney). It is here, listening to the yarns spun by one his minders (Diane O'Keeffe), that Lefcadio's love of folklore is first nurtured. From Dublin, Hearn moves to school in St. Cuthbert's, near Durham, where he accidentally loses his left eye in a sporting accident. When his studies are forced to terminate because of his aunt's bankruptcy, the young man takes off to colourful Cincinnati where he works as a general reporter, before moving to New Orleans. Finally, Lefcadio settles in Japan where he spends the last days of his life. In a flight of theatrical fancy, the production shows the eccentric's demise to be spurred on by his opening of a cursed box, which rapidly accelerates his ageing.

The plot of Storytellers' production weaves Lefcadio's stories with his life. As well as being driven by such a weighty narrative, the production also tries to remain faithful to Hearn's stylized aesthetic vision. To this end, the play combines word, image, movement and sound in near-equal measure. Marcus Costello's set, which curled like a lazy c the length and breadth of the stage, was the centerpiece of the visual display. With a door at its centre, it facilitated most of the entrances and exits. Costello's lighting was as bold as his stage design, if occasionally lacking in variation. And against this vivid backdrop, many quasi-Gothic scenes were layered, beginning with the initial haunting which set the morbid precedent. Some of the most affecting vignettes were set in Japan, and included the stylised killing of an orphan girl by an angry mob armed with polyethylene wrap, as well as the inscription of



"holy texts" on Lefcadio's body, using video projection. And these macabre moments, as with the more mellow, were accompanied by Denis Clohessy's musical score. Inspired by an eclectic range of sources, the arrangement included hymns, Moore's melodies, Buddhist chants and American folk songs, some of which were notated by Lafcadio himself while in Cincinnati.

All performances by this cast were impressive, with Sweeney's intense restlessness a fitting portrayal of an inquisitive man always on the move. Other members of the cast, including Colin O'Donoghue and O'Keeffe, being gifted musicians as well as actors, doubled roles to perform Clohessy's accompaniment. Maria Tecce and Maloney, in their role as a pair of missionary nuns, gave an especially memorable rendition of

VISIONARY Moloney
and Sweeny in Dream of a Summer Day

"Hail Queen of Heaven."

While this enjoyable production served up an audio-visual feast, the abundance of word, image, movement and sound sometimes hindered rather than assisted clarity. This difficulty was compounded by the fact that the details of Hearn's life, to me at least, were largely unknown, and so I struggled to catch them as they were offered, while at the same time trying to enjoy the rest of the *mise-en-scène*. While a sharper narrative focus would have been kinder to the audience, it would perhaps have been unfaithful to the spirit of Hearn.

Like its subject-protagonist, *The Dream of a Summer Day* is a truly busy, sometimes bizarre, but ultimately compulsive piece of theatre.

Fintan Walsh is a research student at the School of Drama, Trinity College.

reviews

THE DROWNED WORLD by Gary Owen

Randolf SD Theatre Company

Project Cube, Dublin

2-12 Mar 2005; reviewed 9 Mar

BY FINTAN WALSH

IF YOU WENT ALONG TO PROJECT CUBE IN the hope of seeing Randolph SD interpret Madonna's 2001 world tour, you are likely to have been bitterly disappointed. Sure, their show featured some beautiful strangers who threatened to destroy the world with their rays of light, but this aside, the parallels between *The Drowned World* (Gary Owen) and *Drowned World* (Madonna) go no further. The actual play on show, by the young Welsh playwright Owen, is set in a world where the beautiful "radians" are controlled by the ordinary looking "citizens." You see, in this Orwellian territory, radiance is highly infectious, and to prevent it from spreading and therein illuminating the ugliness of the majority, it must be contained at all costs. To this end, the citizens have instated a fastidiously monitored system of segregation, which prohibits the intermingling of the radians with the citizens. And those unlucky enough to contract this vile incandescence must be quarantined in order to prevent a global outbreak of beauty. The prospect just sounds like a nightmare, doesn't it?

Kelly (Ruth McGill) and Darren (Matt Torney) are lonely citizens, whose lives inadvertently come into contact with Tara (Marian Araujo) and Julian (Paul Reid), a beautiful couple who are on the run from a quarantine order. Despite knowing the law of the Ministry (the name given to the governing establishment), Darren is unable to exercise

restraint at the sight of angelic Tara, and so he harbours her and her boyfriend. Although Kelly initially meets this action with disapproval, eventually she also becomes contaminated with radiance and develops a fixation on the couple's beauty. The citizens' obsessive interest violently culminates with Darren "harvesting" Tara's hair and teeth to sell to other beauty-hungry citizens, including Kelly herself.

As with its two other professional productions — *EEEUGH!!TOPIA* (2003) and *The Illusion* (2004) — Randolph SD offers a highly polished performance here. "Set realiser" Louise White and director Wayne Jordan share a sensitivity for spatial organisation, as revealed in the set's clarity of presentation and the actors' movements, which are disciplined, sometimes verging on stylised. This observance of detail is also seen in the measured but effective use of lighting by Sinead Wallace and in the performers' crisp, rhythmic delivery of words, particularly in the case of Torney and McGill. Torney's lyrical rendition of Owen's poetic prologue primes the audience for a real treat.

Despite these positive qualities, which in their recurrence seem to be among the company's trademarks, the play text does little to show off the group's talents. Its premise alone reeks so much of teen spirit that it is often difficult to smell the performance's perfume from the play's pong. This is largely because Owen's text, in failing to evolve beyond the ugly versus beautiful premise, is really not all that interesting. Sure, even though the audience may read in parallels with other violent practices of segregation, such as anti-Semitism, apartheid and even forms of ethnic cleansing (even



though we are not obviously beckoned to any one of these interpretations by the performance), the conflict between the beautiful and the ugly still seems like a weak metaphor, if that's even how it is intended. This problem is compounded by the fact that Owen's characterisation is too under-developed to see his use of appearance as a broader statement on personal virtue. And that aside, beauty and ugliness work better as aesthetic or metaphysical principles than as metaphors.

This leaves us to assume that Randolph SD was pitting the battle between the radiants and the citizens as an actual possibility. In the company's vision of Owen's world then, instead of wishing to become like the beautiful people, as we so clearly do nowadays, society just

YOUR TEETH OR YOUR LIFE McGill and Torney in
The Drowned World

kills them off instead. By setting the play in an environment more like a familiar present than an estranged future, the pro-

duction did seem to almost literalise the issue. But if some kind of naturalism was the company's aim, then one would have expected the difference between the beautiful and ugly to have been more convincingly portrayed — the only thing that seemed to set the characters apart was the colour of their clothing. Furthermore, the actual threat posed by radiance was not only poorly developed in the text but fairly impalpable in performance too.

While Randolph SD did an admirable job of trying to keep *The Drowned World* afloat, I couldn't help thinking that the play was undeserving of the company's talents and efforts.

reviews

ENLIGHTENMENT

by **Shelagh Stephenson**

The Peacock Theatre, Dublin

9 Mar-16 Apr, 2005; reviewed 9 Mar

BY SUSAN CONLEY

BY MERRIAM-WEBSTER'S DEFINITION, the act of being enlightened means to be freed from ignorance and misinformation. But the dictionary leads us on to "illuminate," which seems more useful to the arguments that Shelagh Stephenson is teasing out in her latest play. To quote Sri Ramakrishna (as you do), "Do not seek illumination unless you seek it as a man whose hair is on fire seeks a pond." Is this the kind of relief that Lia Kilmartin (Ingrid Craigie) is after? Is she truly seeking renunciation of the temporal in order to embrace the spiritual, or is she feeling guilty that she has any feelings at all? Is she truly seeking fulfilment via detachment, or is she practicing a kind of denial that has less to do with repudiation and more to do with doing without materialist trappings?

"It doesn't have anything to do with interior decorating," Lia insists when television producer Joanna (Amy Marston) interrogates Lia about the progressive emptiness of her study. As a reaction against the disappearance of 20-year-old son Adam, who has gone missing while travelling the world, Lia undertakes a quest towards "goodness," which amounts to the disposal of the fruits of her disposable wealth in a fit of post-imperialist, white Western atonement. She has been "bad" — not grateful enough, or too grateful, maybe, for her status in the world — and now, by stripping her surroundings bare, she will be "good."

She is alone in this guilt: even Joyce (Jan Carey) the spiritual channeller she

has been consulting, thinks this is "fluffy nonsense." Husband Nick (Mark Lambert) is coping, albeit less dramatically, by doing his work and watching football. Lia's father, Gordon (Alan Barry), a former Labour MP, seeks to manipulate the media in reigniting interest in his lost grandson. It is he who brings the ferally ambitious Joanna into the mix, and the situation is further complicated by a young man who is shipped back to the Kilmartins in the belief that he is Adam. He (Christopher Adlington) is not, and his presence, and psychotic personality (he cuts himself, is a pathological liar, and a thief) creates havoc in a household that is supposed to have met its quota for chaos.

The problem is that the production never manages to stir the pot of emotions that Stephenson has percolating beneath the surface of her play. In Act One, we meet a fractured family suffering the tortures of uncertainty and hope, emotional states that the world saw live on their televisions on and from Stephen's Day 2004. Anyone with an ounce of empathy was able to relate to the dilemmas of those waiting for news of loved ones caught in the tsunami, a seemingly endless cycle of horror and fear and disbelief. One imagined that every time the phone rang, as it does in Stephenson's play, it heralded another unbearable gamut of emotions.

Stephenson does not make a meal out of Lia's grief — for it is Lia's journey that becomes the focus of the play — nor does she bury that grief completely under an old-fashioned stiff upper lip. She has, in fact, created a potentially complex and compelling character, one who perceives her world, and her very nature, to be under attack. Director Ben Barnes unfor-

tunately chose to guide Craigie through a far less complex maze of emotions than appear in the text. Lia is articulate, perhaps overly so, and honours her head over her feelings. Yet many opportunities arise to explore her conflict; moments in which her desire to atone collides with her need to reach an end of grief. Craigie's performance betrays none of this turmoil: for example, she indicates none of the desperation that one assumes a woman of her intellect would feel in order to permit herself to hire a "sensitive." Lia's struggle comes across as less of a rollercoaster and more of a tram to nowhere, chugging along a straight track past uninvestigated station stops.

Adlington, Carey, and Marston are English imports who invest themselves fully in their characterisations — especially Marston, who is quite the wolf in chic clothing. Barry is not given much to do, Lambert only slightly more, and both characters seem underwritten. The lot are situated on Joe Vanek's gloomy set, three cobalt-blue walls that were rather bare enough to begin with; Lia's purge makes no apparent difference.

Lia is surrounded by ignorance and misinformation, a state she ultimately doesn't try very hard to work through. The play itself renounces Lia's renuncia-



IN THE DARK Craigie and
Lambert in *Enlightenment*

tions, in that she claims she's shed false hope. It is a wise choice, for enlightenment is by no means an easy path. For Lia, the very thing she needs to renounce is Adam, and despite her claim that she is able to move on, that is something she will never do.

Susan Conley is a critic, novelist, filmmaker, and is art director of this magazine. This review first appeared in itm's online newsletter.

FRONGOCH by Ifor ap Glyn and Michéal Ó Conghaile

North Wales Stage in association
with Project, Dublin
On tour; reviewed 25 and 26 Mar 2005
at Project BY ROS DIXON

AFTER THE EASTER RISING OF 1916, some 1,600 Irishmen — participants, fellow-travellers and sympathisers — were interned in a camp at Frongoch, on the Tryweryn river, near Bala in North Wales. The internees campaigned against conscription into the British army, demanded to be treated not as criminals but as prisoners of war, and organised resistance to prison regulations. From the British government's point of view, Frongoch was a mistake. So large a gathering of Republicans turned the camp — dubbed both "the University of Revolution" and "the Sandhurst of the Irish Republican Army" — into a hotbed of revolutionary activity, coordinated mainly by Michael Collins.

Collins, however — though featured on the poster and programme — plays a relatively minor role in *Frongoch*, written by Ifor ap Glyn in collaboration with Michéal Ó Conghaile and toured in Wales and Ireland in February and March 2005 by North Wales Stage (Llwyfan Gogledd Cymru). This little-known piece of history is told instead, through a mixture of English, Irish and Welsh, from the perspectives of a cast of three: Malone, a young Irish revolutionary, Captain Bevan, the English camp commander, and Doctor Peters, a Welshman.

As Malone, Caoimhín Ó Conghaile was most affecting when recounting how a friend, having "kept faith with

Redmond," died horribly at the Somme. Like the play as a whole, this story was intended to show the effect of historical events on ordinary lives, but the actor was given too few such opportunities for personal revelation and his character seemed too broadly sketched, as a spokesman for his nation rather than as an individual. By contrast, the martinet Bevan's accounts of his experiences at the front lent his character greater depth; while not excusing his brutality towards prisoners, they went some way to explain his anger at the Irish for engaging in a squabble for independence rather than fighting the common enemy. In Michael Atkinson's powerful but modulated performance it became clear that Bevan, in his ceaseless talk of duty to King and Country, was clinging to rhetoric to make some sort of sense of the horror. Begging Doctor Peters in vain for some kind of forgiveness and in a drunken rage of self-loathing — a pistol in one hand, a half-empty whiskey bottle in the other — he told how a moon-faced German boy soldier had pleaded for his life, and how he, Bevan, "shot the moon." Peters, sensitively played by Richard Elfyn, is the play's main narrator, and its most lyrical, sympathetic, and heroic character. When ordered not to treat prisoners who withhold their name and number, he is torn between allegiance to the army and duty to his patients; scapegoated during an enquiry into camp malpractices, and with his career in tatters, he commits suicide in the Tryweryn.

