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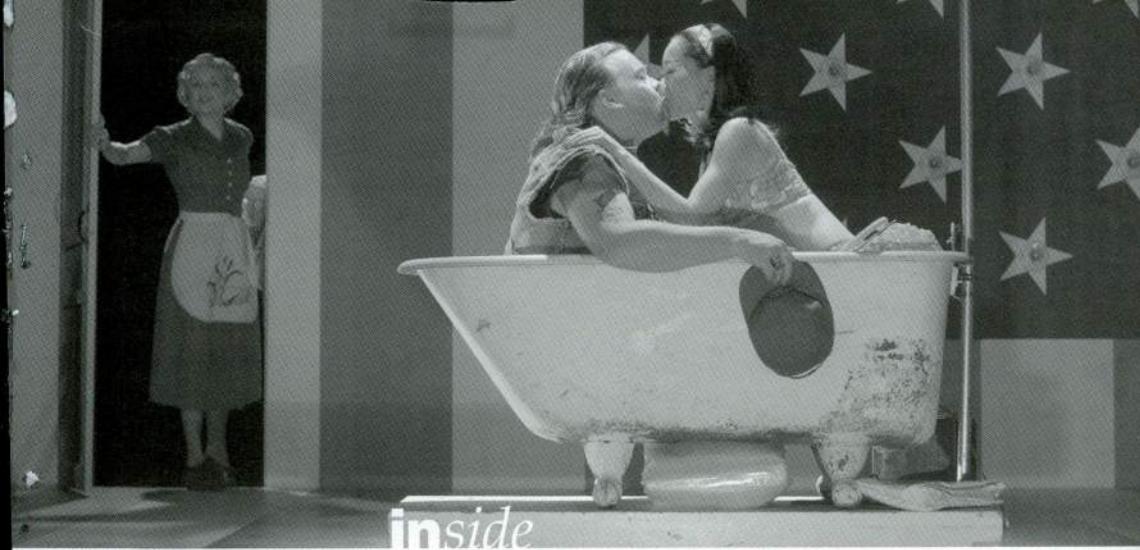
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ON THE COVER: Barbara Brennan and Olwen Fouéré in *Woman and Scarecrow*. Photo: Ros Kavanagh.



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The Art of Lobbying

END OF YEAR NERVOUSNESS about arts funding seems more acute than usual this December as the economic and political forecasts suggest a bumpy ride ahead. The relative advantages of Regular Funding and Once-off Project Funding by the Arts Council are examined in detail in our News section. But whichever system companies and organisations are currently availing of, there's a general sense that lobbying on behalf of the arts would be a great deal more focused and effective if the Minister, Seamus Brennan, had the benefit of a specialist advisor. Previous holders of this position – from Colm Ó Briain to Fiach Mac Conghail and Donal Shiels – have demonstrated its influential capacity. At the very least, the role inspires confidence, which, along with advocacy from all possible quarters, is what's badly needed now.

Lobbying on behalf of the arts would be a great deal more focused if the Minister had the benefit of a special advisor

ITM's eighth annual International Critics' Forum was held in Project Arts Centre in October. Chaired by Dr Patrick Lonergan, it covered a range of Ulster Bank Dublin Theatre Festival productions, with lively audience contributions. This year we've published the edited transcript of the discussion on www.irishtheatremagazine.ie rather than in the magazine. Additional DTF reviews, as well as comprehensive Dublin Fringe Festival reviews are also online.

While you're visiting the website, we'd appreciate if you took part in our Readers' Survey: a few quick questions to tell us where and how you buy this magazine – whether you're a regular subscriber or a bookshop browser – as well as any other feedback. Comments on anything in this issue may also be sent to admin@irishtheatremagazine.ie.

Happy New Year.

Are You a Regular?

BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU WISH FOR. INITIATED LAST JUNE, the Arts Council's Regularly Funded Organisation programme (RFO) succeeded the short-lived Multi-Annual Funding scheme that buckled in 2003 (when the Arts Council's budget suffered heavy cuts). But the seventy-seven organisations singled out by the Council as "strategically important" to their respective art forms

have so far suffered the brunt of similar economic uncertainties.

Designed "to strengthen and make more secure a group of key arts organisations", the RFO scheme has thus far had the opposite effect, affording most companies less than an inflationary increase on their previous level of funding. In the case of theatre companies, that means that

the activity undertaken in 2007 may not be affordable in 2008.

For Corn Exchange, who were unable to produce a show in 2007, the effect was immediate. "We couldn't even afford to do *Dublin By Lamplight* this year," says Artistic Director Annie Ryan. "We're actually going backwards."

At the time of the RFO decisions,

the Arts Council's Director, Mary Cloake, announced: "While the Council wishes to respond to these high quality proposals as fully as possible, it is currently constrained by continuing uncertainty about its own level of funding for 2008." This may have encouraged companies to hope that "top-up" grants might materialise at the end of the year – a suspicion that dissipated with each dark prognosis for the national Budget in December. (With no Book of Estimates published this year, the Budget was still a matter of conjecture at the time *ITM* went to press.)

In August the RFOs took matters into their own hands, writing to the new Minister for Arts, Sports and Tourism, Seamus Brennan, under the aegis of Theatre Forum, requesting a meeting. Referring to the Arts Plan 'Partnership for Arts 2006-2008' which emphasised "ongoing stability from year to year for organisations undertaking strategically important activities", and the commitment to provide multi-annual funding to the Arts Council in the new programme for Government, the letter did not mince words. It highlighted the deficiency in the Arts Council's budget to adequately support its RFO clients

while arguing for the long-term goal of raising the arts budget to €100 million for 2008. "Implementing the Programme for Government and supporting the Arts Council's bid for €100 million for 2008 will provide much-needed resources to ensure the continued success of Ireland's cultural industries," the letter concluded. "It is our strong belief however that failure to implement such measures will result in a collapse of faith within the arts sector as to the government's intention to deliver on its own Arts Plan and along with it our plans and visions for the future."

On top of widespread disappointment among RFO clients with the level of funding, the funding decisions were announced later than expected and, more than two years into a process of internal restructuring that is not yet concluded, communication between the Council's staff and its clients seems to have reached a nadir. In a separate letter to Mary Cloake, Theatre Forum's Chief Executive Tania Banotti relayed the group's desire to meet with her collectively. As Budget day loomed however, the collective efforts of the RFOs to lobby the Department of Arts directly had taken precedence.



"There's the realisation that the arts community is not an enemy in all of this; that we can help with the process of trying to get more money. Some people have expressed fear about that," Banotti told *ITM*; "that going directly to the Department undermines the Arts Council. In a way that ship had sailed some years ago. The day the Department started handing out capital grants, some of that arm's length principle in the Arts Act really went by the by."

The Minister granted the RFO delegates a meeting in early October, in which the organisations made their case, and were then invited to draft a document along the same lines. Whether, at this late stage, such efforts can have had any demonstrable

impact on the Minister's funding for the Arts Council in 2008 remains to be seen. But, as Banotti puts it, "If the Minister says he wants to hear from the arts community directly, one can't exactly ignore a call for dialogue." And with the Minister yet to appoint an arts adviser, it has proven the only means of dialogue.

Currently there is much discussion in the sector about whether it is better to be an RFO. "In a way it has divided people into those who are and those who aren't," said one production company member. "We won't find out who lost out until the people who weren't RFOs get their revenue grants."

"There's a net loss to our organisation by participating in the RFOs, cer-

NOT REVIVED THIS YEAR: CORN EXCHANGE'S DUBLIN BY LAMPLIGHT



tainly for 2008," says Project's Willie White, adding that he was reluctant to have direct engagement with the Department, but emphasised the importance of lobbying for a stronger Arts Council. On the other hand, it is hoped that in the event of an economic downturn, and the Arts Council's budget falling short of the sought-after €100 million, the RFOs could be partly insulated by the programme's ongoing commitment. But such commitments, you may recall from 2003, have been subject to change.

At least the timing of the RFO scheme has provided some comfort. "We know [our grant] in July rather than in January," says White. "That at least is preferable. If they just said it was an early disappointment scheme rather than an award for being a successful organisation, we might have had different expectations."

A JUGGLING ACT

Amid all this uncertainty, Anne Clarke's Landmark Productions has proven to be an enviably flexible model. By the end of 2007 Landmark, which is not in receipt of State revenue funding, had staged four productions within the year, availing of various once-off Arts Council grants while pursuing both co-productions and unabashedly commercial enterprises. The Arts Council allocated €40,000, in a once-off project grant, to

Landmark's staging of *Blackbird* last February in Project, while €31,600 went towards the revival of *Underneath the Lintel* as part of the Touring Experiment. In November, Landmark staged *The Last Days of The Celtic Tiger*, a highly successful commercial undertaking (ticket price: €45) backed by numerous independent investors and sponsors, which is due to return to the Olympia Theatre next spring. In December, the company concludes the year with *Alice in Wonderland*, a co-production with The Helix, which has also received a project grant from the Arts Council.

If there has ever been any squeamishness about balancing subsidised theatre with commercial endeavours, that may vanish as more ambitious companies contend with straitened circumstances. Clarke is keen to preserve the various models of production that Landmark has incorporated. "I think they all do different things," she says. "Each of the projects in the last year I've really wanted to do, and the first job of a producer is to find a way to get a show on, to raise money from whatever source is the most apt. *Blackbird* absolutely could not have happened unless the Arts Council supported it to the extent that it did. It also represents really good money for the Arts Council: they don't pay for overheads, salaries, or any of the year-round costs. It's very cost effective for them. If I do management work, or a

THE LAST DAYS OF THE CELTIC TIGER
(LANDMARK PRODUCTIONS)

commercial show like *The Last Days of The Celtic Tiger*, that can pay Landmark overheads and my salary for the year and allow me to do these things that are very close to my heart."

The programme for Paul Howard's show thanks a long list of products and nightspots – from Heineken to The Ice Bar – as though it was a roll call of Ross O'Carroll Kelly's personal acquaintances. "It's life imitating art," say Clarke – although it is actually a nod to her sponsors.

Landmark's next production, Frank McGuinness' adaptation of *Miss Julie*, reverts to a project grant. "I think the once-off production funding model gives the Arts Council

great value for money and also great flexibility, maybe too much flexibility. I'm going into production in early January and I won't know until early December the level of grant aid. If they don't come through, I'm really stuck. At the same time it gives Landmark the flexibility not to be bound by structures."

Few may be able to emulate a seasoned producer like Clarke, who admits that *Blackbird* may feed the soul, but Ross O'Carroll Kelly feeds the children. But if the economic downturn materialises, more companies may wonder if the subsidised sector and the commercial producer can be friends.

ON THE ROAD

By late autumn The Touring Experiment appeared to have reached critical mass. Between September and November, forty-one productions had hit the road under the Arts Council's €2 million, two-year "action research project", which aims to determine the needs of presenters, venues, festivals and audiences. Thirty-two productions took place in October alone.

"This is a crucial phase for the Touring Experiment," says Jane Daly of the Irish Theatre Institute, which is spearheading the project, "both in

terms of the depth of information being collected and the analysis of very detailed case studies and audience work that will feed into the report and set of recommendations around the specifics of touring. We're at that stage where it would be impossible to say definitively what that's going to be. But it will be worth waiting for."

With so many productions on the road simultaneously, not every production's huge efforts have met with a commensurate response. "How are we finding audiences?" Leo McKenna, Company Manager of Irish Modern Dance Theatre (IMDT), responds:



IRISH MODERN DANCE THEATRE'S RRRRRKILLKILLKILL...
TAKING PART IN THE TOURING EXPERIMENT

CHRIS YON

"With great difficulty." This, however, is par for the course with contemporary dance and IMDT's *RrrrrrrrKILLKILLKILL...to infinity (make it look real)* was never aiming to set the halls of Ballybofey on fire. "What we do is niche work anyway and modern dance is always hard to sell," says McKenna. "What the Touring Experiment has enabled us to do is make ourselves available to venues we would ordinarily have been scared to go to because of potential failure. The key thing for us is that the Touring Experiment enabled us to take more of a risk in choosing places to go to. Places that haven't seen the like of John Scott's work before."

Daly will not be drawn on any early indications of the Touring Experiment, which will complete its report and deliver its findings and recommendations to the Arts Council in the spring. But given the unprecedented level of touring under the programme's aegis she will allow this: "I can see an extraordinary momentum, and my personal opinion, as a practitioner and someone who is very involved in producing and touring work, is that it would be really important that momentum is maintained. So there won't be a flow of activity and then a complete stop."

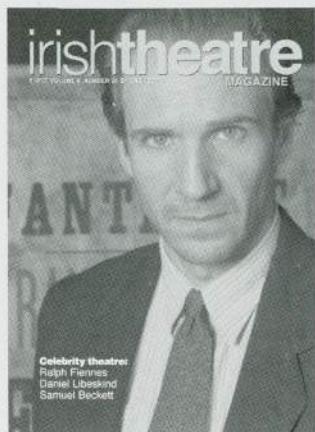
ALL CHANGE AT BEDROCK

In the last issue of *ITM* it was reported that Cian O'Brien had been ap-

pointed General Manager and Producer of Bedrock, which, in the context of an interview with Jimmy Fay, appeared to be an ongoing role. O'Brien, however, has since been appointed Associate Producer with Rough Magic.

With Fay taking a sabbatical from Bedrock, during which he will serve as the Abbey's Acting Literary Director, the company has appointed Valerie Murphy as Company Manager, whose job will cover the role of producer. In the meantime Alex Johnston has assumed the role of Artistic Director and has proposed a number of projects for 2008 which are dependent on Arts Council funding. These include *In Dublin*, a drama based on the sex traffic industry, by new playwright Elaine Murphy and *Tideline*, the English translation of Wajdi Mouawad's *Littoral*, as well as the development of a 'mosaic' collection of short plays, by various authors, to be performed in 2009.

"Alex is one of the founding elements of Bedrock," the company's Board Chairperson Gráinne Humphreys told *ITM*, "so he would have a very strong notion and a very good idea of what a Bedrock production requires. This is an opportunity to look at what Bedrock is, with a slightly different context, with Alex driving it in a different way. Everyone's aware that it will be a change. But change is good."



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opening nights

TANYA DEAN marks key diary dates for the winter nights ahead.

Quick Bright Things present **TEMPEST!** at Project Arts Centre, Dublin until 21 December.

Curtayne Theatre Company presents **DICKENS IN DUBLIN** by Laurence Foster in Bewley's Café Theatre, Dublin until 22 December.