Frongoch explores links between language and identity, and examines the different responses of the Irish and the



Welsh to their colonisation. Its seriousness is relieved on occasion by comedy, and the director, Ian Rowlands, punctuated a rapid pace with moments of quieter reflection. With his designer, Sean Crowley, he created a simple but brilliantly inventive staging. Five tall painted glass panels hung from metal tracks supported by brick pillars. These served many purposes. When moved back and forth they allowed rapid changes of scene. Individually, they were used as props, like a blackboard for a makeshift classroom or a screen for a newsreel from the Somme. They permitted too a series of projections, creating backdrops — a running river, a Gaelic football match — displaying quotations from newspapers as commentary on the action, and showing troops marching off to war. Pre-recorded videos provided scenes

LIFE DURING WARTIME
Ó Conghaile in Frongoch

with other characters: Malone's mother, Michael Collins, Members of Parliament, and a conscientious objector. The live performers interacted with these projections; thus at one comic moment the panels divided to let Bevan "join" for dinner the images of Sir Charles Cameron and one Colonel Lambert. Against a grey and brown set, lit from the side, some projections looked like old oil paintings and others like sepia photographs, which generated an ethereal mood. Most impressively of all, however, stunning collages of images and texts allowed English subtitles for speeches in Irish and Welsh to be integrated completely into the setting: an innovative solution to the problems that often beset multi-lingual performance.

Frongoch illuminated forgotten history, and resounded with current debate.

reviews

With a multi-national cast, and created by North Wales Stage in collaboration with Project (Dublin), aided by Garter Lane (Waterford) and the Town Hall (Galway), this production demonstrated the viability of cross-cultural collaboration.

Ros Dixon is lecturer in Drama and Theatre Studies at the National University of Ireland, Galway.

THE GLASS MENAGERIE

by Tennessee Williams

Lyric Theatre, Belfast

4–19 Mar and 29 Mar–2 Apr 2005;

reviewed 31 Mar

BY PAUL DEVLIN

HAVING REJECTED THE POSSIBILITY OF reaching any fundamental truth in the theatre through the use of "photographic realism" alone, Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* explores the slow-burning desperation of the Wingfield family in a dramatic work that is part realist, part symbolist. Originally staged in the mid-1940s, but set in the depression era of the 1930s, Williams' deeply personal "memory play," narrated by an angst-ridden Tom Wingfield, is an intense examination of codependent and flawed family relationships. Abandoned by her husband years earlier, Amanda Wingfield, a prototypical Williamsian aging southern belle, is forced to rely on her son, Tom, for financial assistance, and struggles to adapt her refined, rural southern charms to meet the harsh economic realities of her present city-life. She fears for the future security of her physically and emotionally disabled daughter, Laura, and recognises the frustra-

tion of unfulfilled ambition and wanderlust percolating in her son. Sensing imminent disaster, she tells Tom she will set him morally free from his surrogate father responsibilities if he can find Laura a husband. The first half of Williams' play concerns the construction of this plan and Tom's reluctant decision to agree to arrange for a "gentleman caller" to visit the family. The second half sees the failed execution of the plan: Jim O'Connor, Tom's co-worker and boyhood acquaintance, arrives for supper but turns out to be already engaged, an irony made all the more poignant by our privileged awareness that Laura has harboured a long term affection for Jim since high school.

Gary McCann's design of a cage-like metal frame surrounding the threadbare Wingfield apartment evokes a strong sense that the space in this play is both a refuge and a prison. His design accommodates the transparency of the "fourth wall" the play asks for, allowing the decentred gaze of the audience to travel through the walls of the apartment into a network of stairwells, fire escapes, and alleyways that surround it, effectively suggesting an almost violent juxtaposition between fading nostalgia and pressing modernity. The tension implicit in McCann's design is complemented by Conleth White's fluid lighting design: ranging from lurid reds and stark spotlights in the play's exterior scenes to a much dimmer, sentimental wash for the apartment interior.

Rachel O'Riordan directs with a keen sense for the musicality of Williams' dialogue and encourages a pleasing, counterpointing physicality in each of the performances. Elizabeth Counsell phys-



ically captures Amanda's charm, waning sexuality, and mounting hysteria. Her attempt to communicate Amanda's mental strain unbalances some key moments, however, as when she confronts Laura about dropping out of a secretarial course. Counsell directs the tension of such scenes inward to her character's self-absorption, rather than pushing the moment toward the dramatic conflict unfolding between characters on stage. Counsell's wonderfully warm southern drawl and girlish elegance, however, play brilliantly against Patrick Moy's portrayal of Jim — full of populist rhetoric and a compulsive belief in the virtues of progress and personality. Abigail McGibbon's physical and vocal tics draw out Laura's impossibly delicate sensibilities with impressive subtlety; McGibbon's is a hugely engaging and painfully sweet performance.

BLUE ROSES McGibbon in
The Glass Menagerie

Her child-like vocal characterisation of Laura contrasts sharply with the snarling cynicism and entertaining sarcasm Richard Dormer brings to the role of Tom. Dormer's physical performance as the play's narrator is aptly imposing, clearly establishing Tom's overarching control and dominance of the play's events, however on a few rare occasions O'Riordan does allow this aspect of Dormer's performance to become slightly overstated — for example, when Dormer holds himself off the set in a mock-martyr image of crucifixion.

O'Riordan has elected to incorporate only some of the slide images and motifs Williams suggests to be projected on stage during the performance of this play. Those slides she does select are purely visual images: the family's ever-smiling, absentee father, and a still life image of a

reviews

blue rose — Jim's nickname for Laura. And yet one wishes this could have been taken further to use the extensive range of slogans and titles Williams proposes; this could have enhanced the central playfulness and almost postmodern sensibility the production appeared to be aiming for. Such visual commentary on stage action might have undercut the overly sentimental feel of some scenes, and fully delivered the kind of risks the production seems to suggest it's going to take from the first moment Dormer takes the stage, simultaneously seducing, implicating and making us complicit in events about to unfold, but whose ironic "knowingness" also lends the audience enough distance to engage with the play intellectually as well as emotionally.

Paul Devlin is a research student with the University of Ulster's School of Media and Performing Arts.

HAMLET by William Shakespeare

Gúna Nua Theatre Company
Project Space Upstairs, Dublin
30 Mar-9 Apr 2005

Reviewed 2 Apr BY BRIAN SINGLETON

IT HAS BECOME IMPOSSIBLE TO DEFINE Gúna Nua's style given the variety of works produced so far; they have presented us with everything from thirtysomething urban-chic drama to pot-boiling crowd-pleasers in the recent past. Their latest offering was a *Hamlet* performed by two actors, a "reduced" approach that has many precursors. The motivation for such versions is to focus on the skill of the actor as the principal source of all meaning and shift emphasis away from what the text means to what it does. This type of approach was seen to

great effect in Barabbas...the company's 1997 version of Lennox Robinson's *The Whiteheaded Boy* in which actors "quadrupled up" and all the stage directions were performed as well. Such approach is a meta-theatrical commentary on the nature of theatre as a communicative medium, while remaining faithful to the text as written.

Actors Paul Meade and Enda Kilroy strove for such textual fidelity in this production despite the fact that they reduced its playing time to two hours, and focused largely on the drama of love, death, weddings, and funerals. Meade took on the eponymous tragic hero at all times throughout the play while sharing his burden of the remaining characters with Kilroy. The latter was not assigned any one character exclusively, although he played the lion's share of Gertrude and Ophelia. Sometimes for the sake of expediency, however, he gave these characters away to Meade because of the impossibility of doubling in particular scenes.

Generally this approach worked well. As the actors raced through the text, they did not permit any emotional identification with character. The play was emptied of drama as the actor lost identification with character, and we were left with a kind of post-dramatic theatre, a symptom of the postmodern age that stresses form over content. Some scenes, however, particularly those involving Ophelia and Hamlet, and the latter's soliloquies, were affecting as the pace slowed to allow for the emotional moment. But most of the time we were taken through the story like passengers on a journey with a detached and dispassionate guide.

With the dispassion came moments of comedy brought about by the necessity to double. Kilroy playing female was not an



issue. For Gertrude he lowered a scarf from his shoulders to look like a stole, and pulled it up to play Claudius. The first moment of this transition brought laughter of recognition but we swiftly accepted the convention. As Ophelia, however, he also wore a skirt as a mark of gender rather than as an attempt to play female.

Most of the humour, though, was derived from the actors' speed of change from character to character. Each was given some kind of indentificatory mask. Polonius had a Groucho Marx nose and glasses, Claudius a crown and scarf, Osric a feathered hat. Characters also were attributed with various Irish accents allowing the geography of accent to signify character differentiation. At times this was hilarious, but occasionally the actors fell foul of their own convention as when Meade had to (as Hamlet) stab Polonius

**GET THEE TO A
NUNNERY** Kilroy and
Meade in Hamlet

(a.k.a himself) behind an arras. The result was farcical but decidedly unfunny, as it simply appeared that that

director David Parnell had

not worked out this particular conundrum of doubling. At other times the doubling was magical, as in the gravedigger's scene when Kilroy transformed from Horatio to the Gravedigger. A soundtrack of his voice led us to believe he was in the grave while he emerged as the other character from upstage.

The whole thing was performed on a deceptively simple raised platform (designed by visual artist Amanda Coogan) which was a machine of transformation in itself. On top was a large trunk and some hanging banners made of a fabric that absorbed beautifully Kevin McFadden's low-intensity lighting design. Between scenes Paul McDonnell's sound design of recognisable popular

reviews

music shored up the production's drive to contemporaneity, although I wonder if the music of U2 can really signify anything other than itself!

Generally the production treated the play with respect, with Meade in particular showing his ability with Shakespeare's verse. Occasional sillinesses crept in (such as Ophelia offering fennel in the form of a dildo) which marred the overall integrity of the enterprise with an inappropriate juvenility. Perhaps the whole approach needed more of a self-conscious framing and a definite performance style than was evident. Instead it was caught between an actor's desire to identify with the text and a production concept that aimed to block such identification.

Brian Singleton is head of Drama at Trinity College Dublin.

THE HOME PLACE by Brian Friel

The Gate Theatre

1 Feb—2 Apr 2005; reviewed 8 Mar

BY SUSAN CONLEY

BRIAN FRIEL IS A MASTER EXCAVATOR of Ireland's history. Employing both humour and pathos, he has interpreted some of this country's most pertinent and persistent themes — history (*Translations*), the conflict between a Catholic present and pagan past (*Dancing at Lughnasa*), emigration (*Philadelphia, Here I Come!*), crises of faith and manufactured family (*Faith Healer*). He has constructed the majority of his works with a stirring combination of critical distance, sympathy, and feeling. However, the overwhelming feeling throughout *The Home Place* is that Friel is excavating himself, an exercise that infuses the piece with a melancholy that has less to do with dramatic atmos-

sphere than a longing for the writer's earlier, more accomplished works. Here, *Aristocrats* meets *Translations* in an orchard which, while not literally comprised of cherry trees, leans so heavily towards Chekhov that the collective weight of familiarity becomes burdensome indeed.

The play is set in a decaying Anglo-Irish Big House in which reside Christopher Gore (Tom Courtenay), his son and heir apparent David (Hugh O'Connor), and the woman they both love, Margaret O'Donnell (Derbhle Crotty). Margaret is their servant/châtelaine/mother figure, a local who, since installed in service in her teens, has given over her life to the House and its inhabitants, thereby sacrificing a truly integrated place in the community; she coddles Christopher, scolds the maid Sally (Laura Jane Laughlin), and claims to love the staggeringly callow David, all the while yearning for a world beyond the dying grove of trees that surround the House.

It is she to whom Christopher turns in his fear that he is the next landlord on the local assassination list; the death by beating of friend and fellow gentleman, Lord Lifford, has awoken Christopher to the very precarious state in which he is living. All over Ireland, the locals had begun to take umbrage at their treatment at the hands of the gentry, and despite his apparent dottiness, Christopher is well aware that he is at risk. This infringement on Christopher's peace of mind is only one of a series of intrusions that the play attempts to express — and indeed, the play is little more than a series of intrusions: of Gore's anthropometrist cousin Dr. Richard Gore (Nick Dunning) and his aide-de-camp Perkins (Pat Kinevane); of



Maggie's embarrassingly drunken and sentimental father Clement (Barry McGovern); of the local townspeople

willing to be examined by Dr. Richard in exchange for payment; and even down to the intrusion of the sound of a children's choir that opens and closes the play. This is a world with no boundaries, an idea which resonates in Friel's chosen temporal and spatial setting — this part of Ireland becomes the borderland after the revolution whose early rumblings he is charting — but these ideas are not developed or given enough critical distance.

Set designer Peter McKintosh makes it glaringly apparent that there is no boundary between the home and the world: the great pocket doors of the house open up directly onto a section of the grove. While gorgeous, with real tree trunks spearing

BOUNTEOUS WOMANHOOD

Courtenay and Crotty in The Home Place

up into the flies of the Gate's stage, the design unnecessarily points its finger at the narrative, making sure that we

don't miss that Gore can be perceived to be a "good" landlord, that normal boundaries don't apply, that he loves the land, that he *believes* himself to be a part of Ballybeg, and desires, as he desires Margaret, to be taken to its bosom. By literally laying his head on her feminine bounty, he hopes figuratively to be protected, and highlights yet another injustice of the text — that of the reduction of Maggie to a set of nicely turned out and readily available mammary glands; one calls to mind the richly developed character of another Maggie as written by Friel (a Maggie that Crotty herself recently played), and one can only wince.