Civic Theatre, Tallaght presents **LITTLE RED RIDING HOOD & SK8TER JACK** by David Parnell until 6 January.

ALICE IN WONDERLAND, adapted for Landmark Productions by Mary Elizabeth Burke-Kennedy, runs at The Helix, DCU, until 6 January.

Lyric Theatre, Belfast presents **BAH, HUMBUG!** by Conor Grimes and Alan McKee until 12 January.

THE WIZARD OF OZ by L. Frank Baum runs at Lyric Theatre, Belfast until 12 January.

CINDERELLA, adapted by Peter Kennedy, runs at the Town Hall Theatre, Galway until 13 January.

QDOS Entertainment Ltd presents **CINDERELLA** at the Grand Opera House, Belfast until 19 January.

The Abbey Theatre presents **THE RECRUITING OFFICER** by George Farquhar until 26 January.

BEAUTY AND THE BEAST runs at the Gaiety Theatre, Dublin until 3 February.

Fairbank Productions presents **TOM CREAN ANTARCTIC EXPLORER** by Aidan Dooley at the Everyman Palace Theatre, Cork from 14 – 19 January.

Irish Modern Dance Theatre presents **NEXT TO SKIN**, choreographed by John Scott, on tour from 15 – 30 January: Project Arts Centre, Dublin; The Dock, Carrick-on-Shannon; Draíocht Arts Centre, Blanchardstown.

GBL Productions present **A NIGHT IN NOVEMBER** by Marie Jones in the Grand Opera House, Belfast from the 21 – 26 January.

Rough Magic Theatre Company in association with NASC presents **THE TAM-**



Pauline McLynn and Owen Roe in **THE TAMING OF THE SHREW**

ING OF THE SHREW by William Shakespeare, on tour from 22 January – 24 February: Town Hall Theatre, Galway; An Grianán, Letterkenny; Backstage Theatre, Longford; Pavilion Theatre, Dun Laoghaire; Glór, Ennis; Dún Laoghaire, Portlaoise; Siamsa Tíre, Tralee.

Second Age Theatre Company presents **MACBETH** by William Shakespeare, on tour from 23 January – 14 March: An Grianán, Letterkenny; Town Hall Theatre, Galway; Everyman Palace Theatre, Cork; The Helix, Dublin.

Prime Cut productions presents **AFTER THE END** by Dennis Kelly, on tour from 30 January – 13 March: Old Museum Arts Centre, Belfast, ending at Strule Arts Centre, Omagh.

GREAT EXPECTATIONS, by Charles Dickens, adapted for the stage by Hugh Leonard, runs at the Gate Theatre, Dublin, until 2 February.

Landmark Productions present **MISS**

JULIE by August Strindberg in a new version by Frank McGuinness, at Project, Dublin, 30 January – 1 March.

BEWARE OF THE STORYBOOK WOLVES, adapted by Tom Swift from the book by Lauren Child, runs at The Ark, Dublin, from 5 February – 16 March.

ROMEO AND JULIET by William Shakespeare runs at the Abbey Theatre from 12 February – 22 March.

FOOL FOR LOVE by Sam Shepard runs at the Peacock Theatre from 19 February – 15 March.

MórWax Productions presents **WHAT MEN WANT** by Peadar de Burca in Draiocht Arts Centre, Blanchardstown from 21 – 23 February.

Gare St Lazare Players Ireland will tour to 23 venues around Ireland with **FIRST LOVE** by Samuel Beckett, starting with Siamsa Tíre, Tralee, on 8 March and ending in The Helix, DCU, from 1 – 3 May.

entrances & exits

TANYA DEAN keeps track of the latest backstage movements in Irish theatre.

MARIE ROONEY is to step down as Deputy Director of The Gate Theatre in February 2008 to work as an independent producer... **PAT TALBOT** is to remain on as Artistic Director/ CEO of the Everyman Palace Theatre, Cork, following the departure of General Manager **CIARA NI SHUILLEABHÁIN**. She has been replaced by **EMER O'HERLIHY**, formerly General Manager of the Cork Film Festival.

TOMÁS HARDIMAN has stepped down as Managing Director of Galway Arts Centre... **MARK MULQUEEN** has stepped down as Director of the Irish Film Institute to be Communications Officer in the Oireachtas ... **ENID REID WHYTE**, the Arts Council's Theatre Specialist, is leaving at the end of the year.

ROISIN KINSELLA, has stepped down as General Manager of Daghda Dance Company. **GEMMA CARCATERRA** has joined the company as Interim General Manager... **PAUL CARTON** has joined Coiscéim Dance Theatre as administrator, replacing **NICOLA DUNNE** who joins Kildare County Council as Arts in Health specialist... Following



the departure of **DAIRNE O'SULLIVAN** to the Hugh Lane Gallery, **ROSS Ó CORRÁIN** has taken up the position of Marketing and Audience Development Manager of Project Arts Centre...

CIAN O'BRIEN (left) is Rough Magic's new Associate Producer, following participation in the company's AIB SEEDS 3 Programme... **VALERIE MURPHY** is joining Bedrock as Company Manager.

Co-founder and Co-Artistic Director of Sole Purpose Productions, **DAVE DUGGAN**, will leave the company at the end of March 2008 to concentrate on writing. Co-founder **PATRICIA BYRNE** will continue as sole Artistic Director ... Prime Cut Productions has appointed **CIARAN MC QUILLAN** as the new Outreach Manager.

Tall Tales Theatre Company is moving from Dublin to be the resident theatre company at Solstice Arts Centre, Navan, from January... Former Director of Marketing and Sales with the Gaiety Theatre, **SUSAN KIRBY**, has joined St. Patrick's Festival as Marketing Manager.

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Filling in the Picture

Audio-described performances are opening up the experience of theatre to visually impaired audiences. **DERBHILE DROMEY** urges more theatre companies to provide the service.

I AM AN ENTHUSIASTIC THEATRE GOER. I laugh and cry and give my considered verdict in the pub afterwards. I am also visually impaired. To me, the two are not necessarily mutually exclusive. However, on Saturday, 17 November, a new world of theatre was opened up to me, when I attended the audio-described performance of Roddy Doyle and Bisi

Adigun's version of *The Playboy of the Western World* at the Abbey Theatre.

Audio description is a tool that supplies visually impaired theatre-goers with a live commentary supplying visual detail, such as facial expressions and the positions of characters. Users wear an earpiece and can adjust the volume as they see fit. Before the play, they listen to programme notes



Listening to audio description of The Abbey's Playboy of the Western World



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which supply them with information about the characters' costumes and the set. They also come in Braille, CD and large print format

Since September 2006, Arts and Disability Ireland (ADI), in association with Sightlines, a Belfast-based audio description company, have staged nine audio-described performances at the Abbey and the Dublin Theatre Festival, including *The Big House* and *The History Boys*.

There is clearly a demand for audio description. Of the twenty places allocated for *The Big House*, fourteen were taken up. Various blind friends of mine have been enticed to attend these performances. They found that instead of being forced to passively react to dialogue and attempt to fill in the blanks themselves, they could now anticipate what was happening. They could enjoy a full three-dimensional experience. As a person who can see quite well, I was curious to see whether I agreed with this verdict.

On the day, all went smoothly, thanks to the friendly, thorough attitude of the Abbey staff. When *Playboy* began, I was deluged with detail at first, then the commentary settled down and continued at a steady pace. The two audio describers spoke whenever the character was speaking. It was as if someone was holding a large magnifying glass to the set. I became aware of pictures of football teams on the walls of the pub setting,

of Pegeen's rigid stance as she confronts Christy, of the flash of keys being thrown across the stage. My seat was in quite a good location, but even if I had been at the front, I would not have seen that sort of detail.

Quite often, characters appear to be mere blobs on the stage. Audio description makes it possible to distinguish who's who in the melee of voices, by telling you the name of the character as they speak. At one stage, Christy attempts to put turf on a gas fire. Usually, I would need a willing friend to explain such a gag to me. This time, I laughed along with the rest of the audience.

Yet at times, the extra detail proved to be a burden as well as a blessing. Suddenly, there was a lot more to concentrate on. At times, the audio description was drowned out by the shouting of characters and by the clapping and laughter of the audience. The audio describers largely succeeded in their endeavours to describe things as they happened. However sometimes, things were described before they happened, or afterwards. As an added inconvenience, the person beside me could hear the commentary and had to ask me to turn it down. This could possibly be avoided by seating those availing of audio description together, rather than scattering them throughout the theatre.

Audio description in Ireland is at a

Checking the soundtrack during The Playboy of the Western World

delicate stage and needs to be nurtured if it is to prosper. The issue of scale has proven to be one of the most difficult obstacles to overcome. Audio describers need three to five weeks to prepare a script, which is drawn from a video of performance made early in the run. Yet most productions in Ireland do not run for that long. Also, there are no trained audio describers in the Republic. ADI plans to run training courses in 2008 to address this.

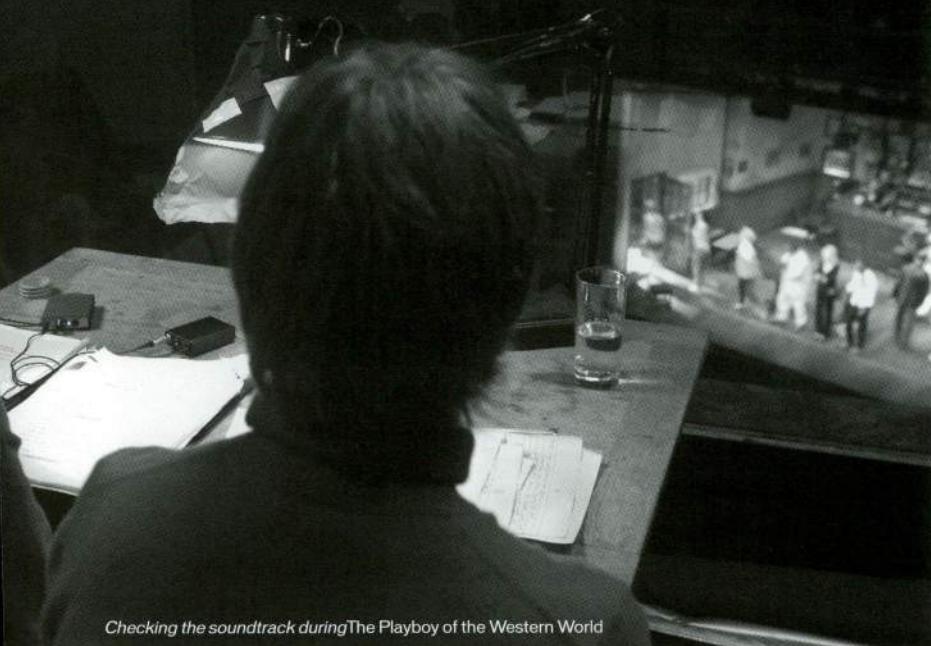
ADI has ambitious plans for the future. There will be audio described performances of all the Abbey's productions in 2008. There are also plans to stage four performances outside Dublin. However, the continued success of audio description is depend-

ent on cooperation from theatre companies. The companies ADI approached were receptive, but wanted to be sure of good audience levels before committing funds.

This is something of a chicken and egg situation, since a lack of audio description is likely to keep visually impaired people away from the theatre. I will continue to go to the theatre whether there is audio description or not. However, I may well be enticed to return to Dublin to sample the rich detail which only audio description can supply. It could be argued that audio description is an art in itself.



Derbhile Dromey is a freelance journalist based in Waterford.



| ALL TOGETHER NOW

20

RADIO MACBETH (SITI)

All



The Dublin Theatre Festival's focus on the art of the ensemble made a big impression on practitioners here. **RACHEL ANDREWS** considers whether creating an ensemble is really the most fruitful way to make theatre.

Together Now

AT IRISH THEATRE INSTITUTE'S ANNUAL NETWORKING conference during the Ulster Bank Dublin Theatre Festival, the keynote speaker, Anne Bogart, Artistic Director of the SITI theatre company in New York, recounted an anecdote. It was 1986 and she had flown to Berlin to see work by the legendary Ariane Mnouchkine, founder of the Parisian ensemble Théâtre du Soleil and one of Bogart's heroes. Late in the evening Bogart found herself alone with Mnouchkine. She had come to Berlin to ask her a question, which was: "what about this company thing?" Mnouchkine looked at her sternly. "'Well, what are you going to do without a company? I mean, don't get me wrong, it makes you miserable, people leave, it's hard, but what are you going to do without one?'"

The moment, for Bogart, was pivotal. "I actually had an epiphany ... I realised that every great production I'd seen, without exception, in my entire life, in theatre or in dance, was always done by a company. So I thought, ok, this is what

I'm going to do. I'm going to form a company. I don't know how you start a company, but I believe that when you believe in something you start to speak about it and find words for it. So I did."

The SITI Company, which Bogart created with Japanese theatre director Tadashi Suzuki in 1992, is formed around a core group of nineteen, involving actors (including actor/director Leon Ingulsrud and actor/choreographer Barney O'Hanlon), designers, a stage director, a managing director and associate managing director, a playwright, and the role held by Bogart. All work full-time with the ensemble and all are waged, something Bogart described as a "number one principle" during a discussion on ensemble theatre that took place after her talk. Bogart also discussed SITI's working methods, describing the company's creative process, and noting that she usually prepares for two years in advance of her plays.

Equally significant was Bogart's explanation of her company's ethic. All of SITI's actors are trained in two distinct methodologies, Viewpoints and Suzuki, which the ensemble uses as building blocks for developing and staging productions. The actors teach these training methods when they are not rehearsing, or touring, as part of training sessions held by SITI, or for workshops organised by universities. It means that Bogart's actors can earn an annual salary, if they so choose. "That," she said, "is what keeps us together."

At present the ensemble seems to be viewed as the Holy Grail in Irish theatre, where there exists a sense that more time and space would result in superior work. Joining Bogart for the discussion in Project Arts Centre were Máté Gáspár, Managing Director of Hungarian theatre company Krétakör, and Malcolm Hamilton, co-founder of and writer-in-residence with Sligo's Blue Raincoat, both of whom work within the ensemble format. They observed that the three- or four-week time-frame employed by most Irish companies to rehearse and stage shows had little relevance for them, as they tend to become involved in discussions and workshops around theatrical pieces up to a year in advance of any specific rehearsal period. This was described by Enid Reid-Whyte, Theatre Specialist with the Arts Council, as sounding a bit "like theatre heaven". In an interview given recently, Rough Magic's Associate Director Tom Creed stated: "clearly, the model of the future is repertory". He told the *Irish Times*: "essentially all of the great theatrical movements that have ever happened, really, were based around companies."