The play is almost entirely defeated by the characters of Dr. Gore and

reviews

Perkins — and yet paradoxically also salvaged by them. Outsiders visiting family homes on the cusp of tragedy is yet another familiar Friel ingredient (*Aristocrats*, again, and *Give Me Your Answer, Do!*); here, Dr. Gore is keen to further his research into the defining features of different classes of humankind, to prove that the Irish are akin to the primitive peoples of the world. Dunning's Doctor is a tour de force of bred-in-the-bone superiority, and the coldness with which he treats the local poor during his experiment provides us with the only frisson of vintage Friel in the entire play. As he measures little Maisie McLaughlin (Ciara Lyons), the spirit of the narrative intention rises above the obviousness of the action: this wound, this late 19th-century perception of the Irish as little more than animals, still festers, still has the power to appall and infuriate.

This is the sort of emotional investment we expect from a Friel play, in which a larger issue is contained within a personal narrative. Friel's affinity with Chekhov has its roots in this notion: that the drama of the personal is the microcosm for the big world. But in this grove, the rich family are not merely symbolised by the doomed trees — they are so openly doomed that the arboreal symbolism is superfluous. The personal narrative has become larger than the issues at hand, and this is the heart of the imbalance of the piece: Friel's tropes have come home to roost, and rather than mirroring the condemned society he is ostensibly crafting, *The Home Place* is merely a pallid reflection of the best work of a playwright who has contributed so much to Irish dramatic literature.

I, KEANO

by Arthur Mathews and Michael Nugent

Lane Productions in association with MCD

Gaiety Theatre, Dublin

8 Feb—28 Mar 2005; reviewed 8 Feb

BY SUSAN CONLEY

IT'S A FRUSTRATING PROPOSITION, attempting to employ one's usual critical tools towards something as goofy, topical, and absurdly hilarious as *I, Keano*. Not that the thing is critic-proof, but the areas which most require analysis have nothing to do with theatricality, but with the events that inspired the work itself, and the creators' handling of said events. Were authors Mathews and Nugent too tough on McCarthy? Too afraid of Keane — or vice versa? Should they have taken a stance on who was right and wrong in the whole debacle? Were they justified in laying on the sarcasm with an even hand? What was the point of the whole exercise, apart from the fact that several of the cast are famous for doing impressions of the major players? Did someone say "cast"? Must be talking about theatre after all.

In a time period roughly AD, an army of hearty Legionnaires under General Macartacus (Dessie Gallagher) sallies forth in international battle. Aided by Guinness (Risteard Cooper) and Packie Bonnerus (Paul McGlinchey), and surrounded by a variety of scribes the like of Mischevus (Joe Taylor) and Obsequius (Malachy McKenna), the squad hope to essay a successful campaign — a campaign that relies heavily on the brilliance and contentment of the legendary Keano (Mario Rosenstock). When the vino flows too freely, and the training facilities prove inadequate, Keano loses the rag and goes home.

There is perhaps no other way, than via broad comedy, that the off-pitch drama of Saipan 2002 could be represented on stage. Even three years on, a replay of the carnage — the miscommunications, the petulance, the anger, the disrespect, the seeming effectiveness of eleventh-hour dealing, and the actual ineffectualness of said dealing — effortlessly triggers the particular frustrated kind of rage and hopelessness that Ireland's participation in that World Cup (or, in fairness, *any* World Cup) inspired. Here, art regurgitates life, as the text doesn't illuminate; rather, it reinforces a kind of sports page approach that acts as (a delayed) instant replay. The text does, however, tease out some hilarious moments, through the characters of Keano the Younger and Duffus (played by children), through the subplot about Quinnus' endless opening of children's hospitals, and especially in the person of Dunphia, a tour de force of mimicry by Gary Cooke; Eamon Dunphy was never so much himself.

The production puts the "cheap and cheerful" into, well, cheap and cheerful: Ben Hennessy's set design, a series of flats on which line drawings appear to have been scrawled at the last minute, just about fulfills the basic needs put



BRING ME THE HEAD OF ROY KEANE

Gallagher in I, Keano

forth by the remit of 'set design'; Monica Ennis' costumes evoke the period without too much fuss, and lighting designer Sinead

Mckenna is given few opportunities to work her usual magic. The notion that this is deemed a musical is perhaps an overstatement of the capabilities of the major players: the score is a hodge-podge of tunes that often sound rather familiar to those of us who listen to pop music, and while the lyrics are the entire production's strong suit, it's probably not ideal for an audience member to go

out humming Queen's "Bohemian Rhapsody" rather than one of the original numbers. The choreography was necessarily simplistic, as it didn't appear as if any of the cast were able to dance at all. The general impression was that of a dramsoc end-of-year revue, with the wittiest performers lampooning — successfully — the familiar doings of an in-group.

And yet, at the end of the day, like, it's all about the craic, all about being part of that in-group, and watching those painful events sent up, for all their idiocy, provides a delicious catharsis. The football faithful will be chewing over Saipan for years, and the reality of this may be what informed Mathews and Nugent's neither-here-nor-there vision: to keep this show running, it's necessary to keep the discussion going, to keep the fires burning, and most of all, to keep reminding us of what might have been, had two men been able to lay aside their swords and unite on the battlefield.

Three of the originating actors, however, were equally unable to set aside their differences with *I, Keano*'s producers, resulting in Cooper, Rosenstock, and Tara Flynn abandoning the field due to "artistic differences" before the production's encore presentation in May. Nipping in to take a look at the substitutes — Conor Delaney for Cooper, Suzannah de Wrixon for Tara Flynn, and Pat Kinevane for Rosenstock — one quickly realises that, though these are good performances, the personalities of the original players and the recognition value of their impersonations (Cooke, Cooper, and Rosenstock have performed their characters often on radio and television) may have been the point of the production. While Delaney takes

his Quinn-like spills with conviction and aplomb, de Wrixon can actually sing, and Kinevane is so deep in the Keane mystique it might be necessary to send out a search party, there is an unmistakable impression that this is the second string... kind of like what happened in Saipan.

One feels less certain now that *I, Keano* has the indestructibility of, for example, *Alone it Stands*, and suspects that its loosey-goosey approach to theatrical convention will send it off to the showers earlier than expected.

KIDNAPPING THE REILYS

by Josh Tobiessen

and

UNDERNEATH THE LINTEL

by Glen Berger

Catastrophe Theatre Company

Town Hall Studio, Galway

Bank Of Ireland Theatre, NUI, Galway

15-17 Feb and 17-19 Mar 2005;

reviewed 17 Feb and 17 Mar

BY DIARMUID O' BRIEN

I REALLY MUST TELL YOU ABOUT THIS PLAY I saw called *Underneath the Lintel*. I feel it's important. I'm reviewing two plays recently staged by a plucky theatre company with the critic-baiting name of Catastrophe, but the one I want to talk about most is the second one I saw. So I'll forgo the chronological convention; I'm sure you'll understand.

The reason I'm so eager to tell you about *Underneath the Lintel* is not entirely dissimilar to that of its haunted protagonist. He desperately wants to tell you something, something astonishing, but he's not sure how, or if he should, or even if there's any validity to it at all. The sepia-toned programme humbly

assures an "impressive presentation of lovely evidences." The audience files into what appears to be a small campus theatre in-between productions; stage lights strewn beside a stepladder, varied backstage debris — but as we soon discover, a few arbitrary fragments are sometimes enough to go on.

A nervous, bespectacled Dutchman appears and draws our attention to the fire exits before expressing disappointment at

duces a book which was dropped into the overnight slot, 113 years overdue. The first clue. He had been an unseen functionary, hopelessly wilting away his existence in low-level routine, until one day he happened upon something extraordinary. He is about to implicate us in an adventure, an epic treasure hunt which has impelled him several times around the globe, whose secret legacy spans centuries, and whose conclusion would irrefutably prove



how few people showed up. Apparently he put up posters but they kept getting covered over. This is not some relentlessly energetic one-man play, you see; this is a lecture for our benefit. He introduces himself, a former librarian, and pauses to show us the "due date" stamp that he still wears around his neck. A remarkable engine; it contains every date past, and the date of all our deaths. He is terminally aware of how fleeting and perilously inconsequential is a human lifetime.

From a well-travelled briefcase, bristling with "scraps of evidence," he pro-

EVIDENCE *Lacroix
in Underneath..., and
Bonar and Lacroix in
Kidnapping...*



the (ongoing) existence of a fabled man, and thusly validate his own life. Oh and, as it happens, confirm the existence of God.

This subtle gem of a play was written by Glen Berger and ran off-Broadway for 15 months; Catastrophe has the honour of introducing it to Irish audiences in Gary Keegan's fine production. I've grown to feel strongly about this play and believe that it deserves some further directorial tuning before it goes on tour (as is planned) later this year. This might include tightening the pace, and maybe adding emphasis to key character devel-

reviews

opments, such as a later, heartbreakng moment when the ontological trail abruptly reaches a dead end, and the librarian is faced with the cruelly likely prospect that he has deluded himself all along. It could do with a touch more apprehension at these vital points, to raise the dramatic stakes and further convey the librarian's desperate desire "to prove one life and justify another."

Duncan Lacroix treats us with a charming, fretful, yet impassioned performance. His librarian is a fragile man crippled by regret and doubt, and yet all the while possessing an uncanny strength to pursue this mystery to the very end. When we finally leave the librarian to his futile quest we take some comfort in the knowledge that if nothing else this obsession has allowed him to live for the very first time. He has finally, joyfully, "learned to dance." The answer he searches for is always an intangible step ahead, but it is the chase that sustains him and gives him a purpose — his very own distinction in the cosmic anonymity of humanity.

I suppose I should mention the other play as well.

For some reason beyond my ability to fathom, gritty urban crime comedies are currently accepted as something of a sure box office thing. Every other Irish film is hailed as the next *Lock, Stock...,* wherein some endearingly incompetent scumbags get in over their heads somehow. *Kidnapping the Reilys* gamely endeavours to put a satiric spin on the theme, but ultimately doesn't know what it wants to do at all.

Following a botched bank job, two small time criminals, the unctuous liar Larry and the oh-so-menacing "Frying Pan" Freddy, barricade themselves into a house. The only reason the gardai don't storm the place is that they believe the

criminals have taken hostages. Larry and Freddy, their self-styled underworld notoriety as fake as their guns, discover that the only way to delay their fate is to play along with the media hype that now feeds off the siege. They invent an entire family, and in a possible riff on the popularity of one-man and two-man shows, take on the multiple roles themselves. Initially this hoax is played out over the phone but as the play goes on Freddy and Larry physically stand in for the Reilys (there happen to be appropriate costumes in the room), whose sensational plight captures the hearts of a celebrity-dependant nation. It is a novel premise where the wrongdoers find themselves not at the mercy of the law but the fickle public who "prefer a good story to the truth."

American playwright Josh Tobissens originally wrote the script as a comedy and there are several occasions where this shines through, snatching laughs through caustically funny dialogue and one-liners. However, the play has been extensively retooled since its original Town Hall run last year (so the programme tells us) in order to render it "darker" and "edgier." The result is a messy creature which erratically slips between genuinely inventive comedy and cringingly undramatic drama, the tone further confused by the odd fit of unsolicited camp.

Lacroix is suitably dodgy as Freddy, but perhaps relies too much on nervous necklace chewing to fill out the role. I'm afraid I cannot fairly evaluate Paul Bonar's turn as Larry, but that's entirely my problem, not his. There's just something about snivelling, toadying characters (especially through that particular Derry accent) that irritates me on an almost existential level. However I suppose if that was the intention Bonar

excelled. The wry mass-media sound-bites and overall production values are skilfully executed, but director Paul Hayes struggles in vain to make us care about these clowns or their zany predicament.

Diarmuid O' Brien is completing an MA in Writing at NUI, Galway.

AN LASAIR CHOILLE
(le Caitlín Maude agus Mícheál Ó hAirtnéide)

agus

AN CEARRBHACH MAC CÁBA
Cóirithe agus Léirithe ag
Darach Mac Con Iomaire

Ionad Ealaíne Axis, Baile Munna

21 Feabhrá–5 Mártá 2005

I láthair 28 Feabhrá

BY RIÓNA NÍ FRIGHIL

IS GNÍOMH MUINÍNE IN ÉIFEACHT NA drámaíochta mar mheán teagaisc an léiriú bliantúil a dhéanann Taibhdhearc na Gaillimhe ar dhrámaí agus scéalta na hardteistiméireachta. Le blianta beaga anuas tá gearrscéalta cosúil le *Anuigh Liom Féin* agus *Fiosracht Mhná* scailte saor ó leimhe an churacaim ag léirithe na Taibhdheirce. Is é an dála céanna é i mbliana agus an dráma *An Lasair Choille* agus an scéal seanchais *An Cearrbhach Mac Cába* a léiriú ag Darach Mac Con Iomaire.

Is mór an t-athrú atá tagtha ar chúrsaí an tsaoil ó chuaigh Cáitlín Maude agus Mícheál Ó hAirtnéide i mbun pinn i 1961. Tá blas seanhaiseanta ar ábhar an dráma *An Lasair Choille* a phléann cás an fhír óig Séamas atá ag tabhairt aire do chláiríneach aosta darb ainm Micil. Bualann sé le cailín óg siúil a dhéanann iarracht é a mhealladh go Sasana léi ach in

ainneoin go bhfuil cathú air, ní éalaíonn sé léi. Gí nach n-eírionn leis é féin a shaoradh ón tsfor-sclábháfocht, tuigtear dúinn ag deireadh an dráma go léargas úr faigthe aige ar a chinniúint féin nuair a scaoileann sé an lasair choille saor ón chás. Ní thagann an t-amhras a léirítear i leith "tincéirí" ná an t-imeallú a thuairiscíonn Micil a dhéantar ar dhaoine a bhfuil míchumas fisiciúil orthu, le tuiscintí na linne seo ar chirte pholaitiúil agus ar chearta daonna. Is cinnte go bhfuil an chaint ar fad faoin imirce agus faoi aduaine Shasana, coimhthíoch ag lucht scimeála an idirlín; daoine óga ar aduaine leo saol an bhaile fhearaínn ná saol na cathrach móire iltíri.