The ensemble has attracted particular interest of late, as practitioners, conscious that the theatrical landscape is becoming increasingly crowded with companies – all looking to the same funding pot – have begun to examine dif-



THE THIRD POLICEMAN (BLUE RAINCOAT)

ferent models of practice. Although Druid and Rough Magic are often referenced as Irish companies already working within the ensemble structure, those companies' loose affiliation to a group of actors (aside from the DruidSynge project) is different to the focus Creed, along with directors David Horan, Darragh McKeon, and producer Maura O'Keeffe, brought to the exploratory Repertory Experiment during the Dublin Fringe Festival. This used one cast to perform three plays in rotation over three and a half weeks. The ethos is also different to the stated aim of Rough Magic to take "the notion of the company as ensemble" with its SEEDS 4 programme, which seeks to join directors with designers, producers, composers and writers.

Given all of this, the decision by the Ulster Bank Dublin Theatre Festival Director Loughlin Deegan to programme the work of leading international ensembles this year appears a timely one. The emphasis has had something of a galvanising effect, particularly among those who attended the Irish Theatre Institute's discussion. However, it remains unclear exactly how the ensemble model could be transposed onto a country that, outside of the Abbey Players, has no tradition of creating theatre through a subsidised company system akin to those in Germany or Russia.

In Ireland, only Blue Raincoat currently operates as a full-time ensemble, with a twelve-member core – which, like the SITI Company, is waged – its own theatre space, and a distinct methodology based on the physical theatre experiments of the French teacher Etienne Decroux. The training unites the company,

but it is the monetary security that co-founder and Artistic Director Niall Henry believes "engenders the growth and the continuity" of the ensemble. This allows it to retain its members and to focus on its "slightly over-obsessional stylistic concerns", with the aim of making "good work on a regular basis." The company's six actors have been involved since 1991, 1995, 1998 and 2001 respectively. A

'I'm not persuaded. What do we need it for?

It depends on the work. If you are doing a straightforward text-based play, how much time do you actually need?'

clear advantage of this method is the group's ability to keep shows alive – in 2008 it will tour Ireland with its production of *The Third Policeman*, staged in Sligo and Galway in October 2007.

But the company has also taken

criticism for being too self-involved, with one critic (Karen Fricker, writing in the *Guardian*) noting that the ensemble "works in a highly choreographed style that varies so little, it usually barely matters what content they treat." Henry admits that the ensemble is "by no means the best way of working" although he is certain, having also worked outside it, that it is the format to which he is best suited.

Nonetheless, most theatre practitioners appear to agree that an ensemble can work well if its members are united by a particular methodology. Outside of that, not all are convinced. "I'm not persuaded. What do we need it for?" asks Willie White, Artistic Director of Project, who would like to first see evidence of "demand" and "dividend for audiences" before endorsing the format. Nor do the arguments for more time and space particularly wash with this experienced facilitator, who is proactive in encouraging artists to consider different ways of producing theatre outside the strictures of Ireland's company system. But he also takes each endeavour on its merits. "It depends on the work. For example, a company like Corn Exchange is fairly exceptional and I can understand the argument in the context of the way they work. But if you are doing a straightforward text-based play, how much time do you actually need?"

In an ideal world, Annie Ryan, Artistic Director of Corn Exchange, would ask for, not strictly more time – the company already employs lead-in periods of up to eight weeks for its plays – but more commitment from a greater range of actors to its practice of the Commedia dell'Arte style. Although Corn Exchange revolves around a core group of artists, its company structure is more fluid than that of either Blue Raincoat or SITI and its top actors are regularly poached by film and television (company member Mark O'Halloran has been effectively lost to the big screen) forcing Ryan to expand her ensemble. There are many talented actors





EVERYDAY (CORN EXCHANGE)

Ryan would like to work with, but not all of them have explored the Commedia style. Pointing out that she has often trained people through rehearsing plays, which can be "very scary, because the style demands a lot of skill", Ryan says she would like to find ways of getting actors to meet once or twice a month to practice, and "do yoga, to engage them physically, anything just to get them moving".

Director of the Cork Midsummer Festival, William Galinsky, believes much of Ryan's frustration could be resolved with the establishment of an Irish national drama school, similar to the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts (RADA) or the Guildhall School in London, where actors could train in different methodologies to the highest standards. Galinsky, an Englishman who has extensive experience with successful international ensembles, such as the Maly Theatre in St Petersburg, is also unconvinced that the format is "the be all and end all", but says that if there are to be ensembles in Ireland, they "cannot exist in a vacuum".

"I think there is oodles of talent in Ireland, and it is a real shame there isn't a third-level establishment for training actors and directors. The idea of the ensemble may not work in Ireland, and there are plenty of other models. But the first step must surely be a long serious look at how we train people."

Few would disagree that the structures for creating theatre in Ireland need loosening. The question is how. The passion of those involved in successful ensemble practice is compelling; the advice, from Mnouchkine to Bogart, powerful. Perhaps Irish theatre cannot move forward without creating these ensembles and repertory companies. Or, perhaps, it is time for the sector to decide what it can do with what it has right now.





Sounds

Can good drama be written to further the cause of human rights? A recent series of RTÉ radio plays – three of them new works by Irish playwrights – tackled the theme. **PATRICK LONERGAN** tunes into the voices behind the issues.

IN 1985, HAROLD PINTER AND ARTHUR MILLER VISITED TURKEY as part of an International PEN campaign against the torture of artists by that country's military dictatorship. "We met dozens of writers," writes Pinter. "Those who had been tortured in prison were still trembling but they insisted on giving us a drink, pouring the shaking bottle into our glasses. One of the writer's wives was mute. She had fainted and lost her power of speech when she had seen her husband in prison."

and Silences

Pinter's response to this visit was *Mountain Language* (1988), a play that aims to give voice to people who've been silenced, like the Turkish writer and his wife. Exploring how political power and linguistic freedom interrelate, and often clash, it's one of Pinter's most powerful works – and was an ideal beginning for a recent RTÉ series of radio dramas about human rights. The four-play sequence was commissioned in association with Amnesty International, to commemorate the European Year of Equal Opportunities For All.

Broadcast on consecutive Sundays during October, the series featured Pinter's play, together with new works (rather grandly, if accurately, dubbed 'world premieres') from Roddy Doyle, Frank McGuinness and Eugene McCabe. Each play lasted about 30 minutes, and was followed by a discussion of the issues raised in the play by a group of selected experts (almost none of whom, by the way, show any expertise in radio drama – but more about that in a moment).

The decision to shift Pinter's *Mountain Language* from the stage to the airwaves proves surprisingly effective, despite obvious problems with that transposition. If governments stifle opposition by silencing their opponents, they enact violence not upon the voice, but the body. For *Mountain Language* to be fully effective, we need to have a sense of the corporeal: we need to see how the bodies on stage can be violated, imprisoned, commodified, shared, and abused – both as sexual and political objects. And this just can't happen in a radio play.

Producer Aidan Mathews attempts to compensate for this loss by having Olwen Fouéré read Pinter's stage directions, which helps to physicalise the action somewhat. The vocal performances by the cast – which includes Jeremy Irons, Nick Dunning, Deirdre Donnelly, Andrew Bennett, and Liam Cunningham – are first rate; their use of British and Irish accents helps to give the production local relevance, while showing how Pinter's play is not simply about the Kurds in Turkey, but (as the author himself has pointed out) about linguistic imperialism in general.

Unfortunately, it all goes downhill after *Mountain Language* – mostly because the three Irish authors fail to display Pinter's awareness that audiences don't need to be persuaded that the violation of Human Rights is a bad thing.

Mountain Language

Harold Pinter

Don't Ask

Eugene McCabe

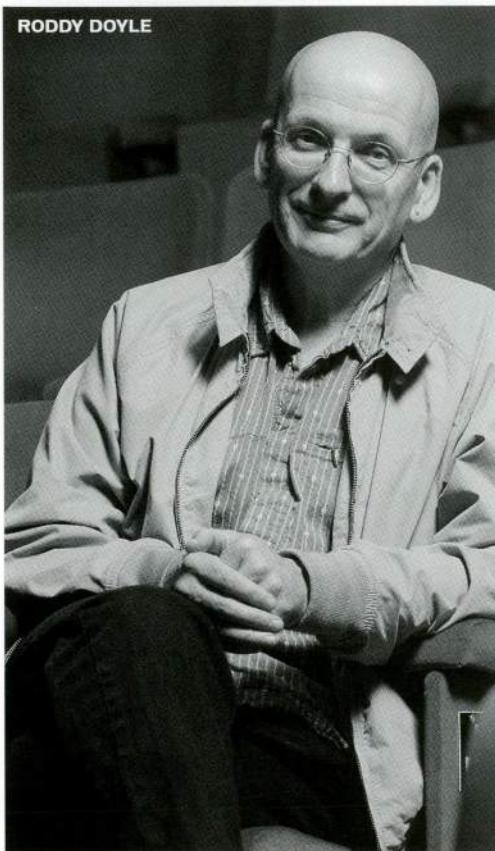
Two Men Meet

Roddy Doyle

**The Rights
of the Child**

Frank McGuinness

RODDY DOYLE



Only Eugene McCabe's *Don't Ask* (also produced by Mathews) works as drama: set in a nursing home, it features TP McKenna as a senile judge reviewing his past, with many lively interventions from a large cast of voices. Dealing with the issue of institutionalisation in its broadest applications, this is an angry play that draws troubling parallels between Ireland's present and its past – but it often feels over-familiar and over-ambitious, at times too closely resembling Sebastian Barry's *Steward of Christendom*.

By far the weakest of the three new works is Roddy Doyle's *Two Men Meet* in which, well, two men meet, apparently in Dublin, to discuss their shared past.

We soon become aware that the younger male (Laurence Kinlan) is the son of the elder (Owen Roe), an alcoholic who'd abandoned his family years before. Doyle has little to say here that can't be garnered from the introductory pages of a self-help book. Adult children of alcoholics, he observes, are sometimes just as determined to avoid drink as their parents were determined to consume it – which means that two generations of a family risk becoming trapped in a cycle of obsession with alcohol. And those children will often invest so much energy in avoiding becoming like their parents that they fail to become themselves.

Produced by Kevin Reynolds, this play undoubtedly deals with an issue that is important everywhere, but especially in Ireland. Unfortunately, Doyle attempts to raise these important observations into drama with writing that seems uncharacteristically sloppy. There is the horrendous dialogue (at one

stage the father describes his relationship with the son as a minefield. "I didn't plant the mines," Kinlan replies sulkily). There are jokes about property values and the M50, which sound trite and parochial. And of course we hear all about the inevitable dead Mammy who makes both father and son feel guilty.

What emerges most clearly (but unintentionally) from Doyle's play is how

our culture has developed a language for dealing with trauma – words, images and symbols that we all recognise unthinkingly as signifiers of hardship, many of them involving clichéd images of women. And unfortunately,

These plays don't succeed as politics because they aren't successful as dramas: the writing lacks depth and there is no light and shade in characterisation or plotting.

those clichés also appear in Frank McGuinness's play, *The Rights of the Child*, which has as its theme the use of rape as a weapon of war.

Bosnia is not mentioned here, but is the obvious context. And that's the play's major problem: it uses a symbol so familiar that audiences are unlikely to be affected by it. In the Bosnian wars, women were sexually assaulted not just as individuals, but as symbols of the nation under attack – that is, their bodies were not just violated, but translated into an abstract image of something that they were not. Unfortunately, hundreds of writers have further translated those women's bodies into another symbol, using them as convenient shorthand for suffering and injustice. This "translation" most notoriously appears in Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues*, which used real testimony from a victim of the Yugoslav rape camps as filler between comedic sketches about orgasms and the difficulty of speaking frankly about sex. So the figure of the raped Bosnian woman is now so common that it has become almost meaningless.

McGuinness seems aware of this problem: his characters are deliberately presented as nation-less, and he attempts to use plotting to make the figure seem unfamiliar again – showing that victims can find horrifying ways of renewing and expressing their agency. Nevertheless, his play is greatly undermined by a style of playing which, as produced by Cathryn Brennan, is undramatic and self-important. Ruth Negga (the victim) and Donna Dent (her interviewer) emphasise the seriousness of the play's theme by delivering their lines as if every word is an act of numb resistance to oppression. So they speak very slowly. And they speak very precisely. "If you do not talk I can not help you" says Dent, pausing meaningfully between every word. "My mother is dead" says Negga. "Everybody's mother. They are all dead". All of this in a monotone. For half an hour.

So it ends up sounding rather pretentious: by the time McGuinness delivers a hard-hitting message about violence being self-perpetuating, the listener may feel as numb as the characters – the play's originality appears too late to have any impact.

And that, in essence, is the problem with theatre that deliberately sets out to argue a point about human rights: it often sets out to state the stunningly obvious, and therefore risks failing as drama. Good drama usually arises from our interest in a conflict that has an unpredictable outcome: in order to invest in a play, we must have a sense that plot and characterisation are indeterminate – that events cannot be predicted, that people are never entirely good nor entirely bad. It's difficult to provide nuanced characterisation and careful plotting when you're trying to make an assertion that can have no ambiguity, that must be applicable to everyone, everywhere.

And this leads us back to Pinter. His description – quoted earlier - of the Turkish writer and his wife is extraordinarily eloquent: the clatter of glass against glass, the silence of the writer's wife – both tell us much more about human rights abuses than we'd have gained from pages of descriptions of actual torture. Pinter is forcing us to imagine the things that he has refused to describe, making us face a challenging question: what can we do to prevent such atrocities from occurring again?

In doing so, he shows that the problem is not that people are unfamiliar with the existence of human rights abuses – but that they are *over-familiar* with those abuses: we're so regularly bombarded with images of pain and destitution that we can feel numbness, or helplessness – or we can persuade ourselves that what we're seeing has nothing to do with us. The job of the writer in such a situation is to arouse our capacity for action – to take the over-familiar and make it strange again. Of the three new plays in this series, only McGuinness's attempts to do this.