Ba mhór an dúshlán é, mar sin, stáitsiú a dhéanamh ar a leithéid de scéal agus aird na ndéagóirí a mhealladh agus a choinneáil. Bhí srian sa bhereis sa chás seo sa mhéid is go raibh an dráma dírithe ar lucht scoile a bhí ag ullmhú do scrúduithe stáit, rud a chiallaigh go raibh ar an léiritheoir fanacht dílis don téacs scríofa. Is léir, áfach, gur maith mar a thuig Mac Con Iomaire, a chóirigh agus a léirigh, an cúram. Ba é an playstation agus an físeán an chéad bhia ar spúnóg na glúine áirithe seo agus rinneadh iarracht an dúil seo san fhís a shásamh ar an chéad dul síos. Coinnfodh síúle an lucht féachana dírithe ar lári an stáitse, áit a raibh dhá phíosa d'fhearsas stáitse le feiceáil; cás na lasrach coille agus ardán ard dorcha le dréimire ar leataobh a d'fheidhmigh mar theach dhá stór. Ba ar shforbhogadh Shéamais idir an chistin thíos staighre agus an seomra leanún thusa staighre a dírfodh aird an lucht féachana. Is léiriú éifeacht fisiciúil a bhí anseo ar intinn an fhír óig a bhí idir dhá chomhairle; comhairle an tseanfhír Micil a bhí ag tathaínt air fanacht sa bhaile agus comhairle mhealltach an tincéara mhñá



Míoda a bhí ag iarraidh air éalú léi. Thug Seán Ó Meallaigh taispeántas cumasach uaidh i bpáirt Shéamais. Gí gur éirigh le

Brídín Nic Dhonncha fáilfacht Mhíoda a áiteamh ar an lucht féachana, ní dheachaigh sí i bhfeidhm orthu chomh mór agus is dual do toisc nárbh fhurasta a cuid cainte gasta a thuiscint in amanna. Tharla nach bhfuil mórán grinn sa téacs féin, baineadh leas iontach cliste as scileanna puipéa-dóireachta Néill Mhic Dhonnchadha chun an lucht féachana a chur sna tríthí ag gáire faoin charachtar Micil. Bhí cosúlachtaí áirithe idir é agus na carachtair dheisbhéalacha ó *The Muppet Show*, Waldorf agus Statler, chomh maith le Bart Simpson gona phearsantacht bhorb, rud a chuaigh i bhfeidhm go mór ar an lucht féachana óg de réir gach dealraimh.

Is é na hachainí a iarrann an cearrbhach

WATCH THE BIRDIE

Ó Malleigh in An Cearrbhach Mac Cába

Mac Cába ar Dhia agus an dóigh a mbualann sé bob ar an Bhás, is ábhar don scéal seanchais *An Cearrbhach Mac Cába*. Ba é geaitsíocht agus siorbhogadh na n-aisteoirí chomh maith leis an úsaíd chliste a baineadh as an flearas stáitse na príomhthréithe a bhain leis an leagan stáitsithe den scéal. Is stíl flisiciúil drámaíochta í seo atá á cleachtadh ag aisteoirí na Taibhdheirce le tamall anuas. Éilíonn an siorathrú páirteanna mar a glacann líon beag aisteoirí iliomad rólanna chucu féin, aisteoirí cumasacha ar féidir leo tréithe agus geaitsíocht na gcaractar éagsúil a léiriú go gasta agus go soiléir. In ainneoin go raibh na hais-teoirí céanna páirteach sa dá dhráma agus nach raibh aon sos idir an dá léiriú, níor thráigh ar fhuinneamh ná ar fheabhas Nic Dhonncha, Mhic Dhonnchadha ná Uí Mheallaigh. Tharla gur típeanna aon-toiseacha nach mbíonn aon doimhneacht

MIKE SHAOUGHNESSY

shiceolaíoch ag roinnt leo iad fórmhór na gcarachtar sna scéalta béaloidis, d'fhóir an stíl seo aisteoireachta go mór don dráma seo. D'éirigh le luas gasta na hais-teoireachta aithris an scéil bhéaloidis a choinneáil bríomhar don chuid is mó, rud a bhí dúshlánaí nuair a smaoinitear ar an athrá a bhíonn ag siúl leis an chineál seo litríocha béal. Níor éirigh leis an léiritheoir an titim seo chun leimhe a sheachaoint go hiomlán, áfach. Bhí gá le tuilleadh eagarthóireachta ar an bhunscléach dar ndóigh, chuir sainchúins an léirithe agus riachtanais an lucht féachana laincisír an ar léiritheoir. É sin ráite, rinneadh ceangal idir an scéal fáithchiallach agus an saol comhaimseartha i ndóigh an-chaochúiseach a chuidigh, creidim, leis na scoláirí a gcuid féin a dhéanamh den scéal. Is cinnte gur éirigh leis an léiriú seo ábhar teagascach atá leamh agus i bhfad ó thaithí phearsanta daoine óga an lae inniu, a dhéanamh tarraingteach agus greannmhar go fiú.

Bhain na scoláirí a bhí i láthair an-sult as an dá léiriú fhuinniúla, bheomhara, ilgħnéitheacha seo. Ba mhór an difear idir na déagóirí cooláilte a tháinig an doras isteach go drogallach, cuid acu ag iarraidh éalú amach as an amharclann roimh an léiriú, na múinteoirí a bhí lena gcois ag impí orthu an t-ómós cùi a thaispeáint do na haistoirí agus na déagóirí gealgháireacha a d'fhág an amharclann agus iad ag cabaireacht faoi an léirithe.

Is ábhar dóchais go bhfuil a leithéid seo de léiriú snasta proifisiúnta ar fáil do scoláirí na hardteistiméireachta. Léirionn a bhfuil curtha ar státse ag an Taibhdhearc le blianta beaga anuas an fuinneamh, an nuafocht agus an talann óg atá ar fáil sa Ghaeilge agus an dóigh ar feidir na buanna seo a chur i bhfeidhm ar an churaclam ach samhláíocht a bheith ag

duine. Is údar misnígh é go dtuigeann múinteoirí a éifeachtaí is atá an drámaíocht mar mheán teagasc agus go n-aithníonn siad tábhacht na hoibre atá ar siúl ag an Taibhdhearc. Is é an trua é, ámh, nach mbeadh fail ag gach aon dalta meánscoile léiriú mar seo a fheiceáil agus a bhlaisceadh. Is mó an tairbhe a mbainfidís as an uair go leith seo den teanga bheo ná na céadta uaireanta a' chloig ag streachailt le teanga dheacair ar pháipéar marbh.

Is léachtóir le Gaeilge í Ríona Ní Fhrighil i gColdáste Phádraig, Droim Conraich. A version of this review in English is available at www.irishtheatremagazine.ie.

**THE LIFE OF GALILEO by Bertolt Brecht
(in a version by Howard Brenton)**

and

THE SUGAR WIFE by Elizabeth Kuti

Rough Magic Theatre Company

Project Space Upstairs, 18 Feb-5 Mar 2005,

and Project Cube, 8-23 April 2005;

reviewed 5 Mar and 11 April

BY HELEN MEANY

THE CURRENT USE OF "EPIC!" AS A TERM of high approval might have caused Bertolt Brecht some bemusement. But then, over the course of his life he became used to feeling misunderstood, and exactly what he did mean by "epic theatre" is still open to interpretation. Anyone expecting Rough Magic's production of *The Life of Galileo* to engage with that investigation would have been disappointed. The company's staging of this great battle between the forces of reason and repression in 17th-century Italy was curiously unengaged.

Nor could the sense of inertia be attributed to a deliberate attempt to generate

reviews

Brecht's famous *Verfremdungseffekt* — "alienation" — or, more precisely, making things strange in order to view them afresh. The problem with this production, which used a text adapted by British playwright Howard Brenton, was that it didn't make things strange or fresh enough. It seemed jaded, with barely enough energy to lead us through the reams of wordy speeches and arguments. Perhaps it was respect for the stature of Brenton that deterred director Lynne Parker from cutting the text; a few excisions and some dramaturgical input would certainly have been welcome. Or, the company could have combined and edited a number of different translations to come up with their own, new version.

The physical staging seemed perfunctory, with video images, including the water of Venice with lines of text superimposed, projected behind a circular raised platform, designed by Alan Farquharson. Some of the exits and entrances were awkward, as if they hadn't been sufficiently rehearsed. The ensemble acting was uneven, leaving Stephen Brennan, in this marathon central performance, stranded with little support — which seemed to be taking the point about Galileo's isolation a bit too far.

Brennan portrayed the excitable scientific pioneer with great conviction, especially in the later scenes, becoming much more subtly expressive as he moved into resigned old age. His physical aging, with both voice and movement, was superb, and he brought humanity, depth, and mischievous humour to this flawed but compelling figure who pays the price for compromise. Louis Lovett as the papal astronomer, among other roles, and David Pearse as the Doge of Venice had some great moments, while Robert O'Mahoney played the Cardinal Inquisitor with a palpably minatory sense of power.

Because of the profound influence of Brecht on every aspect of theatre — most of which we take for granted — it is an undeniably huge challenge to stage his work today. Judging by the packed houses at Project — admittedly bolstered by the production's short two-week run — there is an appetite for it, especially for *Galileo*, with its questions about the struggles of conscience, the demands of religion, the quest for knowledge and truth and the necessity for political expediency, written by a life-long Communist against the background of the Stalinist show-trials and the rise of a different form of totalitarianism closer to home in Germany.

Unfortunately, this production didn't rise to the challenge of finding contemporary analogues for Brecht's radicalism. Nor did it seem to have a clear vision of why this play should be staged here now — apart from the neatness of coming up with something that slotted into the ready-made, themed phenomenon that is the "International Year of Physics."

Matters of conscience of a different kind were at the heart of Rough Magic's second new production this spring. *The Sugar Wife* is a new play, commissioned by the company from Elizabeth Kuti, an English playwright and actor who lived and studied in Dublin in the 1990s. Her first play, *The Whisperers*, was staged by Rough Magic in 1999, followed by *Treehouses* at the Peacock and *The Countrywoman*, produced by Upstate Theatre Company in Drogheda. She is a writer whose historical awareness and literary imagination are highly developed, enhanced by a sensitivity to emotional nuances. The best scenes in her new play exhibit these delicate qualities but they are mostly overwhelmed by the weight of



her thematic concerns.

Depicting Dublin in the middle of the 19th century in *The Sugar Wife* becomes a way of commenting on urban life in Ireland today. Observations about exploitation, consumerism, and profound social inequality highlight how little has changed in 150 years. Despite their erratic use of the Quaker plain tongue — “thee” and “thou” — the married couple at the centre of the play, Samuel (Barry Barnes) and Hannah Tewkley (Niamh Linehan), seem to be our contemporaries. The past is refracted through the present in ways that contribute to a sense of this production’s worthiness. The position of women in marriage; sexual politics and the related theme of colonialism and its attendant commercial exploitation; racism; photography as voyeurism; philanthropy as guilt-assuagement; evangelical zeal as an

MAD SCIENTIST

McCabe, Brennan, and Barnes in Galileo

outlet for distorted egotism and anger; moral relativism and the inextricability of good and evil — a plethora of “big issues” are addressed and reiterated here in a programmatic way, actively striving for a sense of contemporary relevance rather than letting that emanate inevitably — or subtly.

If, through the intervention of a dramaturg, some scenes had been jettisoned, the whole piece rigorously edited and many of the thematic layers pared back, a stimulating, affecting, and reflective play might have emerged. Some of the least ponderous moments are in the intimate scenes between Samuel, the Quaker tea and coffee merchant (whose family business is based on Bewleys) and his wife Hannah, whose high moral standards and troubled conscience about the city’s poor have become a form of self-punishment and an expression of unhappiness. Her

inability to respond to him sexually is a source of tension and division between them, and these painful feelings are expressively portrayed, particularly by Barnes. Under the influence of their two house guests — Sarah Worth (Susan Salmon), a freed American slave and campaigner, and Alfred Darby (Robert Price), a zealous English anti-abolitionist who bought Sarah's freedom and accompanies her on her lecture tours — Samuel and Hannah begin to change and to look at themselves and the world with new perspectives.

Perspective and light are part of the play's metaphorical armoury: Darby, the ex-Quaker son of a north of England manufacturing family, is a pioneer of photography who describes what he does as "capturing light," although, from another point of view, he could be regarded as an originator of exploitative imagery, creating a pornography of suffering through his fascination with capturing the degradation of others (especially women) in drawings and daguerrotypes. His pictures of Sarah, taken when he first met her, enslaved, naked, and starving, fascinate and excite Samuel, prompting him to request a picture of his wife Hannah in Oriental costume. This becomes a means of showing Hannah to herself in a new light, so that she discovers a sense of both shame and rage, awakening her sexual hunger. It also brings



OUTREACH Linehan
(standing), Conroy, and
Price in *The Sugar Wife*

another form of enlightenment: in a late powerful scene, she declares to Samuel: "there is no God."