It's disappointing that the post-broadcast discussions of the issues raised by these dramas rarely included what we might call theatre criticism. These plays don't succeed as politics because they aren't successful as dramas – the writing lacks depth, the actors seem unfamiliar with their lines, and there is no light and shade in characterisation or plotting. If we are to give voice to the voiceless, we must first acquire – and keep – the attention of the audience. As Pinter showed, artistic excellence is always more persuasive than political sincerity – and sometimes silences can communicate much more than thousands of well-intentioned words.



The World as a Stage

Are visual art and theatre converging? A current exhibition at London's Tate Modern explores 'the theatricalisation of everyday life'. For stage designer **JOHN COMISKEY** these exhibits highlight the distance between the two fields as much as their intersection.

Jeppe Hein's: Spiral Labyrinth



THE WORLD AS A STAGE: ART MEETS THEATRE' IN Tate Modern presents a selection of works from an international group of sixteen contemporary artists which touch on theatrical themes and concerns. They range from those examining forms of social and ritual presentation – how we stage ourselves - to direct theatrical quotes and even puns, setting out to question our culture of spectacle and the place of the individual within it. The theatrical forms invoked – sometimes tenuously - range from ancient Greece to fairground, via Shakespeare and historical re-enactments. Much of the work is concerned with breaking the conventions of art galleries.

Ideas of the static observer vs the participant abound: in *Séance de Shadow II (bleu)* by Dominique Gonzales-Foerster, a motion detector triggers a floor lamp to project the viewers' shadows onto a blue wall.

The first item in the exhibition is encountered while approaching the Tate Modern building. *The Visitors* by Renata Lucas is a line of firs, bits of hedge, broken logs and scrub placed as an intersection to the formal planting of the Tate forecourt. One could easily miss it but for the large board announcing its presence. Elsewhere we are told that it seems to advance on the building in an almost menacing way. Geddit? Sadly, this sets the tone for much of the rest, wandering on the blasted heath of conceptualism.

Next up is an encounter with the ticket-taker at the exhibition entrance who unexpectedly says "Let's fight for peace. This is new. Tino Sehgal 2003" (a phrase which later resonates with another phrase within: "Give ugliness a chance") Mr. Sehgal is apparently interested in the ephemeral, and altering the context of encounters, but , whilst charming and providing a welcome release for the attendant, it is a very slight idea.

And this is the problem with most of this exhibition. While the works do create an imaginative space for the viewer, it is small. They are one-note ideas inflated by their setting in a major art gallery, and often functions at the level of institutional critique only. *Arena* by Rita McBride illustrates the problem – it may be a big work of art in a gallery, making the visitor the subject of someone else's show, but it's a set of empty bleachers in a theatre.

Ulla von Brandenburg's *Curtain* provides a good example. A very large curtain,

reproduced from the Royal Shakespeare Theatre of 1932, covers an entire wall. It seeks to explore ambiguities of time and place – is a performance about to start or end? Is there a space beyond? These questions quickly digested, one admires the pretty colours and moves on.

Where these works of art do not meet theatre at all is in the play of emotion, or lack of it. They are, for the most part, formalist exercises, engaged in questioning the processes of the artists. In the world of theatre such navel-gazing is usually left in the rehearsal room.

encountering other untied shoe-laces. The work relies largely on its title, *Resistance*, to form its argument, and once known is instantly forgettable. *Sweeney Tate* by Mario Ybarra Jr. is a rather bland installation of a barber's shop in which we participate via the mirror, with a video of interviews of Los Angeles barbers reminiscent of community television. *Kugel* again by von Brandenburg is a looped film presentation of a tableau, possibly of a funeral, reflected in a curved metal surface, enlivened greatly by passing children making shadow-plays of dogs and donkeys in the projection beam.

Other pieces have even less to offer – Paweł Althamer's costume and props of a business man discarded on the floor; or Marcus Schinwald's *Bob*, a dull mechanised puppet secreted in a corner with some packing crates.

Most of these exemplify a desire to stimulate an imaginative space in the viewer, but sheer triteness defeats the effort. It is not that the concepts are poor but the actual exhibits are weak.

In the pleasingly absurd *Luna* by Cezary Bodzianowski a projected video shows the artist in a rotating fairground drum attempting to keep balance by use of roller skates on one foot and hand. The two entertainments negating each other, he quickly falls and tumbles. One thinks of clowning, Chaplin, Sisyphus, 2001, da Vinci, washing machines, but mostly *Jackass*. Nonetheless it has a sense of humour, and comes as a welcome relief. In his other video work on show, *Flying Helmet*, the artist is measuring each panel of the adjacent Globe theatre, the drawings and measurements in turn framing the screen. There is something witty in this serious analysis of a fake, but quickly one finds oneself watching the public in the video more than the artist. Tellingly, the passers-by react more to the camera than his presence.

Where these works of art do not meet theatre at all is in the play of emotion, or lack of it. They are for the most part, formalist, soul-less exercises, engaged in

Or consider the work by Roman Ondak, consisting of an eight-minute video of a performance where the camera follows someone's feet, shoe-laces untied, through a public space, occasionally



Catherine Sullivan's *The Chittendens: The Resuscitation of Uplifting*

questioning the validity of the art object and the processes of the artists. In the world of theatre such navel-gazing is usually left in the rehearsal room; here it is the principal subject.

There are, however, three outstanding pieces. In Jeppe Hein's *Rotating Labyrinth* there are two slowly revolving concentric circles of mirrored columns throwing shadows and beams of light into the room.

As they turn, they create performances within the circles and constantly changing reflections without. The public is at once performer and spectator and a series of sliced dramas ensues. A glimpse of a couple stealing a kiss is slowly closed by mirrors reflecting a middle-aged man, black notebook in hand... In marked contrast to the mediocrity around it, the piece manages to allude to the Coliseum, the zoetrope and a hall of mirrors and yet create something that is entirely of itself. It is also an object of great beauty, and therefore almost an act of heresy in this context.

The Chittendens: The Resuscitation of Uplifting by Catherine Sullivan is also a video presentation, with echoes of both James Coleman and panto. A host of

characters perform melodramatic scenes in what appears to be a disused office building. Each is in its own drama, and costumed in a different periods.

It uses a repertoire of highly evolved and greatly exaggerated gestures, at once instantly recognisable from stage, TV and film, yet reinvented by a manic juxtaposition. It is superbly constructed, brilliantly performed and two view-

ings was not enough to take it in.

Finally, Jeremy Deller's *The Battle of Orgreave Archive* which occupies two rooms, is a thought-provoking and very well-considered exploration of the stag-

Would that the rest of the exhibition had been as thought-provoking. The problem lies in the exhibition's subtitle: "art meets theatre". Mostly this art doesn't meet theatre, it passes it by with a nod of the head.

ing of history. The subject is a confrontation between police and miners which took place during the British miners' strike of 1984 and specifically its re-enactment for Channel 4 in 2001 employing actors, extras, and former miners and policemen who had participated in the original.

The re-enactment becomes a means of exploring both the reality and the relevance of the historical event. There are documents from the production company ("health and safety is an absolute priority"); actors' C.V.s ("has performed with Gladiators and Soap stars in charity entertainment in Lapland") and a brilliant juxtaposition of two videos, one showing a surreal historical re-enactment society's jamboree (Romans saluting Confederates) and a riot police training exercise where trainees face fake rioters and cinematic fire. The second room is given over to a full-length documentary of the re-enactment, featuring interviews with participants and others.

This was the most popular work on show and the most studied. Clearly the subject still strikes a chord in contemporary Britain, where the historical and cultural legacy of the miners' strike is now up for grabs. Deller makes one view the posters around London for *Billy Elliot* in a very different light.

Would that the rest of the exhibition had been as thought-provoking. The problem lies in the subtitle: "art meets theatre". Mostly this art doesn't meet theatre, it passes it by with a nod of the head.



John Comiskey is a lighting and stage designer, and film and television director. He was curator and designer of Ireland's participation in the Prague Quadrennial 2007.

'The World As a Stage' continues at Tate Modern, London, until 1 January 2008.

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BATTLES LOST AND



WON

Scandal, censure and ideological conflict: fifty years of the **DUBLIN THEATRE FESTIVAL** were the subject of detailed academic scrutiny at a two-day conference during this year's Festival.

TANYA DEAN sums it all up.



The Lost Theatres Project: *the site of the former Queen's Theatre.*

To coincide with the fiftieth anniversary of the Dublin Theatre Festival (DTF), the Irish Theatrical Diaspora research group presented 'Interactions: 50 Years of the Dublin Theatre Festival', the first academic conference dedicated entirely to the DTF. During the many topics discussed during the two days in Project Arts Centre in October, a preoccupation emerged with the early years of the Festival, when theatre often served as an artistic battleground upon which dominant ideologies could be challenged either implicitly or overtly. The sound of a mimed condom dropping still echoes loudly down the years, it seems, as the case of *The Rose Tattoo* kept cropping up as a point of interest. And this year's programme seems to have stirred up thorny issues of exclusivity and possession regarding the premiering of Irish productions overseas prior to their performance in the Festival.

Anne Bogart, director with New York's SITI Company, opened the conference with a refreshing take on the role of theatre in an international context. SITI are one of the leading proponents of the ensemble as a model for making theatre and one question from the audience asked how long Bogart's ensemble would take to create a piece of theatre. A gasp of horror rang out from the assembly when Bogart cheerfully replied that the normal rehearsal period for the US theatre economy was three weeks plus tech (prompting one audience member to blurt out "Even for you?!") Bogart explained that the challenge of the art form was to change the time signature of the rehearsal and work for three weeks "as if you have all the time in the world". Curiously for the director of two acclaimed productions running the Festival, Bogart described international touring as "painful, deeply painful and embarrassing", citing cultural "translation problems" as the main challenge for any production taken out of its national context. However, she quoted her long-time collaborator Tadashi Suzuki: "International intercultural exchange is impossible...therefore we must try."

Having opened on an international note, the conference segued to a strong focus on the homegrown: *Landmark Irish Plays, Playwrights and Practitioners*, chaired by Christina Hunt Mahony (Catholic University of America) used the DTF as a cross-section for Irish theatre as a whole. Championing a "lost hero" of the festival, Emilie Pine (University of York) asked why Hugh Leonard was remembered not as a Grand Master of Irish theatre, but more like a "waning godfather". Leonard has been undervalued, Pine argued, because of his engagement with farce as a theatrical mode creating what Pine described as "quintessential festival plays". His absence from DTF retrospectives (despite having had more plays produced at the DTF than any other playwright, and having served as director of the DTF) highlighted the tension between popularity and artistic merit



The Rose Tatoo débâcle in 1957: Alan Simpson being escorted from the Pike Theatre by detectives.

in the theatrical and festival context. Cathy Leeney (University College Dublin) cited director Patrick Mason as one of the major architects of Irish theatre. Examples of Mason's highly visual work (such as *Peer Gynt* in 1988 and *By the Bog of Cats* in 1998) were used to trace the journey of a director's work through theatrical images and materialised spaces. Anthony Roche (University College Dublin) focused on three standout Irish productions from the 1964 Festival, which he identified as key moments in the development of contemporary Irish theatre: *King of the Castle* by Eugene McCabe, *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* by Brian Friel and Irish language drama *An Triail* ('The Trial') by Mairéad Ní Ghráda.

Displaying a bold break from the taboos of Irish society and stage (Roche observed that *An Triail*'s frank investigation of sexuality and the hypocrisy of Irish society towards single mothers represented a "freedom of speech and from censorship that was extended to works in Irish rather than English") and from the naturalist norms of Irish theatrical tradition (such as the splitting of the male lead in *Philadelphia* into two distinct personae and the Brechtian techniques of *An Triail*), these productions exemplified the DTF as a platform for high-profile evolutions in Irish theatre.

With the focus still firmly on domestic concerns, *Social and Political Issues*, chaired by Chris Morash (NUI Maynooth) looked at scandal and censure in the history of the DTF. In 'The Dublin Theatre Festival and the State', Lionel Pilkington (NUI Galway) cited the arrest of Pike Theatre director Alan Simpson (for directing "an indecent and profane performance", namely the implied dropping of a condom onstage in the 1957 production of Tennessee Williams' *The Rose Tattoo*) as indirectly contributing to the Church's further involvement in the DTF. The objections by the Church (or more specifically

Thomas Kilroy's plays from 1968 and 1971 were a violent enactment of the backlash when homosexuality threatens the 'norm' of heterosexual masculine society. This kind of theatre was a way for Ireland to interrogate itself.

Archbishop John Charles McQuaid) to the performance of O'Casey's *The Drums of Father Ned* in the DTF the following year were the catalyst for the cancellation of the 1958 DTF.

Shaun Richards (Staffordshire University) continued the theme of taboos with his paper on 'The Machinery of Citizenship: *The Death and Resurrection of Mr Roche* and *The Gentle Island*'. Performed in 1968 and 1971 respectively, both productions were a violent enactment of the backlash when homosexuality threatens the 'norm' of the heterosexual masculine society. This kind of theatre, Richards argued, was a way for Ireland to interrogate itself during a repressive time. Alexandra Poulain (Université Charles-de-Gaulle Lille III) looked at the reactions to productions of Tom Murphy's *The Sanctuary Lamp*. When *The Sanctuary Lamp* opened during the 1975 Festival, it engendered disparate reactions (enthusiasm and disgust) to its representation of the Mass as a "profane spectacle of entertainment".

This retrospective on the social impact of the DTF, historically, was given a more human touch with a keynote speech by playwright Thomas Kilroy, entitled 'The Early Years of the Dublin Theatre Festival: A Personal Recollection'. He added his own reminiscences of the *Rose Tattoo* debacle of 1957. "My encounter with *The Rose Tattoo* was one of the most shameful memories of my life", he said, "I'll try to convey the mood of the time, and how I failed to live up to it." Kilroy recalled that during that particular year, trying to balance his twin loves of writing and theatre, he went to Alan Simpson to ask for a job and ended up selling tickets at the Pike Theatre. When the *Rose Tattoo* scandal was ongoing, Kilroy was put under outside pressure to leave; it was suggested (although not by his college) that if he remained, he might not graduate. "I went to Alan, and he told me

By The Bog Of Cats by Marina Carr, directed by Patrick Mason.



AMELIA STEIN

to go home. To my lasting shame, I did." Kilroy said that he was "unable to shed the incubus of the Ireland that I grew up with, until I finally finished writing my play, *Mr Roche*". Discussing *Mr Roche*, he said that the play was "a liberation of myself from the background that led to my behaviour at the Pike".

Day two of the conference maintained the strong focus on the local/national importance of the DTF, but broadened out slightly to include a few international productions. *Performance Contexts*, chaired by *Irish Theatre Magazine's* former Editor-in-Chief, Karen Fricker (Royal Holloway,

University of London) opened with a survey by independent scholar and journalist, Sara Keating, of 'Irish Language Drama at the Dublin Theatre Festival', such as *An Trial* and Brendan Behan's hostage drama *An Giall* ('The Hostage') which had been due to receive its DTF premiere in the cancelled 1958 Festival. Carmen Szabo (University College Dublin) followed with a paper on 'Shakespeare's Hamlet at the Dublin Theatre Festival', focussing in particular on performances such as Robert Lepage's *Elsinore* in 1997 and the 2005 Conall Morrison production (a joint venture between the Abbey and Lyric Theatres) as "post-modern realities with the framework of a festival". Lisa Fitzpatrick (University of Ulster) rounded off the morning session with a discussion of 'Parody and Contemporary Irish Society at the Dublin Theatre Festival', looking at productions – such as the 2002 Abbey production of Marina Carr's *Ariel* and 2005's *The Bull* from Fabulous Beast Dance Theatre – that employ elements of the grotesque in performance as a parody of a simpler, rural time.

The afternoon brought a digression to international imports in the DTF, with a panel on *the Impact of the International on Irish Companies*. Ros Dixon (NUI Galway) led the way with a paper on 'Russian Theatre at the Dublin Theatre Festival', offering both a diachronic overview of the evolution of Russian theatre from Soviet to post-Soviet, and snapshots of how that evolution could be seen in the Russian productions imported or co-produced by the DTF over the years. Peter Kuch (University of Otago) followed with a discussion on 'Company B and Irish-Australia Festival Links', focussing on the production of *Cloudstreet* in the 1999 DTF by Company B from Australia. The evidence on how international productions influenced the Irish theatre scene was somewhat unconvincing. Interestingly, the only paper to contrast the DTF against other festival models was

It would have been interesting to see the emphasis move a little from the Festival as a cultural mirror that helps us to "see ourselves" to a more macrocosmic examination of it.

from John Harrington (Rensselaer) on 'The Beckett Festival – National and International'. Harrington argued that the Beckett Festival offered a model for a festival with a different cultural context to the "annual moveable feast" of the DTF, replacing 'internationality' with 'transnationality'.

Following an impressively comprehensive critical overview by author and journalist Fintan O'Toole (*The Irish Times*) on the evolution of the DTF over the 50 years of its existence (with particular emphasis on the festival as a context in which theatre can produce work that raises important questions about Irish culture and the Irish "cultural project"), the finale of the conference was a rousing panel discussion on *The Future of Festivals*. Karen Fricker presided as chair over a panel made up of DTF Artistic Director Loughlin Deegan, Marie-Hélène Falcon of Festival TransAmériques (Montréal), Máté Gáspár from Hungarian company Krétakör and Angharad Wynne-Jones of LIFT (London International Festival of Theatre). Topics ranged from whether festivals ghettoised international work, to the increasing role of festivals as co-creators, not just marketplaces. One point of ongoing contention was how many of the Irish productions in the 2007 DTF arrived to the Festival 'second-hand' having received prior premieres abroad, such as Fishamble's *The Pride of Parnell Street* by Sebastian Barry (which opened in the Tricycle Theatre, London in September 2007). The DTF's Artistic Director Loughlin Deegan pointed out that compared to other international festivals such as Avignon and Edinburgh, which can act as huge marketplaces for new work, with the funding to match, DTF is operating on a much smaller scale. He added that the DTF has to allow Irish artists to work and think on an international scale, so demanding exclusive rights to international premieres of Irish productions would be a little draconian.

The variety and interest of the papers presented at the conference showed that despite operating on a smaller scale than some of its international counterparts, DTF boasts a rich history that was ripe for a focused academic survey. It would have been interesting to see the emphasis move a little from the prominence of the Festival as a cultural mirror that helps us to "see ourselves", to a more macrocosmic examination of it in its international framework, and a more focused review of the effect of intercultural exchange in a festival context on Irish theatre. However, it seems that even after fifty years, the Dublin Theatre Festival can still engender lively discussion.



Tanya Dean is General Manager of this magazine. For further coverage of the Ulster Bank Dublin Theatre Festival 2007, see www.irishtheatremagazine.ie, where an edited transcript of ITM's Critics' Forum is published.

All Over Town (*Calipo Theatre Company*)

Nights Out on the Fringe

Plunging into the programme over two packed weeks, our adrenaline-fuelled reviewers went in search of the best Irish productions in the **DUBLIN FRINGE FESTIVAL '07**.

ANN MARIE HOURIHANE has her first taste of the Fringe and finds it's not quite the hotbed of radicalism she'd hoped for.

THE FRINGE IS A VERY UNCOMFORTABLE PLACE — hard chairs and strange locations, and even in September the venues where the performances were held seemed rather chilly. The shows I saw were heavy with sex, with monologue and with real historical personages, an understandable but not necessarily encouraging combination. To this newcomer, the Fringe appeared shockingly conservative, both in subject matter and productions, but despite this — or perhaps because of it — it demanded a terrifying amount of courage from its actors.

All Over Town (Project), *Lenka's Wardrobe* (Bewley's) and *Frozen Music* (St Mary's Abbey) were all monologues. *La Casa Azul* (Players) was about the relationship between the Mexican artist Frida Kahlo and her husband, Diego Rivera. *Gerry and the Peace Process* (Players) was a musical about the Northern Ireland Peace Process from the point of view of Sinn Fein, and in this it was not unlike the press coverage in the Republic of that odyssey — although it was a great deal sharper.

Waiting For Ikea from Wicked Angels was a modest piece about two young women growing up in central Dublin. Just two actors and the predictable parting-of-the-ways, I-will-always-love you, rites-of-passage story. Yet it was very satisfying to

WAITING FOR IKEA
Wicked Angels

LENKA'S WARDROBE
Turas Theatre

ALL OVER TOWN
Calipo Theatre Company

FROZEN MUSIC
Ember Productions

**GERRY AND
THE PEACE PROCESS**
Volta

LA CASA AZUL
Mephisto Theatre Company

watch, as a capacity (and overwhelmingly female) audience in Bewley's proved. Directed by Alan King, Jacinta Sheerin (Chrissie Ryan) and Georgina McEvitt (Jade Green) brought precision and lightness to their own script, and carried off a fairly predictable storyline. From the awful school dance classes to the pregnancy tests, from the son in sequinned costumes to the suspect boyfriend who pushes green tea, *Waiting For Ikea* was beautifully done. It kept its focus sharp, was ruthlessly logical and never tried to get fancy about what is essentially a very old tale about a pair of girls growing up under the prying eyes of the neighbours.

If *Waiting For Ikea* could have used a tad more adventure, *Lenka's Wardrobe*, also at Bewley's, at lunchtime, could have used rather less. Or to put it another way, Turas Theatre's production should have helped its only actor more. It had a cracking, quite spooky story about female cupidity and delusion, and it was nicely unsettling to be hearing about the totemic power of clothes while seated in one of the most outrageously expensive shopping streets in Europe, as the crowds shuffled by under the windows. One of the few plays I saw on the Fringe that looked at Irish society now, it was adapted by its director, Joanne Beirne, from a short story by Bridget O'Connor.

Lenka arrives from Eastern Europe to share a house with our narrator Eve (Gene Rooney), who is essentially a modern good-time girl (modern good-time girls earn their own money). Eve works in PR for a publishing company; she keeps her meeting earrings in a glittering pyramid next to her fags. Lenka's work with animal skins soon sunders Eve's relationship with her best mate (the Fringe was very big on same sex friendships) and Eve descends into endangered species chic. This should have had an eerie effect, but both the script and the direction were poor. It would, however, send you off to find the short stories of Bridget O'Connor. Any writer who could come up with an idea this nasty has to be worthy of investigation.

The seriousness with which a monologue has to be approached was very well demonstrated by Calipo Theatre's *All Over Town*, by Philip McMahon. Directed by Darren Thornton, its actor, Andrew Macklin, had the benefit of professional lighting and sound, and its story of Sean, a young Irish lad from the countryside (well, Waterford) travelling the crowded route to Thailand and Australia barrelled along for the first half. This was a gay-rites-of-passage story, and it adopted a confessional tone to no great purpose. It took all of Andrew Macklin's considerable energy and charm to keep one's attention from straying away from Sydney and the fact that Sean was in love with a very bad guy.

As with *Waiting For Ikea*, here was the kind of play that was written and per-



formed in America and in Britain twenty years ago, when feminism and gay pride were hitting the theatres. In this respect *Lenka's Wardrobe*, for all the faults of its production, was by far the most modern play I saw on the Fringe. It took contemporary life for granted, and never tried to explain or justify itself.

It was worth locating Ember Productions' *Frozen Music* - and apparently finding the St Mary's Abbey was a problem for many would-be patrons - just to see Geraldine Plunkett. I could have done without the cello music, although the performer, Geaspar Wakefield, looked extraordinarily like Julian Lloyd Weber. The audience was predominantly female and over sixty. Before a late start we had to endure someone telling us about a special-price menu available over the road and the fact that the people who manage the Chapter House at Saint Mary's Abbey "do have an event management statement in place". However, all of this was taken in good part.

There was one poem each by Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill and Eavan Boland. We saw Geraldine Plunkett tackle Beckett's *Company* head on. Although the direction was shaky – all the physical movements seemed to me distracting, not to say irrelevant – there was great pleasure in Plunkett's beautiful voice and in her attack. One got the feeling that she would play Lear if she were asked to, and it was a reminder how neglected our experienced actors are — not only by the

Fringe. I also liked the fact that four young members of the audience were invited to lie down at the front of the audience, and periodically crossed their ankles as Plunkett talked about lying down and crossing your ankles. "Well," the lady beside me sighed happily when it was over, "That was a tour de force."

Gerry And The Peace Process, from Volta, was written by David Crann and Liam Hourican. Equipped only with a set of protuberant teeth and a lot of nerve, Hourican played Gerry Adams as the type of aw-shucks ingenue who once lay at the heart of the conventional Hollywood musical.

To see Gerry Adams singing "Where Is Love?" is not an experience that comes along every day. (I know "Where Is Love?" is from *Oliver!*, a British musical. But Gerry is very broadminded.) When asked about a United Ireland, Gerry replied "Gee, I never really thought about it." As Gerry discovered the fleshpots of Dublin – Peter Stringfellow became his best friend – a much grumpier Martin McGuinness, in a cardigan, played Gerry's middle-aged carer, who was always trying to spoil his fun.

It was all played purely for laughs and there were plenty of them. Portraying Gerry Adams as the well-meaning boy from a small town who is promoted to stardom, and keeping the action almost completely within the confines of Sinn Féin (there was a wonderful Aengus Ó Snodaigh) pleased the Dublin audience greatly. The band laughed all the time - always a good sign - and the video inserts in which Gerry participated in the television programme, *Cribs*, were particularly effective. One couldn't help feeling that this show was the sort of student production that might have graced the stage at Queen's University, Belfast, anytime in the last two decades, but that probably says more about the parlous state of satire in the Republic than anything else.

A much less happy prospect was presented by Mephisto Theatre Company's *La Casa Azul*. This was a translation of a play by Sophie Faucher, who seems never to have got over the way that the artist Frida Kahlo dressed. Surely the fact that Hollywood has discovered Kahlo's wardrobe (in *Frida*, starring Selma Hayek, 2003) is reason enough not to put on a play about Frida Kahlo at the Fringe? The three actors never got above wading through this stuff and were defeated from the start. Having *Je T'Aime* audible from another theatre during Frida's premature labour didn't help a great deal. However, *La Casa Azul* did provide the funniest line of the Fringe. Frida's sister is helping Frida dress but Frida is a bit worried about her outfit. The sister says "You can get away with it, you're a Surrealist". If only that had been true.



SEONA MAC RÉAMOINN packs in as many dance shows as possible, impressed by their thematic range as they explore the body – politic and personal.

THREE IS A SEQUENCE IN *HOW DID WE GET HERE?*, Ríonach Ní Óella's production for Ciotóg (Project Upstairs) where it explores the reasons why audiences might decide to go and see a show. Two dancers are discussing going to a dance performance but the paraphernalia of life intervenes: babysitters, dinners, taxis, money and time. That relationship between audiences and performance seemed particularly pertinent to a Fringe festival, where audiences and locations are the lifeblood. Movement between locations, and the uncovering and transformation of myriad spaces for performance are essential to participation and engagement.

Dance audiences could choose from a very high level of dance and movement content in the programme this year, which was not unexpected, given Artistic Director Wolfgang Hoffman's own dance experience and programming background. There was more monitoring of the shows invited to participate, so that, across the board, production values were higher than in previous years. The range was extensive: local and international, physical and reflective, expressive or introspective, with the usual balance of hit and miss. The themes explored also ran a wide gamut, from intimations of the Peace Process to teasing out issues surrounding disability. They explored the body politic, personal, private and

CIO TOG - HOW DID WE GET HERE Ríonach Ni Néill
LINGERING ON THE DIAGONAL Nick Bryson/Cristina Goletti
HANGING IN THERE Nick Bryson/Damian Punch
THE ANIMA AND ANIMUS Shakram Dance Company
KETZAL Derevo
INCARNAT Lia Rodrigues Companhia de Danças
THE RAIN PARTY Junk Ensemble
BLOCK PARTY Dance Theatre of Ireland
WALK DON'T RUN Rebecca Walter/Catapult

challenged and it was the way these themes were excavated and presented that determined how effective they were.

Dublin's new Dance House was home to more than eight separate dance shows (usually triple bills) which divided fairly evenly between works that seemed too internalised and those which, often, managed to create a relationship with the audience. Crux Dance Company brought two shows, which, while well produced and quite elaborate in terms of technology, failed to ignite or engage. By contrast, *Evolution*, a short solo performance by Claire Cunningham from the UK was very effective in exploring her own disability, and her use of crutches was graceful, imaginative and provocative. Another highlight from that venue was *Lingeri*ng on the Diagonal, an Irish/Italian collaboration by Nick Bryson and Christina Goletti, where their manipulation of space almost convinced me that it really was an apartment. A play on relationships that spark and tire and then either re-ignite or evaporate, it was clever, quirky and overt in its awareness of audience, which contributed to the outcome through text messaging.