Amplifying Kuti's motifs of illumination, Paul Keogan's studiously simple set is the perfect framework for his lighting design: a slatted wooden floor allows slivers of light to seep through from below, their fine lines evoking the pin-hole technology of a camera obscura. At the back of the stage a bank of wooden drawers holds all the props (more chic Shaker rosewood than Victorian Quaker) each one pulling out to allow further diagonal shafts of light to suggest the "opulent plainness" of different floors of the Tewkeleys' home and the company's warehouse. The wall of drawers is inge-

nious, an oversized version of the miniature compartments of an antique wooden storage rack for tea, spices, and condiments.

Such imaginative set design, conceptual rather than literal, indicates how much care has gone into the physical staging. Yet this capacity for compression and suggestion is less evident in Lynne Parker's direction: there are jarring differences in tone and performance style between Neil Conroy as Martha, a slightly anachronistic, if clichéd, Dublin urchin, and the stilted, declamatory style of Alfred and Hannah. The portrayal of Hannah's puritanical repression — in her costume, voice and movements — is heavy-handed, while Sarah's direct addresses to the audience, in which she delivers her public lectures on her African roots, seem self-conscious, although later in the play Salmon is appealingly assured in her role.

At times, all the characters speak in a way that only characters in plays speak: stagily, suggesting a directorial unease with the historical setting. While the writing certainly aspires to an intense, almost Shawian moral significance, it does not necessitate the actors to actually sound as if they're in an early Shaw play — *Alms and the Man*, perhaps?

Helen Meany is a freelance arts journalist and critic.

LONELY HEARTS by Charles Richards

Observatory Lane

On tour; reviewed 2 Mar 2005 at the Pavilion Theatre, Dun Laoghaire BY HARVEY O'BRIEN

LONELY HEARTS IS A BLACKLY COMIC meditation on the case of Henri Landru, con-man, antique dealer, and multiple murderer, whose activities garnered sub-

stantial publicity in post-WWI France. So notorious was this man that his trial eclipsed the peace negotiations and his execution by guillotine was attended by celebrities.

It would be a stretch to directly relate Charles Richards' sharp and sometimes funny take on moral relativity to contemporary world events, even though serial killers, genocidal geopolitics, and high profile public prosecutions are still with us. This tale is not presented as an allegory, but as a reflection upon a specific moment in time replete with its own contextual bracketing and moral ambiguities.

Landru made contact with widows and spinsters through the lonely hearts columns and conned them out of their furniture with promises of romance, while his real family waited at home. As millions of French men and women met their deaths on the battlefields, Landru, a former military quartermaster, seems to have found the juggling of double, triple, and quadruple lives too difficult, and finally turned to murder: "war does strange things to people — makes most mad, makes some sane", he tells us. In a world where there is such "a demand for ghosts", who will miss a few more people?

The script leaps back and forth in time. As police investigations in 1919 come ever closer to an arrest, the story of Landru's first murder unfolds — a middle-aged widow with an elderly mother and young daughter, who take the case of her disappearance to the gendarmerie and are initially met with skepticism: "millions are missing, Madame", says inspector Duclos (Donncha Crowley). Landru himself is played with confidence by Tom Hopkins, whose deftness in capturing the roguish charm and affecting wistful melancholy of the character eventually pays divi-

dends when he describes the process of dismemberment and cremation from the dark shadows cast by Kevin Smith's lighting on Martin Cahill's minimalist set.

Paul Keeley's direction is lively and witty. There are some nice incidental touches, including some dumbshow slapstick involving characters peering around portable doors, actors serving as props, and other bits of business such as when two of the cast flop into a pose at the rear of the stage and become a statue. There is a great deal of movement, most of which is well choreographed if not always well executed. The set design is extremely simple and very flexible, the same few pieces of bare furniture serving multiple functions as the actors reshape their arrangement. A huge paper guillotine hangs over the stage until the inevitable climax, which chillingly details Landru's final moments and, as we are told, the six or seven seconds of life that remains in the human head after it has been cut off.

With so much happening, it is clear that Observatory Lane has worked hard to keep this production brimming with metatheatrical complexity, and in most respects they succeed. Hopkins holds the centre while Keeley and the cast keep everything around him moving — the whirling of action echoing the psychological and emotional uncertainties which torment Landru: "When did the thought



ROGUEISH Hopkins
(centre) and company in
Lonely Hearts

become the deed?" he asks when he realises that the widow he has been making love to has become his first murder victim as love

play becomes strangulation.

Unfortunately not all of the performances in this production are as effective as Hopkins'. With nearly everyone playing several roles, the demands of switching deportment and vocal rhythms are great if the characters are to prove convincing and the direction is to maintain fluidity. Mannered gesturing, forced comic timing and affected delivery on the part of some of



MYOPIC Edward
Malone in ... Ed
Malone

centred misery and irritation with the rest of the world, as well as suggesting a deliberate statement by the character on his proclaimed social class.

BYOB's stated vision is to produce innovative comedy that emphasises the creative role of the performer. In this instance, while the show is sometimes funny and clever, and certainly emphasises the performer, it lacks substance. It essentially explores a single joke, played out in the title, performance style, and material: Ed Malone's narcissism and his resulting misperception of his life. Its semi-ironic stated aim, in the programme notes, of rejecting "sentimentality, catharsis, the seal of completion" and recognising the possibilities offered by storytelling and myth, offers nothing really new. The play shares the

Irish theatre's fixation with the father-son relationship and romantic failure, even as it mocks both. Ultimately, its biggest difficulty is that, in its mocking engagement with the monologue genre, it reproduces what it critiques.

17 by Michael Gow

and

CHATROOM by Enda Walsh

The Shell Connections 2005 NT Festival

15-18 Mar 2005

Reviewed 18 Mar 2005

at the Everyman Palace, Cork

BY SUSAN CONLEY

HOW TO MAKE THEATRE ACCESSIBLE TO and interesting for teenagers? It's a question that Royal National Theatre has answered in a very sensible way by providing material for young drama companies, written by high-profile playwrights, that reflect the issues and concerns of the adolescent throng. The Shell Connections NT Festival allows participating companies to choose from several commissioned plays each year, and then sponsors a series of mini-festivals in areas around the UK and Ireland, at which young participants perform to audiences of peers. The individual festivals are adjudicated and the best production of each play is performed at the NT in early July. This year the roster of playwrights included Mark Ravenhill, Ali Smith, and Andrew Payne. In the Irish mini-festival, which was held this year in March in Cork, no less than four out of a total nine companies chose to perform *Chatroom* by Enda Walsh — hardly a surprising choice given the writer's high local regard and the excellence of the text itself.

Given the restraints of time and space (column inches, that is), the following are

TONY MCLEAN/FAY

ciance and its limber approach conceals a more ambitious project: to render a city in surfaces, to measure youth in moments.

Refreshingly free of inherited moralising, Duggan refuses to punish his aimless characters but simultaneously eviscerates whole social scenes: the vapid garrulosity of clubs adrift in coke; the "import lager" snobs of superpubs or the jittery anxiety of café culture. A play wrought in monologues is unlikely to express much faith in the idea of community, of course. And though one hopes that Duggan doesn't become dependent on the form, his encouraging first outing uses monologues renders life in Dublin into something increasingly familiar: a restless city, full of chatter, with nobody getting through to each other.

Peter Crawley writes about theatre and music for The Irish Times and is news editor of this magazine.

THE SELF-OBSSESSED TRAGEDY OF ED MALONE by Edward Malone

Be Your Own Banana Theatre Company

Granary Theatre, Cork

22-24 Feb 2005; reviewed 24 Feb

BY LISA FITZPATRICK

DIRECTED BY BRIAN DESMOND AND written and performed by Edward Malone, *The Self-Obsessed Tragedy of Ed Malone* is a stream of consciousness monologue in which the fictional Ed Malone traces the key events of his life so far. These include a brief flirtation with homosexuality, various failed romances, and his family life. The monologue is structured around the motifs of falling in love, his relationship with his father, and social class. These obsessions punctuate and shape the other narrated events.

The play is performed on a bare stage, in the intimate space of the Granary Studio. Ed Malone paces back and forth as he speaks, halting at intervals to address his remarks to one or other section of the audience. The performance demands that Malone play all the parts — the child Ed, his father, mother, and girlfriend — and play the emotional range from innocent bewilderment to tenderness to rage. However, by remaining in character as Ed, and sketching the different characters by modulations in voice pitch, stance, and facial expression, the focus on the fictional Ed Malone and his self-obsessed world is effectively maintained.

The conceit of naming the character in the play after the author/performer foregrounds the relationship between the fictional and the "real" Ed Malone. It also creates a humorous metatheatrical comment on the monologue genre, and its frequent descent into self-indulgence. The joke around which the show revolves is that this *Self-Obsessed Tragedy* is, of course, not a tragedy. The events that obsess Ed are the ordinary minutiae of everyday life; only he grants them any significance.

The programme — which contains mock interviews with the playwright and the director — and the play both centre upon Ed's perception of himself as an authentic tragic hero from working-class Cork. This is given further expression in his costume, a pair of old baggy trousers, unravelling sweater, and tweed jacket. The costume is so much at odds with Ed's age — it suggests a very old man rather than someone in his 20s — that it becomes another aspect of the character's self-conscious image-making. It gives expression to his misanthropic, misfit persona, contributing to a sense of the character as weighted down by his self-



tions with his depressive girlfriend (conveniently confined to Galway), and partly because he is either snug in a cannabis cocoon, or brooding his life away.

In the course of 90 minutes, Dublin itself provides a form of instantaneous high, and character development becomes something of a luxury: director Jim Culleton recognises, like his designers, that *Monged* works best as a trip. Thus Sabine Dargent's two-tiered set can suggest the monolithic highs of financial centres or the dank lows of canal banks, the space transforming beneath the unreal accents of Mark Galione's lighting, or the electronic pulses and murky echoes of Vincent Doherty and Ivan Birthistle's sound design that seep in and out of the action. We wander through Capel Street ready to score, emerge loaded from apartments in Mountjoy Square, and duck into

TRIPPING Keenan,
Reid, and Byrne in
Monged

the Iveagh Gardens with cans in brown bags. Duggan's monologue form may sound second-hand, the voice seems not wholly his own, but he is confident with its fractured technique. Words sweep the characters along with the pace of a fast-cut film montage: "Drinks down, asses up, coats on and out the door." There is little time to reflect, however, when the script and stage provide constant stimulation.

That various plot threads run away frayed and loose might appear listless: the Corkonian dealer later phones Dave to apologise, Ray relates a skin-crawling tale of sexual chicanery which dissipates without consequence. That Dave regards his girlfriend variously as a coveted possession, a freakishly unreal object, or ultimately a redeeming angel, maintains the play's uncertain attitude towards women. Yet *Monged* hums with authorial insou-

COLM HOGAN

the cast detract from the overall effectiveness. Though Mary Kelly and Patrick O'Donnell have their moments (including some in drag), there are a few too many misjudgements among the other supporting cast to pass without notice. Brent Hearne's one-note "bad cop" gendarme fails to create an impression of menace in several crucial scenes, while Kathryn O'Hart struggles to flesh out the characters of two young women with her small arsenal of bewildered facial expressions. Brid Ní Chionaola meanwhile never shakes her pronounced accent, which colours every character she plays with one thespian hue. All of this unfortunately breaks the audience's engagement with the play as they pause to consider the inadequacies of its execution.

Harvey O'Brien lectures in film at UCD and reviews theatre for culturevulture.net.

MONGED by Gary Duggan

Fishamble Theatre Company

14-30 Apr and 5-7 May 2005; reviewed 18 Apr
at Project, Dublin BY PETER CRAWLEY

WE ALL KNOW HOW IT HAPPENS. AT first it's just a bit of fun. You feel different. Sensations grow more vivid. Inhibitions dissipate in an instant. Soon words tumble out in an unnatural, uninterrupted torrent. It's giddy. It's dangerous. It's highly addictive. And so it is that in his first professional production, Gary Duggan succumbs to the intoxicating lure of the monologue play.

Monologue addiction has claimed many writers before Duggan. We thought Brian Friel was cured after *Faith Healer*, but then along came *Molly Sweeney*. Such were the heady, heedless days of the young Conor McPherson that each time

he seems to have sworn off the stuff, he lapses back into its insular pleasures. Mark O'Rowe still buzzes with a stage full of shockingly stylised and constrained articulation, refusing to be rehabilitated.

Though it makes its deepest bow to O'Rowe, *Monged* uses its monologues purposefully, deploying the form of loneliness or self-absorption to follow the drug-fuelled odyssey of three twentysomethings through Dublin, constructing a montage of the city as glimpsed, elliptically, between fistfuls of amphetamines, innumerable spliffs, and snorts of cocaine. In the course of two days, which seem to blur into one, a dealer, a poseur, and a naif pick their way through the detritus of society and history, ascending at times to the VIP level of an exclusive club or scaling the heights of a public statue, before (as is the way with drug-fuelled odysseys) coming down again.

"I love the ground," says Bernard (Paul Reid), sitting crumpled against a stack of wooden pallets, trying to gain some purchase, attempting to reassemble the jigsaw of his mind. Much sharper is Dave, charismatically embodied by Rory Keenan as a terse young go-getter in designer labels, supplementing his career in construction as a drug dealer. (That he consumes more of his products than he ever deals, however, seems coy on Duggan's part.) The play's first encounter involves Dave collecting supplies from a nervy Cork dealer who holds him at gunpoint; Keenan performs this with an elliptical, comically sardonic quality, all clipped north-Dub sentences and precise, stop-motion mannerisms. With less definition, Jonathan Byrne's Ray seems always at some remove — partly because he is locked in despondent phone conversa-

reviews of two of the nine productions, and only one of the four productions of Walsh's text. First up is Dublin's Cabinteely Youth Theatre, who decided to gamble on the Australian playwright Michael Gow's *17*, in which Ella (Ciara Smith), whose 17th birthday is imminent, finds out from her parents that a strain of insanity threads through her mother's DNA, and that there's a good possibility that she herself will go bonkers on what should have been an important and joyous day. The premise is interesting, and brings up all sorts of issues of identity that teens grapple with on an hourly basis: who am I, why am I in this particular familial group, what'll I do if I end up a freak like my mother/father/aunt/uncle?

Gow takes this notion of "birthday as milestone" and milks it for all it's worth in the first 15 minutes of the play, in which several of Ella's more memorable birthday parties are painstakingly recounted. The missing link in each of these events is the fact that, while chock-full of friends and neighbours, they markedly lack the presence of extended family. Queries to this absence are brushed off in the most lame of parental ways, and Ella remains unenlightened until three very strange characters start turning up at her doorstep. These three "crazy relatives" haunt her throughout the rest of the play, until Ella realises that she is who is she is, no matter what, crazy or sane, and that it's all a matter of point of view, anyway.

The play hopes to make notions of sanity negotiable, and in a way, almost succeeds: it is clear, during scenes in which Ella is seen in a variety of classes in secondary school, that she has a unique outlook on life, and an idiosyncratic approach to her homework, that, more often than not, lands her in the hallway

outside the principal's office. She sees her subjects and her assignments in a different way than do her peers, and often heads off on creative tangents. This is, perhaps, Gow's way of positioning Ella as a future artist; the production scuppers this persuasive point of view, however, by choosing to present us with a performative Ella (Smith) and a narrative Ella (Emma Lester), whose monologues frame the play's action, and whose presence can't but make us think that Ella may indeed have a future as a schizophrenic.

The play's tone is stilted and its absence of adolescent vernacular glaringly noticeable, an absence which makes one wonder if Gow had bothered to talk to any teenagers at all during the course of his work. Unfortunately, while Cabinteely's youth gave it their all, the direction by Fiona Lester and Daphne Felton added confusion rather than creating clarity, resulting in stilted delivery from the majority of the cast, and unimaginative use of the stage. Many of the young performers were left out to dry, especially when their skills were not up to the standard set by the several who gave reasonably confident performances.

In mind-blowing contrast was Boomerang's production of Walsh's play, which proved itself to be one of the most fully realised Irish productions I have seen in a very long time for any target market or age group. Directed by Donal Gallagher, the set and performances supported Walsh's extremely well-observed, idiomatically correct, and masterfully executed slice of teenage life, one that was funny, painful, disturbing, and redemptive without being corny. Walsh flawlessly creates the world of the web by demonstrating the kind of boredom that people of all ages seek to alleviate through random conver-



sations with strangers, and expertly validates the world of his play by demonstrating what could happen if that need for excitement gets out of control.

The stage, set in a graduated rake, was comprised simply of rows of orange plastic chairs; a screen filled the upstage wall, on which were projected a series of pertinent video clips that acted as bridges between scenes. The opening scenes introduced us to the six characters, all middle-class teens trawling internet chatrooms, who communicate with each other through the convention of direct address to the audience (as prescribed by Walsh in his text), which wonderfully and simply stands in for the action of typing; this technique allows the characters to inhabit their own spaces, as they would

**IN CYBERSPACE, NO
ONE CAN HEAR YOU
SCREAM** Quirke and
Dowd in Chatroom

in "real" virtual life, and yet enables them to correspond, in every sense of the word.

William (Jody Quirke), a private school boy, seeks an outlet for his fury at the powers that be, who he imagines conspire to keep the world's youth forever childlike. Jack (Ronan Dennehy), a robust jock with a surprisingly soft centre, is just in it for the craic. Eva (Lyndel Dowd), a private school girl with a frightening mean streak, is seeking like-minded others; Emily (Lisa Hayes), the slightly ditzy glamour girl, is just passing the time; Laura (Fiona O'Toole), the requisite Goth, and Jim (Michael Bate), the sad guy, are there for much more complex reasons.

Jim becomes the focal point of the story, as it is his misfortune to run into

GARRY CORBEEY

— in a virtual sense — Eva and William. We hear him “speaking” to Laura in a suicide room, and she tells him it’s not her place to give advice. He then becomes a natural victim for a couple of bullies who think it might be funny to listen to Michael, make him think that he is being heard sympathetically, and then try to convince him to kill himself “live,” via webcam, on the net.

Every performance is fully convincing, and each actor plays her or his part with nuances that lift each far above what, in lesser hands all round, could have come across as mere stereotypes: Dowd is especially viperous as Eva, and her work “off speech”, i.e., “active listening”, is as terrifying as are her sweetly delivered manipulative suggestions. Bate is heartbreaking as the young lad who, at 15, can’t see the point of going on, and has no one to talk to but strangers.

Everything that is good about this play is supported by its production, from Gallagher’s precise direction and clean blocking, to the supremely rocking soundtrack, to the use of the back projection and video that provides us with an anchor in a series of rooms that only exist through spoken text. This kind of skill knows no demographic, and Walsh has created a piece that has the integrity to stand up to anything that would be delivered to an older, general audience; indeed, if youth has anything to teach old age, it’s that relevant storylines told in the vernacular needn’t always have to do with the gritty, drug-ridden inner city. There’s plenty of dramatic fodder lurking behind suburban closed doors, and in *Chatroom*, the drug of choice, with its resultant high of anonymity and menace, is all the more frightening for being a click away.

THE SHADOW OF THE GLEN

and

THE TINKER'S WEDDING by J.M Synge

Big Telly Theatre Company

On tour; reviewed 18 Feb 2005 at the

Ardhownen Theatre, Enniskillen

BY CIARAN MCQUILLAN

THE PICTURESQUE, LAKESIDE SETTING of the Ardhownen Theatre is a popular end-of-tour destination for Ulster touring companies. However, there was no sense of winding down for Big Telly as a capacity audience packed into the Ardhownen for the first of two sold-out performances. It may seem to some as an act of folly to produce this rarely performed double-bill when Druid Theatre Company has recently done so, to some acclaim, and are tilting their lance at the rest of Synge’s canon as well. However, once again, the general lack of North-South theatrical traffic meant that this was something of a moot point.

The Enniskillen audience settled down content that they were on safe ground. If these particular texts are among his more obscure, the fact that it was Synge meant they knew what they were going to get: a feisty young woman fighting for scraps in a cottage, or a shebeen full of drunks, priests, and enigmatic young strangers, combined with a liberal sprinkling of Synge-ese, a resurrected corpse or two, and fight thrown in for good measure. However, Big Telly have established a fine reputation for original and quirky interpretations of Irish classics in the last couple of years and right from the start, they caught the audience off guard.

The production started with the actress Nolwenn Guizou walking through the theatre accompanied by a puppet called Job, performing a prologue introducing

the character of the Tramp, played by Jack Lynch. He arrives at the claustrophobic cottage, designed by Sabine Dargent, to take shelter and seek the hospitality of the spiky Nora Burke, to whom Ruth Lehane managed to add an elegant reserve alongside the necessary waspishness. Lynch played the Tramp as all charm and honeyed words, and soon had his feet under the table, tipple in hand, as Nora explained that he is in a wake house, with the man of the house recently deceased and laid out in the bed opposite. The ghoulish flirting between the two over the still-warm corpse was a joy to behold — Lehane's scheming mind racing ahead and Walsh trying to act casual about his timely entrance.

Of course it couldn't last, and John Hewitt used all of his accumulated comedic class to spring back to life and slay the audience at the same time. Soon the resurrected Dan Burke and the Tramp struck up a blokey partnership against the unfaithful shrew, but the revolt was stalled by the arrival of the camp and calamitous boy-next-door Michael Dara (the youthful John Lovett.) The horse-trading which followed was high-stakes and tense, with everyone frantically fighting for the scraps. The piece never reached the darkness of the excellent *Colleen Bawn* produced by Big Telly in 2003, and Lovett, who excelled in that production, didn't quite bring the



BACK FROM THE DEAD *Lehane and Hewitt in The Shadow...*

same energy and impetus here. The pace of the opening and of Dan's awakening didn't quite carry to the end. Both play and production ended anticlimactically, and a short film, starring Job the puppet, by way of epilogue added little remedy, but did lead to some bemused conversation over interval drinks.

The second half saw the tight box set of the first half exploded all over the stage to become the Gypsy encampment for *The Tinker's Wedding*. The fiddle playing of the versatile Guiziou provided a beautiful aural accompaniment to a multi-leveled minefield of pots and pans, washing lines, and sacks. Lehane and Lovett returned to the stage, this time as a pair of young tinkers full of love and dreams. Caution, however, seemed to be the watchword for Lovett's Michael Byrne, as he attempted to rein in his betrothed's flights of fancy.

VINCENT LOUGHREAN



As Sarah, Lehane skipped around the set, underlining a sense of freedom that some members of the contemporary travelling community (who workshopped with the company on the project) have compared to the stagnant cottage dwellers dramatised in the earlier piece.

Almost as soon as Sarah and Michael set their sights on getting hitched, however, obstacles begin to fall in their path — most notably the utterly repugnant and unscrupulous Mary Byrne, played, in a piece of brilliant casting, by Jack Lynch. Half Widow Twanky, half Steptoe in a dress, she drunkenly rolled around the stage pouring scorn and insult on all who crossed her. Pilfering the tin can made as an offering to the local Priest (a bumbling Hewitt), she sells it for drink and sinks the couple's seeming last hope of marriage. Not to be deterred, the couple incessantly

HEY PRESTO Lovett, Hewitt, and Lehane in *The Tinker's Wedding*

harassed the priest, and finally by binding and gagging him, brought him to his knees. The interplay between Hewitt and Lynch was superb — the unlikely alliance between the man of the cloth and the tricky old hag seemed to be based on the mutual respect for each other's untrustworthiness.

Even more so than the previous play, this production of *The Tinker's Wedding* didn't bring out the darkness and sinister elements of the story. The violence against the priest was pantomimic, and had none of the riotous viciousness so brilliantly invoked in Big Telly's *Playboy of the Western World* two years ago. One wonders if the addition of the deep lament of *Riders To The Sea* might have added more balance to the evening, but the practicalities of touring might have made too big an undertaking for a small company.

reviews

It would, however, have solved another problem of this double-header — the length. Ardhowen audiences go to the theatre for a full night's entertainment, and there were a few mumblings as the crowd headed for the carpark before ten o'clock. All told, the Big Telly makeover of these classic texts didn't sit well with this traditionalist audience. The company went a long way to making the plays colourful, and perhaps more accessible for younger audience members. Synge, however, is meat and drink to many of the regular attendees of regional theatres, where amateur companies stage his plays so regularly. Rather like a trendy vicar trying to spruce up evensong, there was the sense that Big Telly were preaching to the converted and getting little in return for their efforts.

Ciaran McQuillan is an Eniskillen writer.

THE SHADOW OF A GUNMAN

by Sean O'Casey

Lyric Theatre, Belfast

15-29 Jan and 7-26 Feb 2005;

reviewed 25 Feb

BY TOM MAGUIRE

THE NOTABLE PRESENCE IN THE LYRIC'S lobby of a contingent of American students made me suspect that this was to be heritage theatre for tourists. Certainly, Carol Betera's set in sepia tones demonstrated a folk museum's detail in creating the dilapidated attic of the poet Donal Davoren and the hawker Seumas Shields. Lathes protruded through plaster walls on two sides, the large windows in one of which were shrouded by the remnants of net curtains. Period bedsteads, a wash-stand, fireplace, and Davoren's writing table and typewriter exuded authenticity.

Washing strung across the background and the city soundscape by Ivan Birthistle and Vincent Doherty set the action firmly in its time.

Yet *The Shadow of a Gunman* is potentially as vital today as it was when first staged in 1923. Since the turn of this year, Republicans have struggled to recuperate confidence in political rhetoric under the shadow of an ever more disquieting reality. Staging the first of O'Casey's Dublin trilogy could hardly have been more prescient: it is a play in which political verbiage rarely finds a match in the lived experience of a city's tenements. Words are sprayed around with abandon by Davoren and Shields as they swap pleasantries from ancient texts and quotations from Shelley. Their neighbours seize on words too: Minnie Powell savours the paper on which Davoren types her name and his; Mrs. Henderson and Mr. Galloher trust that a letter to the IRA will sort out their objectionable neighbours; Tommy Owens sings rebel songs as his service to the cause. This is a world where words stand for actions.

Such thematic relevance goes only so far: a production must be vital too in its performance. This was very much a show of two halves. The first was played with relish by the cast almost as a series of music-hall comic turns, a succession of jaunty vignettes showing the ludicrous and outlandish characters populating the tenement, with more than a hint of stage Irishness. Gerard Jordan invested a credible energy into Tommy Owens' visit to pledge his allegiance to the cause of Irish freedom before Davoren whom he, and everyone else, has mistaken for an IRA gunman. Frankie McCafferty as Mr. Galloher and Eleanor Methven as Mrs. Henderson proved an irresistible double-



act in delivering their letter. In both scenes Fiona Buffini's direction was taut and well-judged, focusing on precise detail. Likewise she marshalled Karl Shiels' considerable stage presence and charisma as Shields to great effect, so that his switches from quixotic rhetoric to banal complaining were achieved with delightful ease. A gaunt Marcella Plunkett captured the mix in Minnie Powell of naïvete and coquettishness. Only in the playing by Michael Patric as Davoren did the direction seem unsure. O'Casey has written him as a shallow prig and an intellectual snob, with little to offer but his own poor quality poetry, giving the actor little to work with. This does not excuse, however, the production's failure to make clear at what point Davoren decides to go along with the lie that he is a gunman on the run.