Nick Bryson was also involved in another memorable offering, where he collaborated with Damian Punch as choreographer and dancer again in *Hanging in There* (Project Upstairs). This took the theme of the Northern Ireland Peace Process and gently but cleverly exposed some of the very physical and tactile political vocabulary and wittily matched them in voice and very polished movement. From the wrong-footing and side-stepping to shared handshakes and negotiating the space or creating dynamic partnerships, this was perfect, quirky, Fringe material. It had broad appeal and the dance-makers were savvy enough to know this was a one-trick pony and not to overplay or overexploit the delicious metaphor.

Strong physical presence added to the visuals in Mairead Vaughan's work for Shakram Dance Company, *Anima and Animus* (Project) which featured three strong dance performances from Jen Fleenor, Olwen Grindley and Mariam Ribon.

More physical discord emanated from one of the disappointing international

offering of the festival: the talented Derevo company from Russia (Samuel Beckett Theatre). The performers were highly accomplished, and you had to admire their visceral power as they used staging effects and their own bodies to morph into grotesque shapes or create deformed images that intimated a post-nuclear era. But it was too lengthy and the element of self-absorption grew larger and the audience was no longer relevant.

Some of the same flaws were evident also in the high profile *Incarnat*, by Lia Rodrigues' Companhia de Dancas, from Brazil (Samuel Beckett Theatre). Rodrigues is a polemical artist: her message of about involvement with the margins of society was a powerful one. Moreover she used the rituals and blood sacrifice of indigenous cultures to show a parallel with the sacrifice and low value of life lived in parts of contemporary society. Again, though, the images of bloody or elemental excess seemed for internal rather than public consumption. Perhaps it needed a wider arena - even an outdoor location - to underline its physicality and mythic power.

Creating site-specific work is walking a tricky line, where the dance-makers need either to control or meld into their environment without appearing to do so. *Rain Party* from Junk Ensemble got the right idea. This was a magical journey through memory and childhood to a secret garden where they playfully explored their space and movement, engaging their wellington-booted followers through puddled streets and beyond. And, into Meeting House Square burst Dance Theatre of Ireland who broke new ground with their *Block Party*. With giant, coloured, foam cubes and an ensemble of energetic and engaging performers, they created endless architectural permutations on squares and circles ready to be invaded by spirited dancers in and around the ever-changing structures.

The spontaneity of the Fringe was exemplified by a perfect, unplanned festival encounter. Along with a rattlebag of Saturday night revellers, this writer happened upon *Walk Don't Run* by Rebecca Walters of Catapult Dance Company. An unscheduled event on the programme, this took place on a few occasions over the festival's closing weekend at the intersection of Dame Street and George's Street. When the traffic lights turned red, suddenly, from each of the corners, four brightly coloured figures carrying a litre of milk or a box of cereal would dart on the diagonal, intercept, leap, or roll on the street with death-defying finesse and speed. Making the ordinary seem extraordinary, it was a piece of urban dance lore. It remained one of the enduring images from a packed festival, embodying all that was fun, risky, imaginative and quintessentially Fringe.

Seona Mac Réamoinn writes about dance and theatre for numerous publications.



THE BUS PROJECT

Performance Lab in association with The Tower of Babel

AS A SEASONED TRAVELLER ON PUBLIC TRANSPORT, one picks up certain survival techniques, most importantly, the development of selective imperviousness. *The Bus Project*, a set of twelve short dramas on board a double-decker, forces audiences to unlearn this social conditioning. Necks are cricked as the audience rubbernecks shamelessly to watch an argument between a young man and his pregnant girlfriend. Gazing dreamily at the passing city is rejected in favour of watching two young men attempt to decorate the bus, having been evicted from their bedsit. And when a heavily tattooed gangster-type brandishes an iron bar and shouts at the passengers to disembark from the bus in a deserted car park in Ballymun, we meekly comply.

This joint production from The Performance Lab (an initiative of Ballymun Regional Youth Resource) and The Tower of Babel (a scion of Calypso Productions) boasts an impressive list of writers and directors, and the diversity of the mini-dramas allows the young cast to display their talents. Particularly impressive on the night were Nicola Moore as a bolshie teenager who is angrily aware that her pregnancy cements her irretrievably in the stereotype of an inner-city delinquent, and Stephanie Kelly, who gave an extremely impressive performance as a young cleaner reeling from being sexually harassed by her boss ("a picture of his kids smiling at us from the desk, and me armed with Lemon Mr Muscle!").

Although the concept is fresh and the majority of the stories engaging, a bus is not an ideal venue for performance. But whatever the limitations of the staging area, the variety of stories on offer and the raw talent of the performers made this journey well worth the fare. — **TANYA DEAN**

IAN R.WALSH detects a self-conscious preoccupation with the process and practice of making theatre in this year's festival.

A LOT OF THE IRISH WORK IN THIS YEAR'S FRINGE was of an introspective nature, focusing on the development of theatre practice and theatre practitioners. *The Rep Experiment* produced by Maura O'Keeffe's 'Once Off Productions' was a case in point. It saw a company of actors, a common design team and one producing partnership work with three directors on three separate plays, all performed in one week. The point of this was for producers, directors and actors to investigate the validity of a repertory theatre in an Irish context. (See Rachel Andrew's feature on ensembles, Page 20.)

The most famous repertory groups have all centered around one person who has the driving vision for the company. The ensemble is thus not just about actors developing together but the director (and indeed, designer, writer, composer) developing with the actors and vice versa. In its use of multiple directors working on separate plays, *The Rep Experiment* went against this central notion of the repertory model.

The three directors (Daragh McKeown, David Horan, Tom Creed) all chose plays that were of a distinctive genre. McKeown presented *Platonov*, an early Chekhov play portraying a teacher who searches for meaning when he realises his youthful dreams are no longer achievable; Horan took on Steven Berkoff's expressionistic adaptation of Kafka's *Metamorphosis* in which a commercial traveller wakes one day to find himself transformed into a dung beetle, and Creed introduced us to David Gieselmann's *Mr Kolpert*, an absurd farce about a couple who throw a dinner party after murdering a colleague for kicks.

The different genres enabled the actors to showcase their virtuosity. In this, the project became more of an exhibition of talent rather than an experiment with repertory. This is not to say that the project was not a worthy enterprise, as there was great joy in experiencing this talented display. One could only marvel at the varied performances, especially from Fergal McElherron, Paul Reid, Sam Corry, Kathy Rose O'Brien and Peter Daly. Reid in particular proved himself most versatile, giving an awe-inspiring physical performance as Gregor Samsa,

THE REP EXPERIMENT:
PLATONOV
METAMORPHOSIS
MR. KOLPERT
Once Off Productions

SEEDS 3: SHOWCASE:
CALIGULA
PILGRIMS OF THE NIGHT
Rough Magic

DUBLIN CITY COUNSELLING
Gentle Giant Theatre
Company

THE ART OF SWIMMING
Playgroup

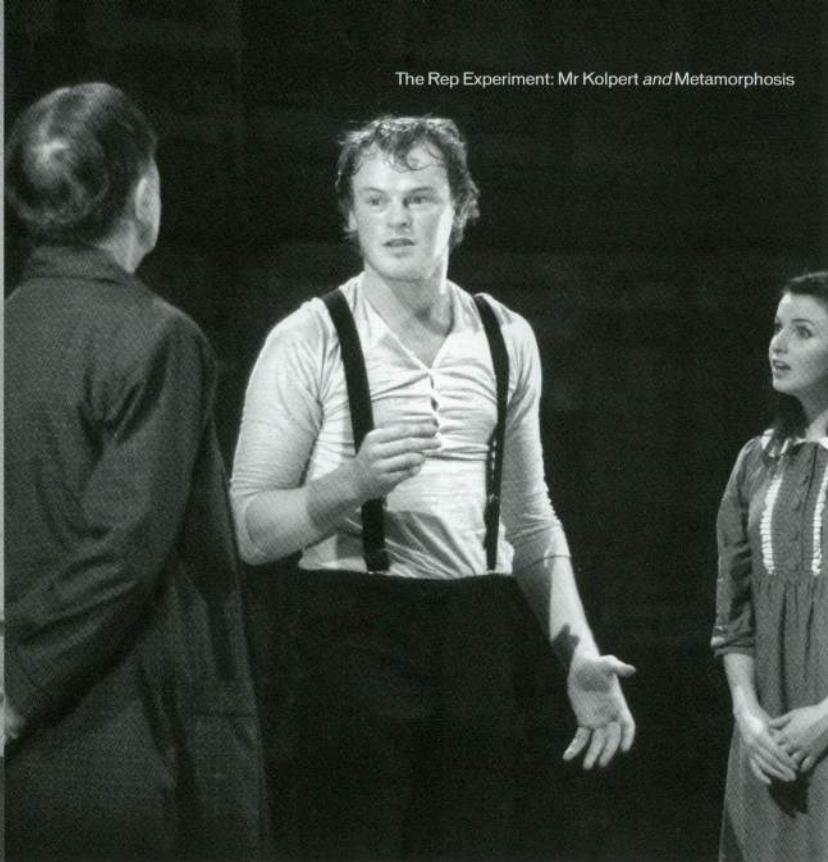


the man who is transformed into a dung beetle in *Metamorphosis*. The directors' talents were less easy to assess. Two of them, McKeown and Horan, attempted to transcend the genres of their chosen plays, weakening both productions rather than strengthening them.

McKeown offered a naturalistic piece, *Platonov*, in a metatheatrical production. We were presented with an open 'un-bounded' stage where the actors, when not in a scene, sat behind moveable blackboards and were partially visible to the audience. This drew attention to the actors as performers and to the stage as a performance space. The sense of entrapment evident in the play was undermined by the open stage and the audience was denied empathy with the characters as they were conscious of them as players. Robbed of its subtly drawn psychological characters, McKeown's *Platonov* unfortunately descended into melodrama.

Horan's *Metamorphosis* likewise experimented with Berkoff's signature expressionistic style, staging the piece as a quasi-naturalistic exploration of grief.

Tom Creed seemed comfortable with the absurdity of *Mr. Kolpert*. He directed his actors to perform cartoon-like characterizations devoid of any moral compass, producing uncontrollable nervous laughter from the audience. The set-de-



sign by Paul Keogan of a 'wall of doors' was ingenious, adding extra comedy and tension as the audience sat in tentative anticipation of what was next to come from which door.

Creed was also involved in another ensemble venture in his role as Associate Director with Rough Magic who presented the *AIB Seeds 3: Showcase*. The *Seeds* initiative is a structured development programme for emerging practitioners. In its third manifestation the project concentrated on the notion of 'company as ensemble' mentoring two directors (Conor Hanratty, Sophie Motley), a designer, (Deirdre Dwyer), a lighting designer (Sarah Jane Shiels) and a producer (Cian O'Brien), who collaborated on two different productions, *Caligula* and *Pilgrims of the Night*, to 'showcase' what they had learnt.

When a production is billed as a showcase, it seems to be presenting itself as a demonstration of craft rather than artistic work. This makes criticism of the *Seeds* project difficult. There was no doubt that the skills of the young practitioners were shown and the productions should therefore be deemed successful. But, if they were to be judged outside of the 'showcasing' framework, they could be accused of overwhelming their scripts with too much artistry.

Albert Camus's *Caligula*, an exploration of moral relativity in an existential world, was imaginatively interpreted by Conor Hanratty. He injected a sense of fun into this cerebral piece by his play on gender roles, clever anachronisms and innovative use of props. The blurring of binaries that is evident in the play's dialogue was excellently signposted by Deirdre Dwyer's design. This fused east and west in its blending of Asian imperialism with Twenties Art Deco and a dojo-like floor space with an uncluttered, shiny black stage. Tilly Grimes' costumes were half kimono, half dress suit and Shieh's chiaroscuro lighting effects also served the interpretation well, displaying this production's coherent vision.

Pilgrims of the Night, a loose adaptation by Len Jenkin of the Canterbury Tales, saw a cast of strange pilgrims gather at a ferry terminal on a quest to see a UFO. Sophie Motley directed this kooky piece with flair, making her actors dance, sing and use acrobatics as they performed their various tales. But it was overlong and the constant exhibition of virtuosity became exhausting. Dwyer's design this time included paper walls that were ripped during the performance. This appeared gimmicky and seemed unjustified.

Neil Watkins, who wrote and directed the cynical *Dublin City Counselling* made Dubliners his subject of examination. His ostensibly comic Dublin dystopia included, amongst other two-dimensional characters, a raped girl guide, a domestically abused husband, and a policeman with a fetish for nuns, all linked by a connection to a dead pedophile. By presenting these people's suffering as comedy with no solution or comment offered, the audience was encouraged to laugh at the vulnerable. This seemed to be theatre as bad TV.

By contrast *The Art of Swimming*, written and performed by Lynda Radley, exhibited great theatrical craft while also investigating the medium itself. Delivered as a first-person monologue, it told of Radley's obsession with the first woman to swim the English Channel, in the 1920's, Mercedes Gleitze. This short play was epic in scope, probing everything from the importance of memory, life's transience and the will to conquer adversity. Radley performed her own beautifully written script with sensitivity and director Tom Creed (yes him again!) helped her create lasting stage images such as the simple threading of a knotted rope to symbolize Gleitze's threading through the waters of the Channel. Here we had the showcasing of talent in an intelligent script, assured performance and subtle direction, as well as an exploration of theatrical form that is as ephemeral and lasting as a memory.

Ian R. Walsh is a PhD candidate in the School of English and Drama, UCD, where he also teaches.



The Art of Swimming emerged as one of the memorable hits of the Fringe.

Its creator **LYNDA RADLEY** talks to **AOIFE WALSH**.

LR: I had an intense interest in the story of Mercedes Gleitz, which I found so pertinent to where I was, as an artist. I picked up inspiration from somebody trying to swim the English Channel seven times and making it on their eighth attempt. I'm being quite honest about the fact that it's about my journey in trying to find Mercedes Gleitz and my imagining of who she was. It's really about storytelling.

AW: Memory seems to be a strong theme throughout.

LR: Absolutely, it is a memory play. I love having a time period to research because my imagination uses the details I discover and then builds on it. That is what I try and do with the audience during the play, especially during the final section when I put them in the place of Mercedes Gleitz and ask them to reimagine the story they have seen and heard from her point of view. Mixed in with that was an awareness on my part that I wasn't actually dealing with my own memories at all and that this play is also about biography. I had a responsibility to tell Mercedes' story in a way that is true to her, while being as truthful as possible about the fact that I was fabricating and embellishing too.

AW: The musical score for the play is performed, for the most part, by Michael-John McCarthy, live on stage.

LR: We were at the Edinburgh Fringe and myself and Michael-John were going to a lot of plays that had an actor and a musician in them, with people talking to the audience and being very honest about the fact that they were making a piece of theatre, as opposed to saying "Pretend you're somewhere else".

AW: And the one-woman format?

LR: It's nice for me to be able to perform. I don't consider myself to be an actor, as such, so I don't really put myself out there to be in other people's work, but in terms of *my* work, it's an interesting process.



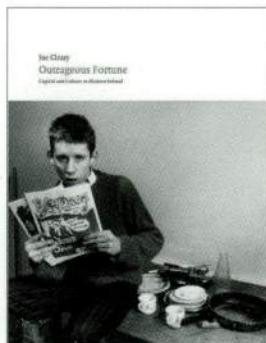
Broken Engagement

The dominance of naturalism in Irish culture and the failure to engage with wider political contexts come under fire in Joe Cleary's impressive collection of essays, writes **EMILIE PINE**.

IN *OUTRAGEOUS FORTUNE: CAPITAL and Culture in Modern Ireland*, Joe Cleary collects expanded versions of his essays, written over many years and covering an impressive spread of Irish cultural history from the rise of the Nineteenth Century novel to the demise of the Pogues. Throughout the book Cleary throws up new ideas and questions about works we are familiar with, from novels to film to music – as well as those we are less familiar with, those that may have received critical short shrift, or

the plays produced out of the Northern Irish sectarian struggle.

Each chapter has a distinct focus, including erudite explorations of the position of Ireland within the critical discourses that have defined the twentieth century, from Marxism to Post-colonialism. What Cleary consistently highlights, however, is the role that naturalism has played in Irish culture of the last hundred years. He argues that it was George Bernard Shaw and George Moore who introduced the French nat-



**OUTRAGEOUS FORTUNE:
CAPITAL AND CULTURE IN
MODERN IRELAND**
BY JOE CLEARY
FIELD DAY PUBLICATIONS, 2006
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uralist style not merely to Irish shores, but to British ones. The role of Irish authors in discovering and then translating naturalism from French to English may thus be one reason why naturalism has so flourished in the Irish context. Cleary traces the style's influence from James Joyce to Marina Carr, via Samuel Beckett (whose novels and plays extend naturalism to the point that it becomes about absence rather than presence). Though Cleary notes the ability of naturalism to expose the nastier and brutish aspects of reality, he is loath to simply pat the naturalists on the back for doing this. Instead, he pushes the analysis of many of these writers in order to engage with the other tendency of this aesthetic: paralysis.

The mention of paralysis instantly summons the characters of Joyce's *Dubliners*, their restricted and disappointed lives. For Cleary, Joyce is one of the first generation of Irish naturalists, a group which also includes Sean O'Casey, whose trilogy continues the focus on the real lives of the working class who bear the brunt of the ideological battles being fought outside the walls of their tenements. O'Casey is most usually celebrated for highlighting the physical and emotional

The lack of any real will to change is a theme that recurs throughout the works that he examines, including the generation of writers such as Tom Murphy, Edna O'Brien and John McGahern.

costs of war to this mainly disenfranchised group. Yet here, while Cleary pays tribute to O'Casey's scathing attitude towards the hard-line nationalists and the rhetorically driven trade unionists, he also holds O'Casey to account for not being equally critical of the humanistic attitude, most usually espoused by the women of his plays. While humanism may ensure a greater level of domestic harmony and cohesion, and a lower degree of blood sacrifice, it will not change the material deprivations or disenfranchised positions of these characters. It is not a viable political alternative and will not result in productive change, merely retaining the status quo.

The lack of any real will to change is a theme that recurs throughout the works that Cleary examines, including the next generation of writers such as Tom Murphy, Edna O'Brien and John McGahern. Cleary observes that in Murphy's breakthrough play, *A Whistle in the Dark*, Michael may attempt to move away from his uneducated and violent working-class Irish family, but he only succeeds in taking up an attitude of 'timorous deference to superiors' and a sense – presumably unearned –

'of superiority to his "thick" brothers'. What Michael also achieves is what his brothers perceive as 'his emasculated distaste for physical violence' and this perception of emasculation is not argued with by Cleary. Instead, he convincingly argues that Michael's inability to effect change explodes the assumption in Irish culture that the metropolis represents an opportunity for freedom. Yet though he praises the play for thinking beyond the limits of naturalism, Cleary sees it as still subject to the logic of paralysis; when Des is killed accidentally, any chance of freedom or change dies with him and the play suffers from a kind of tragic anticlimax, with no real resolution offered.

While on the surface, then, many of these texts appear to engage with the need for change, Cleary puts forward the case that their failure to engage with wider political contexts means that they also fail to put forward either a strategy for change or a viable alternative ideology. This is a necessary critique, yet by keeping one eye so keenly trained on the larger picture, at times Cleary overlooks the minor keys of a text. To take a specific example, in discussing Brian Friel's

Dancing at Lughnasa, Cleary argues that the hysteria and subversive force of the sisters' dance illustrates that in addition to the overwhelming and positive energy that is usually commented on, there are negative qualities to the 'Dionysian' energies coming to the surface. Cleary explains this with reference to the repressed 'sensual' energies of the sisters and the fact that the Ballybeg of 1936 was 'shadowed' by world events such as the rise of Fascism, the Spanish Civil War and 'Europe's imminent descent into World War II'.

While Cleary is right to set the play in its context, for an audience at least, the dance is the direct result of the frustrations and desires of the sisters, and expressive of their individual personalities. The Dionysian energies are certainly there, but this is one moment in the play where the focus is purely on the sisters, 'dancing as if language no longer existed'.

While there are small quibbles like this to pick with the text, what Cleary excels at is a full exposition of each work; this book does not stint on analysis. In the chapter devoted to 'Domestic Troubles', Cleary considers three plays set in and about Ul-

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Dancing At Lughnasa: Catherine Byrne joins in the joyful dance of the Mundy sisters in the original Abbey production.



TOM LAWLOR

ster: St John Ervine's *Mixed Marriage* (1911), Sam Thompson's *Over the Bridge* (1960) and Tom Paulin's version of *Antigone*, *The Riot Act* (1984). Each play is considered in full and from multiple angles so that an in-depth reading of the individual plays emerges, as well as a statement on what they collectively have to say about the sectarian divisions of the North. So, in *Mixed Marriage*, the father Rainey's decision not to support a non-sectarian workers' strike is discussed not simply as a knee-jerk reaction but as a decision which highlights the wider problems with the power and social structure of both pre- and post-partition Ulster. The expansiveness that Cleary grants himself in these chapters enables just this kind of discussion and gives Ervine's play, for example, the place that it deserves in Irish theatrical history.

The same kind of detailed view is fruitfully brought to bear on other works too, notably Mike Newell's film *Into the West*, and as Cleary unpacks the various meanings of this film, he also illuminates an entire cultural discourse from which it emerges and to which it contributes, namely the intertwined attitudes to women and land that have characterised so much Irish cultural production. This is one example of Cleary's ability to join up the dots, illustrating how themes are explored

in a variety of texts, from a range of different positions, yet how they fit into and respond to the wider cultural debate.

Overall, this is a sophisticated and fresh take on twentieth-century Irish culture that assesses individual texts in rigorous and insightful ways. Cleary takes other critics to task for accepting the inherited critical frameworks that champion Irish culture with little regard for how conservative or outdated those frameworks might be. Furthermore, he takes on the idea of uncritically applauding the excoriating view of Ireland put forward by writers from Joyce to Kavanagh to McGahern. Cleary rightly draws attention to the level of paralysis and fatalism in, for example, O'Casey's trilogy, McGahern's later novels and Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa*. Because of their perceived failure to speak beyond the limits of the family, or to engage with real-life politics, time and again Cleary sees these writers as choosing to 'cop out' of being truly innovative or politically radical. In this, Cleary echoes other left-leaning critics such as Lionel Pilkington.

Nevertheless, despite the extraordinarily high level of much of Cleary's critique, I must take issue with this defining aspect: the baseline assumption that art can and should be evaluated and judged in terms of its political engagement. For this kind of cri-

tique seems to miss out on so much of the vitality of drama, film and literature that is not about politics. While the sisters' dance in *Lughnasa* does indeed occur against the background of the rise of Fascism and the Spanish Civil War, for audiences it is vital and alive, it is a last bid for freedom. It is also an experience with shifting meanings – there were more than ten shades of difference between the dance of the original production at the Abbey, directed by Patrick Mason, and that directed over ten years later by Joe Dowling at the Gate. The Abbey production was dominated by a sense of pleasant nostalgia and celebration. In 2004, the Gate production had a darker aesthetic – a kind of grim nostalgia – and the sisters seemed to strain more at the boundaries of their lives. The result was that the later version produced a more unsettling play. Cleary's treatment of the works, discussed almost purely in terms of their texts, misses the aspects of performance and reception that can so alter the meanings of the words on the page.

While Cleary can be commended for drawing our attention to the aporias in Irish culture due to the dominance of a naturalist aesthetic, and while he should also be praised for refusing to revere certain writers over others, I think we should also be wary of the refusal to accept that art is its own justification.

As writers and artists, we not only can but should strive to create moments of autonomous beauty and transcendent power, free of the demands of power politics. For it can be the case that despite, or perhaps because of, an insistent focus on the local, a writer or director can manage to anatomise an entire social world, and say something universal. And, we might also acknowledge that not all the dragons of De Valera's Ireland are quite slain.

For all that, Cleary is right about the determination of many Irish writers, such as McPherson and Carr, to echo the pessimism of previous generations of Irish naturalists. He is also right to draw his sword and challenge the binary opposition of tradition versus modernity, to read Twentieth Century Irish culture as a continuum, albeit a nuanced and digressive one. And this collection of essays will, one hopes, provoke readers to visit and revisit texts both new and old, to seek new modes of thinking about and questioning the values and politics of the next generation. Cleary's constant questioning of received assumptions and old certainties is one of the most impressive and necessary aspects of the book. For isn't it the nature of great criticism to question rather than provide answers? 

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Ringside Seats

ITM's team of reviewers assess the past three months' productions from around the country.

Classical Movements

Scripts taken from the library shelf and the bottom drawer were on stage in new - and not so new - productions this season. Our critics take a historical turn.

THE BIG HOUSE

by Lennox Robinson

Directed by Conall Morrison

Set Design: Francis O'Connor

Lighting Design: Ben Ormerod

Costume Design: Joan O'Clery

With: Lucy Gaskell, Deirdre Donnelly,

Patrick Godfrey, Philip O'Sullivan

Matthew Douglas, Brian Bennett,

Ger Kelly, Georgina Miller, Sean O'Neill,

Derry Power and Mary Rea.

The Abbey Theatre

1 Aug - 8 Sept 2007

Reviewed 5 Sept.

BY FINTAN WALSH

Like your granny showing too much leg, there's something oddly disconcerting about the Abbey flashing its back wall. Slowly but surely, in recent times, we have learned to read the stage's retral exposition as a fashionable indicator of the theatre's commitment to 'innovative' direction and design. When Conall Morrison's production of *The Big House* opens, the juxtaposition of a sizable naturalistic set against a deliberately visible extremity leads us to believe that Lennox Robinson's play is also about

to be 'pared down', 'torn apart', 'deconstructed' like the ascendancy houses of its consideration. But by the end of the first scene, when the production has experimented with more playing styles than your average fringe festival, doubts are raised as to whether there was much to experiment with in the first place.

The first problem encountered by this production is that the tragic-realist text, first staged in 1926, is so historically immured that any inventive manipulation of aesthetic or theme is practically impossible. While all of Robinson's work engaged with Irish culture when he was writing during the 1920's and 1930's, *The Big House* is unmistakably of its time; it is explicitly set in the wake of political events such as Armistice Day (1918), Black and Tans warfare (1921) and the end of the Civil War (1923).

Robinson sets the action in Ballydonal House, County Cork, where an Anglo-Irish family, the Alcocks, is torn between its attachment to Ireland and Britain. While young Kate's love of Ireland borders on obsession, her parents are dispassionate and ul-



Matthew Douglas and Lucy Gaskell in *The Big House*

timately unforgiving of the locals who refuse to repay loans, and attack their stately home. No doubt the play's seventy-five year absence from the Abbey owes something to its historical specificity, but also to its simplistic cry for pluralism in the context of slight, often sentimental characterisation. In the face of these obstacles we might have forgiven Morrison for staging it as a museum piece, if indeed it had to be staged at all. But in giving us something so utterly confused and often bizarre, forgiveness is near impossible.

Direction seems to be the greatest problem here. As with his other work at the Abbey (*The Bacchae of Bagdad* and *The Importance of Being Earnest* stand out) Morrison tries to include as many ideas and styles as possible into the production. There's the concrete back wall, for starters, placed

behind a heaving, realistic living room interior. A smattering of spindly, stylised trees separate the spaces, onto which some oddly-conceived, multi-coloured decorations are hung; these are more reminiscent of Halloween bunting than 1920's home furnishings. Then there are the Cirque du Soleil pyrotechnics that are too ostentatious and mechanical to succeed in simulating the tragic burning of the house. The whole effect is gimmicky and the production reeks of an attempt to spice up a play that's not that hot in the first place.

The same sense of artificial dynamism characterises many of the performances. At some stage or another, nearly all of the actors jitter about the stage with no clear sense of direction. They amble, wander on and off with no apparent dramatic purpose, and get trapped behind fur-

niture. In the second act, the entire Alcock family discuss their future upstage, inexplicably obscured by the large dining table that's suddenly been plonked centre-stage.

Perhaps the most irritating aspect of the piece is Lucy Gaskell's take on Republican-sympathiser, Kate. Her cartoonish performance as the protagonist switches between goggle-eyed enthusiasm and goggle-eyed enthusiasm with melodramatic gesticulation. While Robinson may have originally inscribed zeal into the character, Gaskell's fanatical support for the locals and the locality, even in the face of her family's destruction, approaches lunacy here. Her portrayal adds another tone to an already over-saturated canvas. The effect is as exhausting to watch as it is difficult to comprehend.

Just when you think that nothing could top this melodramatic caper, Kate's deceased brother Mick appears to her at the end of the play, in a flash of light that's just pure silly. It is impossible to share in Kate's high-emotion as she glides off-stage towards the apparition of her sibling – although our urge to leave the theatre is just as strong.