After the interval, the comic set-pieces

BIG GIRL'S BLOUSE

*Shiels and Peter
Ballance in Shadow*

continued in the drunken entrance of Adolphus Grigson, played by BJ Hogg. Here, however, they are juxtaposed with the events sur-

rounding the British Army's raid on the tenement. These are dark events: both literally, since they are set at night, and in tone since they demonstrate the humiliation of the tenants and ultimately lead to Minnie Powell's death. For such juxtaposition to work, however, these dark moments need to create an emotional jolt for the audience. Buffini opted to indicate rather than show directly the violence of the raid, but the technique of shadow play was better as an idea than an actual effect and palled long before the scene had come to an end. The second dark moment, the death of Minnie Powell, was problematic also. This was partly because it is written as an anti-climax: Minnie Powell is killed by mistake not for a cause

reviews

and her death provokes self-pity in the others rather than grief. However, the production here seemed unclear how to handle the tone, opting to slow the pace rather tortuously to indicate its significance.

This was a pleasant enough way to spend the evening and it would be churlish to attribute the audience's enthusiastic applause to their satisfaction at having ticked off another item on the list of Irish classics to "do." I wonder whether the Lyric would be found innocent of a similar charge in mounting this production in this way.

Tom Maguire is the subject director for Drama at the University of Ulster.

SISTERS by Declan Hassett

City Theatre Dublin

On tour; reviewed 22 Mar 2005 at the Town Hall Theatre, Galway **BY PATRICK LONERGAN**

DECLAN HASSETT'S *SISTERS* IS WRITTEN in monologues, and set mainly in 1950s rural Ireland. Devised as a vehicle for Anna Manahan, it operates with a biblical subtext, naming its two characters, Mary and Martha, after the sisters in the Gospels. None of these qualities is inherently problematic but, taken together, they add up to a play that's formally and thematically conservative, and which has little to offer audiences — other than the chance to see Manahan taking on the challenge of playing both roles.

In Luke's Gospel, Mary and Martha represent two extremes. When Christ visits them, Martha bustles about anxiously, while Mary listens attentively to Jesus' teachings. Martha complains about her sister's laziness, but Christ actually praises Mary. This biblical story subtly con-

trasts activity with contemplation, and materialism with spirituality. It's not intended to be a portrayal of psychologically convincing characters, however.

And that's Hassett's first problem: the monologue form demands detailed characterisation, but his source material contrasts general tendencies in human nature to make a moral point. What we get in this play, therefore, is a stereotypical portrayal of sibling rivalry, with characterisation based mainly on how two sisters superficially differ from each other. The first act presents the inarticulate and crude shop-assistant Martha, who is slovenly and bad-tempered. The second presents Mary, the well-spoken, well-dressed teacher. Martha has slutty brown hair, while Mary is virginal blonde. Martha refers to the man at the centre of the play as "Bob," but of course the straightlaced Mary calls him "Robert." And so on.

A further problem caused by the use of monologues is that the form usually requires greater levels of movement and gesture than are needed in naturalistic performance. This wouldn't be difficult if the characters here were larger than life inner city gangsters, full of adrenalin and aggression. But they're not: Hassett is presenting two women well past retirement age, for whom exuberant movement will be neither possible nor credible. With her portrayal of each character, Manahan hovers around the centre of Stuart Marshall's sparse set, and spends much of her time seated — so the acting mostly happens from the neck upwards. Manahan must therefore enliven her performances with verbal expression. This maintains the audience's attention, but it also means that her characters' emotions are often exaggerated, making both per-



formances disjointed and unconvincing.

Manahan isn't helped by Hassett's presentation of gender. There's always an assumed male gaze in these women's presentation of themselves: Martha and Mary don't talk about how they feel, but describe how they imagine themselves appearing to others. Frequently, that imagined appearance has an erotic or sexualised element. Martha describes being fitted for her first bra; when someone sees her, she doesn't describe feelings of embarrassment, but talks about how she covers her breasts. Later, she describes herself lying naked on her kitchen floor (as you do). And when the two women are raped (more about that in a minute), both tell us how their clothes have been ripped, but deny us knowledge of their inner feelings. One could charitably interpret this as an exploration of how women in 1950s Ireland

BIBLICAL *Anna Manahan in Sisters*

were alienated from themselves by something patriarchal to do with de Valera. But to me it seems that Hassett is presenting women who seem more like an expression of male desire than female personality, a common feature of writing with a Catholic overtone by Irish men.

I make this suggestion on the basis of the plot, which includes the serious issues of rape and abortion, but only as a way of moving the action forward. Both women are raped by the same man (Bob/Robert), on different occasions. Mary gets pregnant, and goes to England for an abortion (perhaps leading Hassett into anachronism: would the experiences his character describes truly have occurred prior to the 1967 UK Abortion Act?) Back in Ireland, Martha responds to her attack by rolling around the floor naked — but her period soon arrives: raped but not pregnant, her life goes on.

reviews

The twist of the play is that, when they finally discuss all of this years later, Mary stabs Martha to death. I'm not quite sure why, though. It seems to have something to do with how Martha (who wanted to have a baby but never did) is enraged to learn that Mary had an abortion. So, in response to slatternly Martha's rebukes, mildmannered Mary grabs the nearest breadknife. You see? The symmetry is reversed, and so the audience learns that well-spoken, well-kept people sometimes commit acts of violence and that apparently respectable people sometimes keep secrets. That ending probably speaks for itself, but perhaps it should be said that drama that considers such issues as abortion and sexual assault should probably deepen our understanding of those things. If it doesn't, it risks being exploitative.

Michael Scott's direction of Manahan is assured: together, they manage to present two unlikeable characters without losing the audience's interest — and that's some achievement. But the play is fundamentally ill-conceived, and struggles to overcome its innate lack of originality.

STUCK IN THE MUD by James Butler

Barnstorm Theatre Company

On tour; Reviewed 4 Apr 2005 at the Pavilion Theatre, Dun Laoghaire **BY PÁDRAIC WHYTE**

DEVELOPED UNDER BARNSTORM'S "New Plays for Young Audiences" writing project, *Stuck in the Mud* centres on the life of Andy (Sean McDonagh), a young boy trying to cope with his parents' separation. Meanwhile, in the playground he is victimised by the school bully, and his best friend refuses to play with him. Throughout the play, the target audience

of 7-12 year olds are presented with a series of issues that are relevant to their lives, such as bullying, parental relations, and the importance of friendship; themes that speak to people of any age.

One of the most striking features of the production is Blaithin Sheerin's innovative set design, in which Andy's bedroom doubles as the local playground. With minor adjustments to the set the performance makes a seamless transition from the private world of Andy's room to the public space of the playground. Director Jim Nolan maximises the set's flexibility, particularly in the opening scene as Andy lies in bed having a nightmare. The audience are presented with an external manifestation of his nightmare world as Florence (Jennifer Barry), the bully, makes her way down the climbing frames of the playground and moves toward Andy's bed in order to taunt him and call him "Mandy." Combined with Jim Daly's use of low lighting, this creates a dark and sinister opening to the play.

The set continues as a central feature in the production, providing the actors with multiple spatial levels on which to place themselves, from sliding down the slide to monkeying about on the monkey bars. In the narrative, the child characters use the space imaginatively as they conjure up fantasy worlds while playing games such as "Devil's Island." These scenes are amongst the best in the play as playground politics are battled out. When Florence first takes control of the playground, the other children are initially fearful of her, until they learn to work together and stand up to her bullying. It is soon revealed that she is not really as tough as she would like others to believe. Meanwhile, Andy begins to realise how important it is to have both his friends



and his father in his life. The script raises some interesting themes about the need to work together, but also about the fear of rejection. At one stage, Andy becomes an outsider to the group, as a result of avoiding Florence but also because of misunderstandings with his best friend Mark (Maurice Walsh). To help the situation, his father, Frank (Ciaran McMahon), gives Andy a chest of toys and constantly reminds him that there is a "secret weapon" in there somewhere. By the end of the play, it is apparent that the "secret weapon" that challenges the bully is a combination of friendship and courage.

The often-energetic playground scenes operate in stark contrast, though, to activities in Andy's bedroom where Andy and his father have laborious serious chats, causing audience members to lose interest in the production. One of the major factors

MONKEYING AROUND

Symons in *Stuck in the Mud*

contributing to such disinterest is Butler's script, which moves the story along at a very slow pace.

While the topics raised are interesting, the narrative seems to drag, particularly during a particular heart-to-heart, at the end of which Frank loses his patience with Andy. Rather than Frank building a momentum and the scene reaching a climax through his outburst, the father's dramatic exit provides the audience with a sense of relief from the tedious dialogue and lack of action that has dominated most of the play.

Nolan's direction of the actors is also problematic, as Frank seems to wander aimlessly around the stage, and Andy simply jerks petulantly from one side of the bed to the other. While Maurice Walsh and Ailish Symons do a good job of portraying the child characters of Mark and Molly respectively, McDonagh, Barry and

reviews

Sinead Murphy (as Sarah) seem too focussed on playing children rather than on playing characters. As a result the audience are often left with two-dimensional representations of the characters and a hunger for something more substantial.

Barnstorm Theatre Company are pioneers in the development of much needed professional theatre for young people in Ireland. This makes it all the more disappointing that this production, which has potential and contains positive elements, does not come together as an ensemble piece.

THE THREEPENNY OPERA

by Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill

Bruiser Theatre Company

On tour; reviewed 22 Mar 2005 at The Helix,
Dublin BY FINTAN WALSH

NOT LONG AFTER IT WAS FIRST STAGED IN Berlin in 1928, *The Threepenny Opera* became Bertolt Brecht's first and greatest commercial success. Featuring a musical score by the neoclassical composer Kurt Weill, the opera, although set in Victorian England's Soho, was written as an attack on the corruption of the Weimer Republic in the interwar years. Brecht focuses on the bourgeois underbelly, and envisages a world swarming with beggars, thieves and prostitutes, social outcasts who are nonetheless ruthless capitalists. Before you could say *verfremdungseffekt*, any one of this motley crew could stab you in the back given the possibility of financial reward. The spirit of the show is perhaps best encapsulated in Brecht's own biting lyrics, "this world is poor, and man's a shit." Well, some things never change.

Macheath or "Mac the Knife" (Michael Condron) ranks highly in this human dung-heap. As London's most powerful

criminal, he is capable of manipulating police and women in equal measure. When he marries Polly Peachum (Sharon Morwood) at the opening of the play, the stolen goods he receives as gifts are overlooked by the sheriff who is in attendance. To the same duplicitous end, Macheath frequents local prostitutes and has an affair with the sheriff's daughter, behind his wife's back. When Polly's father (Derek Halligan), who controls the city's beggars, learns that his daughter has married the criminal without his consent, the plot is set in motion, with the beggar-King forcing the sheriff to have his unwanted son-in-law arrested. And in Peachum's tireless pursuit of Mac, any existing alliances among the down-and-outs are broken, loyalties are betrayed, and nothing is sacred.

As in the musical's original staging, Belfast-based Bruiser Theatre Company here incorporate many elements of Brecht's then-developing epic dramaturgy. The use of discordant music, the raising of placards to display key phrases, multi-role playing and the actors' direct address of the audience from downstage are all in keeping with Brecht's attempts to frustrate the audience's passive consumption of theatre, in favour of stimulating critical inquiry and provoking action. Despite these affinities, however, Bruiser's production is not fully committed to a Brechtian aesthetic. Because of the subtlety of their presentation, the alienating devices employed rarely succeed at alienation. This is chiefly the result of the production's overall chilliness.

Most obviously this is notable in the minimalist design concept, which sees the stage decked out with an assortment of large white boxes, which the performers manipulate as the action warrants. It is



also seen in costuming, with the actors uniformly dressed in black and white, with only Macheath set apart from the rest of the cast by his ox-blood boots. This restraint is further revealed in the fairly benign character portrayals. While performances by Morwood as Polly, and Tony Flynn cross-cast as Low-Dive Jenny raise laughs, they are nonetheless understated interpretations, relative to the dramatic potential of such meaty roles. And while Condron gives a fine performance as Macheath, in being quite amiable, his portrayal never really invites us to consider the depravity of Mac's actions. Similarly, the musical numbers are all too gingerly executed: even though the performers are only accompanied by one musician on keyboard, Brian Connor, the hesitance of their voices communicate an uncertainty as to whether or not they should be spit-

TOP OF THE DUNGHEAP

Niki Doherty, Flynn, and Halligan in *Threepenny*

ting Brecht's sardonic words into the auditorium with political purpose or kindly singing ballads.

While Bruiser's production is enjoyable, this pleasure is frustrated by the sense that the director, Lisa May, with a bit more courage, could have created something with much more conviction. The sparks are there — they just were not fanned. This may also have had something to do with the company's uncertainty of how to deal with the play's politics. While Brecht's tough, dirty, dog-eat-dog world presents the opportunity for examining many of the ills of late capitalism, including poverty, materialism, and even nihilism, Bruiser seems reluctant to take on any of these issues directly. When Macheath's line "What's breaking into a bank compared to founding a bank" is flipantly delivered, despite its loaded contemporary resonances (the most obvious

reviews

being to the Northern Bank job) we know that the company has not given sufficient thought to how the play relates to current life. And if the company were really not interested in producing something overtly political, then perhaps they should have abandoned the epic homage altogether, and concentrated on creating the most obvious alternative — a raucous, theatrical romp.

WE SHALL SING FOR THE FATHERLAND

by Zakes Mda

Thinking Image Theatre Company
in conjunction with the English Department,

University College Cork
Granary Theatre, Cork

11–15 Apr 2005, reviewed 13 Apr

BY LISA FITZPATRICK

THINKING IMAGE'S PRODUCTION OF Zakes Mda's one-act drama, *We Shall Sing for the Fatherland*, was performed by a predominantly black cast from Ghana, Nigeria, and Ethiopia, and directed by Cal Duggan, who is South African. This is the second time in six months that a South African play has been performed in Ireland, the other being Calypso's production of *Master Harold and the Boys*, while the Ireland-based African company Arambé debuted with the Nigerian play *The Gods Are Not To Blame* at the 2003 Dublin Fringe Festival. This is a new development that seeks to engage new and host communities with each other, using theatre as a medium of exploring and communicating shared human and historical experience. That, in the case of Thinking Image and Arambé, the actors are almost all amateur, working in other professions by day, foregrounds the globalisation of our own economy and workforce, which has made this kind of multicultural performance possible.

Mda's dramatic aesthetic is rooted in "theatre of development," drawing upon the techniques of Augusto Boal. A long-time critic of apartheid and political corruption in Africa, he lived in exile in the U.S. for many years before returning to South Africa in 1995. He has criticised "protest theatre" for addressing the oppressor and not the oppressed, so becoming an object for liberal consumption rather than a tool for empowerment. His political concerns are reflected in *We Shall Sing for the Fatherland*.

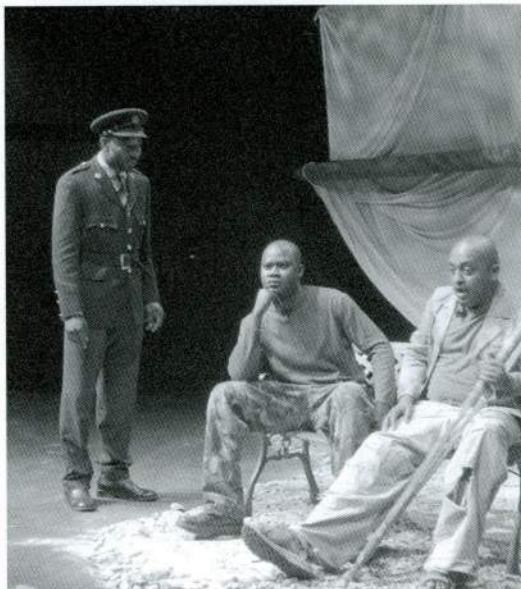
Set in a "city park" in an unnamed African country, the play addresses the impact of globalisation and neo-colonialism on postcolonial Africa, through the story of two impoverished veterans of a war of independence. The time is the present: although the play was written in 1973, the present remains our present, since the issues remain current. The one-legged Sergeant Major and his loyal soldier Janabari sit on the park bench, where they are harassed by the police, and are treated with contemptuous indifference by a young woman, a banker, and a businessman who represent the new affluent middle-class in the liberated country. Finally they die of cold, and are buried on the same day as the businessman. But while he is honoured with a fine funeral, the two soldiers are buried by convicts in waste ground.

The simple set is a gravel patch with a park bench, in front of what is both a sculpture and a stylised cruciform tree. This is both a reference to *Waiting for Godot* that highlights the plight of the two central characters, and an image of the crucifixion that suggests their sacrifice for their fellow countrymen. Time passes, but nothing changes for Janabari and Sergeant Major, though the Sergeant is

always sure that things are about to improve. The flaw, however, is that the gravel crunches loudly when the actors walk across it, making it difficult to hear what is being said. In the final scene, the policeman sits supervising the convicts digging the graves — represented in an impressionistic projection onto a cloth draped behind the tree — while the two dead men meet and speak downstage. Spatially outside the world of the living, they observe that world over the policeman's shoulder.

The cast performed impressively, particularly given that some were on stage for the first time. David Ugochukwu successfully juggled the parts of the policeman Offiseri, the Young Man, and the Businessman, and Antoinette Acheampong, who played the Old Woman and the Young Woman, created the impression of two different people on stage. Marcus Bale, who has a background in theatre, played the Banker. Esayas Bekele and Adiyanju Bolaji played the parts of Sergeant Major and Janabari respectively. Although they needed to project their voices more effectively, they effectively established a sense of camaraderie and shared history, with the Sergeant verbally abusing his subordinate, and Janabari barely keeping his temper, in a series of comic exchanges.

This production resonates with some prominent issues in Irish current



INDEPENDENCE?

Oguchukwu, Adeyanju, and Bekele in *We Shall Sing....*

affairs, in particular the nursing home charges controversy and the plight of destitute Irish immigrants in England,

whose contribution to the prosperity the country currently enjoys has not been recognised or rewarded. Such issues might come across more clearly if the company had a longer rehearsal period, which would give the actors more time to develop their roles and interpretation. Nonetheless, staging an African drama with a predominantly black cast to raise issues facing Irish society is a bold undertaking. Hopefully it will also raise awareness of the new cultures within Ireland, of our shared historical experience and concerns, and of the potential riches and benefits of cultural diversity.

reviews

WINTER by Jon Fosse

Rachel West,

in association with Project, Dublin
7-19 Feb 2005; reviewed 18 Feb

BY PETER CRAWLEY

JON FOSSE IS A POET OF SILENCE. In the wide-open spaces strewn through his play texts, in the ambiguity of his theatre's setting, in the uncertain sense of time or place, and within every ellipse, hesitation, and repetition of his characters' speech, the Norwegian playwright reveals little and is reluctant to elucidate. The chasm between the substance of his dramas and how they may be interpreted has conferred on him the status of a latter-day Beckett or an heir to Pinter, and in the process apparently made him the most widely produced and translated modern European playwright. Staging the Irish premiere of any of Fosse's plays and the first English-language production of this 2000 work, Rachel West allows us to discern Fosse's place at the end of such an avant-garde lineage. But *Winter* itself reveals less the hand of a contemporary absurdist and more the broad strokes of a theatrical equivocator.

Naming his characters Man and Woman is vague enough, but with just enough evidence to suggest that they are a troubled prostitute and an ineffectual businessman, hardly pushes the archetypal boat out. Meanwhile that well-worn 1960s theatrical cliché of a bench in a public space spells out that the characters are — and will remain — strangers to each other and to us. Despite its author's origins, there are no cultural clues. Apart from the title, there is no sense of being rooted in a particular time other than the evidence of contemporary costume. We are nowhere. It is now.

In a minor controversy, reported by *The Irish Times*, this version by Vincent Woods is not the play's official translation — that honour falls to Ann Henning Jocelyn. The alterations made by Woods have not shrouded the minimalist text in colloquialisms, rather it has served to eliminate "noise" — any words that might cause a cultural hiccup (such as "kidding", for instance) were effectively muted. Rather than stamping any kind of ownership on it, then, Woods has hermetically sealed in its arcane process of signification — all of which means that the play's journey through the hands of three writers has amounted to a semiotic passing of the buck. Faced with erosion of place and the elusiveness of meaning in monosyllabic utterances, the audience must fill in the gaps, supplying in their minds not only a context, but also a subtext, and frequently the omitted parts of the text itself.

With a play so reluctant to confirm the details, what happens in *Winter* is less interesting than what may be going on. Anne O'Neill's chavette-styled Woman approaches Gary Murphy's Man, a worried looking businessman with a hangdog expression. Hugging herself with the cold, and apparently in some distress, O'Neill initiates a relationship, or perhaps a contract, with Man and they continue to his hotel room. Here Monica Frawley's spare and efficient set folds into a new shape, the exterior space of shadowy dark greens transformed by sliding panels to reveal the dusky glow of hotel lamps and a conspiracy of fuchsia bedding — a transient bedroom, lurid to the point of decay.

Avoiding anything as easily comprehensible as a sexual encounter, the play trots along as Murphy's character allows



Woman to rest. He buys her a more upstanding wardrobe, and in his growing infatuation sets about ignoring phone calls from his business colleagues and his wife. Woman, however, has been socially altered in some Pygmalion sense, and when an increasingly desperate Man ultimately finds her outside again, apparently further up the ranks of prostitution, it is she who holds the power, he who needs sanctuary and succour.

West and her cast have clearly committed to the sparse material, holding fast to a text so bare it might set others adrift. In Beckettian terms, something is taking its

**SEARCHING FOR
SUCCOUR** O'Neill and
Murphy in Winter

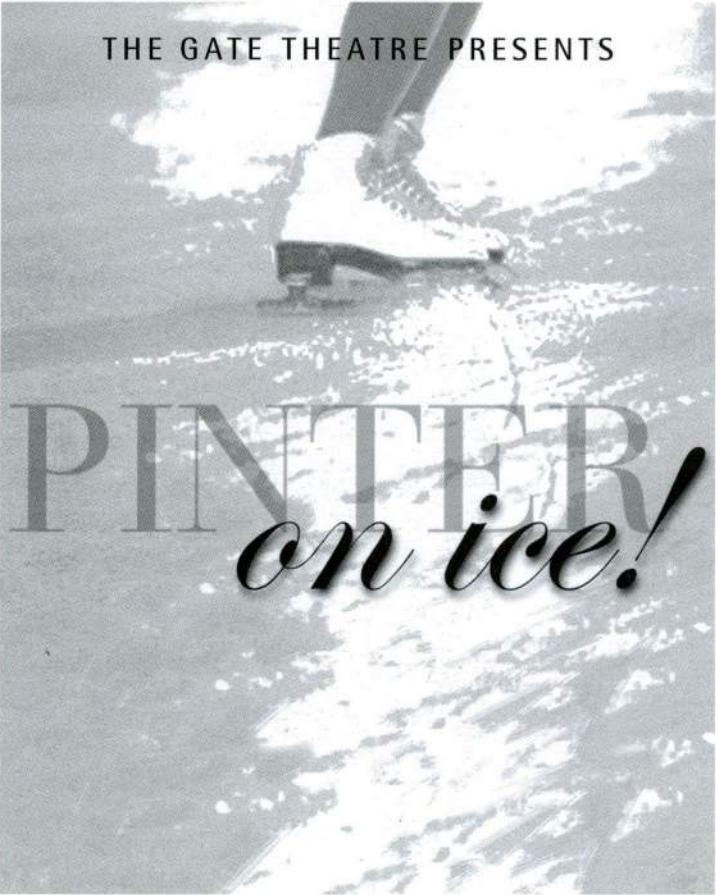
course in *Winter*. But despite its careful measures in script and staging, this production never seems entirely sure what that something might

be. Instead, it leaves you with the impression of a lot of effort invested into signifying nothing, and, without the menacing humour of the absurd, that no longer feels significant.

The dream-like tumult of images in Fosse's *Girl on the Sofa* notwithstanding, one wonders if we are merely scratching the surface of Fosse's worldview or if, in fact, the playwright's work has little depth to hide. Wisely, perhaps, the poet of silence provides few answers. •

exit stage left
Always leave 'em laughin'...

THE GATE THEATRE PRESENTS



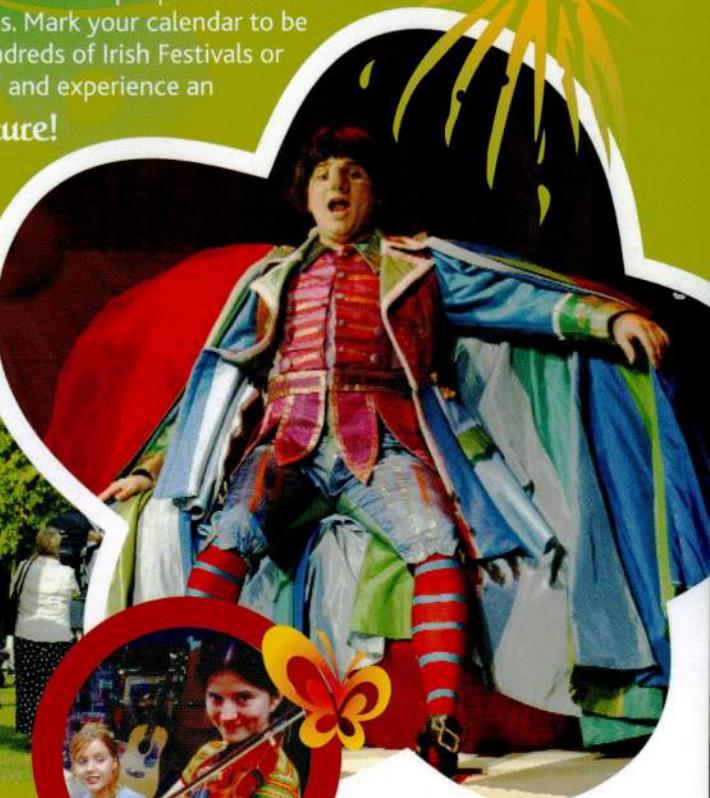
PINTER
on ice!

"We're looking at Disney, and Disney's looking at us."

Life, Theatre, Music, Dance, Celebration...Discover

A World of Festive Culture

In Ireland, the spirit of celebration crosses languages, cultures, rivers and mountains as people revel in their heritage & communities. Mark your calendar to be at one of the many hundreds of Irish Festivals or Cultural Events in 2005 and experience an **Explosion of Culture!**



ireland.ie

Fáilte Ireland

...music, mockery, movement and mayhem as the pagan lord Crom comes to announce the summer solstice...

Tine Chnámh

Tine Chnámh
le Liam Ó Muirthile

Léiritheoir/Directed by: Darach Mac Con Iomaire

Dearadh/Design: Dara McGee

Dé Luain/Mon. 11 – Déardaoin/Thur. 21

Iúil/July 2005 @ 8.00 i.n.

Ticéid €15/12 Áirthintí: 091 563600
An Taibhdhearc, An tSráid Láir, Gaillimh



TAIBHDEARC NA GAILLIMHE

AMARCLANN NÁISIÚNTA NA GAEILGE

ISBN 13937855 05
9 771393 785027