While Robinson's play may be an interesting historical document, its theatrical potential remains questionable. If it did nothing else, Morrison's version suggested that during its seventy-five year absence from the

Abbey, the play was more likely to be intentionally and justifiably quarantined rather than simply forgotten.

Fintan Walsh teaches and writes about theatre.

UNCLE VANYA

by Anton Chekhov,

adapted by Brian Friel

Directed by Robin Lefèvre

Designed by Liz Ascroft

Lighting by Mick Hughes

With: Stella McCusker, Anthony Calf,

Owen Roe, John Kavanagh, Tom Hickey,

Cathy Belton, Catherine Walker,

Frances Blackburn, Pat Nolan

Gate Theatre

2 Oct – 17 Nov 2007

Reviewed 23 Oct.

BY PATRICK LONERGAN

ONE OF THE MORE INTERESTING recent developments at Michael Colgan's Gate has been the ongoing attempt to change the way that people think about Brian Friel's plays. In 2004, the theatre gave us a *Dancing at Lughnasa* that fully explored the darker elements of Friel's script, when an Irish audience might have been expecting something closer to *Riverdance*; and last year Colgan achieved something that had been dismissed for years as impossible: he brought *Faith Healer* back to Broadway, where it was critically and commercially successful. And

let's not forget that the Gate was instrumental in making Friel a playwright of global importance, premiering *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* at the Dublin Theatre Festival back in 1964.

Viewed in this context, the decision to revive Friel's version of Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* is puzzling, and ultimately disappointing. It's only nine years since this play premiered at the Gate, since which time it's been successful in London and New York in a Donmar Warehouse production directed by Sam Mendes and starring Simon Russell Beale. Given that the Gate had an opportunity to mark its relationship to the Dublin Theatre Festival in this fiftieth anniversary year – and because there remain several neglected but important Friel plays (*The Gentle Island*, *Volunteers*, possibly *The Mundy Scheme*) – the reappearance of a work that has neither been ignored nor misunderstood seems terribly unadventurous.

The production itself does little to dispel the consequent sense of disappointment. Arriving at the theatre, one is struck immediately by the set design by Liz Ascrott, which is gorgeous but far too familiar: the stately home with trees in the background has recently appeared in the Abbey's *Big House* and the Gate's production of Friel's *The Home Place*. Perhaps the production team were deliberately

attempting to establish links between Friel's original work and his adaptation; there may even have been a desire to place him in dialogue with Lennox Robinson. Nevertheless, it all feels maddeningly predictable.

The same impression arises with every other aspect of the production: it's pretty, but we've seen it all before. Director Robin Lefèvre has assembled a dream cast – but they all seem to be working well within their limits. Movement is strangely subdued and artificial; characters hover around zones on the stage like impatient wild animals in cramped zoocages. We always know that actors are about to deliver important speeches when we see them starting to walk towards the centre of the stage; we always know that a joke is about to be cracked because someone on stage will pause meaningfully to ensure we're all awake.

So the problem appears to be with the direction, which involves placing the actors in rather unimaginative patterns onstage, and asking them to deliver their lines in one of two styles: quiet or loud. There is some nice business from Owen Roe as Vanya – a pat on the leg here, a facial tic there – and it's impossible for actors like Catherine Walker, Cathy Belton and John Kavanagh to perform badly. But the overall impression here is that none of the actors has been challenged – indeed, at

times it feels as if they are being held back.

But the strangest feature of this *Vanya* is that so many of the actors deliver their lines in what used to be called 'Received Pronunciation' – or English as it's spoken by the Queen of England and (even now) the occasional BBC newsreader. As with so many productions at the Gate, it is assumed that upper-class characters should speak in an aristocratic English accent, while the peasantry and the comic relief should deliver their lines in Synge-song peasant talk. That's all very well for productions of Pinter, Wilde or Coward – but it's a problem for Friel, whose versions of Chekhov attempted to place his work in an Irish idiom for the first time. The whole point of these translations was to resist the impression created when so many of the great world plays are brought to Ireland via London: that when you have something sophisticated to say, you can only say it in an English accent – but if you need to be devious, stupid or funny, an Irish accent will do nicely.

The delivery of lines in RP in this production shows a marked lack of awareness of what Friel was trying to do with *Vanya*. But more importantly, it also reinforces a set of social assumptions and values that really have no place in contemporary Ireland (or, for that matter, in contempo-

rary England). Who exactly does the Gate think it's performing to?

Patrick Lonergan teaches drama at NUI Galway. He is co-editor of 'Echoes Down the Corridor': Irish Theatre – Past, Present and Future published by Caryfort Press.

SAINT JOAN

by George Bernard Shaw

The Royal National Theatre

Directed by Marianne Elliott

Costume & Set Design: Rae Smith

Lighting Design: Paule Constable

Music by Jocelyn Pook

Sound Design: Paul Arditti

With: Brendan O'Hea, Luke Treadaway,

Anne-Marie Duff, Ross Walton,

James Barriscale, James Hayes,

Gareth Kennerley, Finn Caldwell,

Paul Ready, Christopher Colquhoun,

Angus Wright, Michael Thomas,

Paterson Joseph, Oliver Ford Davies,

William Osborne, Simon Bubb,

Jamie Ballard, Jonathan Jaynes,

Michael Camp, Eke Chukwu, Simon Markey,

David Ricardo-Pearce.

11 July - 25 Sept 2007. Reviewed 25 Sept.

BY KAREN FRICKER

NEWS THAT THIS WELL-RECEIVED London staging of *Saint Joan* featured an Irish-accented Maid of Orléans was sure to pique interest on the Other Island. Was this the rare revival of Shaw's 1923 play that reads its critique of colonialism in a specifically

English-Irish context, drawing parallels between Joan and the 1916 rebels and giving voice to what Gareth Griffith has classed as "Shaw's frustration at the sight of Ireland going from terror to civil war"?

Well, in a word, no: the production does not reflect a specifically Irish reading of the play, and Anne-Marie Duff's accent comes across as an unfortunate cultural shorthand, a clang-ing moment of objectification in an otherwise thrillingly robust interpretation by director Marianne Elliott. While sometimes mistaken for Irish, given the number of Irish characters she's played (most famously in *The Magdalene Sisters*), Duff is English, so the Irish accent here is a choice, and she's the only character in the play who uses one. Sounding vaguely rural and West-of-Ireland in origin, Duff's accent is apparently intended as an indicator of Joan's country-bumpkin status, a portrayal accepted without question by many London critics. For *The Guardian's* Michael Billington, Joan's Irishness signals that she's an "outsider in a conformist world"; while for *The Independent on Sunday's* Kate Bassett, Duff's "lilt" contributes to an air of "smiling rustic simplicity." It is not clear if *The Financial Times'* Ian Shuttleworth (himself an Ulsterman) is offering a disapproving critique when he, rather disturbingly, connects Duff's Irish accent with the play's ultra-timely depiction of "religious and

secular extremisms the world over."

This aspect of Elliott's production is particularly regrettable because virtually everything else about it reflects the combination of intelligence and theatricality that has become her signature. The production concept is neo-Brechtian, with a healthy dose of Broadway/West End showmanship mixed in. Its centrepiece is a large, square, black floor-boarded area set into the Olivier Theatre's huge round stage, which reveals itself, in the thrilling Siege of Orléans sequence, to be able to rise and lower in what feels like a knowing nod to *Les Mis*. The production opens with the large, all-male cast (save Duff's Joan) slowly walking towards the audience, dismantling a big pile of wooden chairs one by one, and setting them around the stage area; when not performing, they sit and watch the action. Lights come up during the trial scene and the actors speak directly to the audience, further framing the action as Brechtian parable.

Duff's Joan is stunning, further proof of this actor's mastery of her physical craft and her ability to offer herself with almost unnerving openness to the demands of a role. She first appears looking awkward in a sack-like gown and headscarf, and only starts to gain confidence in her movement and posture when she dons trousers and breastplate. Wide-eyed, almost febrile with the joy and awe of

Anne Marie Duff in St Joan



her mission, Duff makes it impossible not to be drawn in by Joan's conviction. We also witness some never-to-be-fulfilled flickers of sexuality in her interactions with Dunois (a sensitive portrayal by Christopher Colquhoun); and, heartbreakingly, her complete crumbling, physical and emotional, in the face of her accusers' relentless questioning in the trial scene.

Shaw's play is famously anachronistic: the lengthy tent scene in which the Earl of Warwick and Bishop Cauchon debate the threat Joan poses features an argument about Protestantism that would have made no sense in the Fifteenth century, while a character in the epilogue appears from the 1920's to report on Joan's canonisation. Elliott furthers this mingling of time periods by dressing the ensemble in Mao jackets that look anytime-Twentieth-Century-modish, while the battle gear is appropriate to the late Middle Ages. The actors need only play the text as written, however, for its contemporary meanings and resonances to come through: Joan's conviction about her direct link to God, and the power of this belief to incite others to follow her, clearly and provocatively suggests jihad.

The rich, purposeful ambiguity of Shaw's text is fully respected here: audiences are urged to feel a combination of sympathy and disapproval for Joan and her cause, but also for the men who argue that she's just one person who might easily be wrong and

whose individualism is destructive. Even as she respects Shaw's words, however, Elliott acknowledges just how many of them there are, and wisely offsets the scripted passages from time to time with spectacular set pieces. It is a shame though, that she and her star opted for such distracting cultural shorthand in their depiction of Joan's nationality.

Karen Fricker is a theatre critic and a lecturer in drama at Royal Holloway, University of London.

THE HYPOCHONDRIACT

by Molière,
in a new version by David Johnston

Lyric Theatre, Belfast
Directed by Dan Gordon
Set Design: Stuart Marshall
Lighting Design: Conleth White
Music & Sound Design: Neil Martin
Costume Design: Diana Ennis
With: Andy Gray, Tara Lynne O'Neill,
Bronagh Taggart, Sheelagh O'Kane,
Padraig Wallace, Kieran Lagan, Miche Doherty,
and Patrick J. O'Reilly

7 Sept – 13 Oct 2007. Reviewed 8 Oct

BY PAUL DEVLIN

DAVID JOHNSTON'S NEW VERSION OF *The Hypochondriac* relocates the action and accents of Molière's neoclassical French comedy to Seventeenth Century Belfast. The hypochondriac in question, Argent, is a rich merchant whose monomania has blinded him

to reason and commonsense. As he wallows in a host of imaginary illnesses and quack-cures, his young wife, Bella, plots to ensure that she and her lover stand to inherit all of his fortune after his seemingly ever-imminent death. Meanwhile, Argent plans to marry his daughter, Angelica, to a gormless Doctor, Macrobius JR, believing he will receive free medical examinations in return. All the while, Angelica pines for the affections of her true love, Hal.

Johnston reimagines such fast-paced bourgeois antics in an Irish setting, the script peppered with 'in-jokes', suggesting a clear desire to narrow the distance between onstage events and the production's local Belfast audience. Dan Gordon's hallmark directorial strategy here echoes Johnston's aim by involving the audience in the events of the play beyond the limits of the production's otherwise largely proscenium arch staging.

While Johnston's attempt to implicate the audience stems from a desire to sharpen the play's satirical edge, Gordon's direction often works harder to emphasise the farcical elements in the script. Both approaches have moments of great success. Johnston's satire works best when Gordon trusts it to deliver its effect without ornamentation: when the audience watch as Argent, a Scotsman, fails to understand Ulster Scots for example. Gordon's direction is most successful

when it amplifies and extends the action of the play: in an inventively realised section of stage business, he chooses to leave the witless Macrobius JR standing alone onstage to improvise with the audience for the duration of the interval while his father roams the auditorium and foyer extolling the virtues of his son's solidly dull intelligence.

However, the attempt to blend the play's farcical and satirical elements is uneven. Gordon over-choreographs a number of scenes and at times is heavy-handed in his deployment of physical gags and panto-esque business. In part this is understandable. Gordon's choices seem designed to re-engage his audience at moments when this lengthy production is in danger of losing them. He attempts to compensate with increased audience involvement – such as squirting the audience with dubious liquids on several occasions – when the script might more usefully have been trimmed or the performances fine-tuned with a greater degree of technique. As it is, Gordon's strategy diverts from, rather than aids, the narrative drive of the work.

Moreover, the play's increasing reliance on farce opens a gap between Gordon's approach and the script's local allusions. Rather than draw the audience in and allow the themes of the play to resonate with the contemporary audience, Johnston's satirical



The full cast in *The Hypochondriact*

jibes increasingly feel like disruptions to the more pronounced pleasures of knockabout comedy.

Stuart Marshall's set design serves the farcical elements of the production well. A cartoon-like scenic painting design mirrors the production's overriding sense of fun and delight in its own theatricality. However, it is left to Diana Ennis's sumptuous costumes to provide a more tangible sense of period that seems absent from Marshall's overall approach. Again, in design terms, the production's attempt to marry disparate stylistic approaches is never satisfactorily consummated. The obvious simplicity of Marshall's painted flats, for example, jars against the precision and detail of Ennis's frocks.

Similarly, while the impact of a brilliantly entertaining and fully

committed cast should not be underestimated here, the range of acting styles on offer betrays the central difficulty this production ultimately faces in performance. Belfast is perhaps not the most obvious location to source a troupe of highly skilled performers trained in the techniques of *Commedia dell'Arte* and *Comédie-Française*. That said, Gordon's own skills as a comic actor are clearly evident in the direction of his ensemble. Some rise to the challenge, others fall short of the mark. Andy Gray, as Argent, Miche Doherty and Patrick J. O'Reilly, as Macrobious SR and JR respectively, are the most accomplished. Gray's energy, verve, and comic instincts bring a strong sense of cohesion to an often disjointed production, while O'Reilly's arch physicality and Doherty's staunch

character work offer Gray some welcome support.

It's wrong to overstate these faults, though. This is a very entertaining piece of theatre. It would, however, be difficult to describe this mixed bag of styles and strategies as highly accomplished. But perhaps in a production that is in large part animated by its own healthy disrespect for the purity of theatrical forms, any claims of technical skill or polish are somewhat beside the point.

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ORLANDO
by G.F. Handel,
anonymous libretto translated
into English by Stephen Oliver

Opera Theatre Company

Directed by Annilese Miskimmon

Designed by Simon Holdsworth

Conducted by Christian Curnyn

With: William Towers, Jonathan Best,

Natasha Jouhl, Reno Troilus, Mary Hegarty

On tour, 22 Sept – 13 Oct 2007

Reviewed on 22 Sept at the

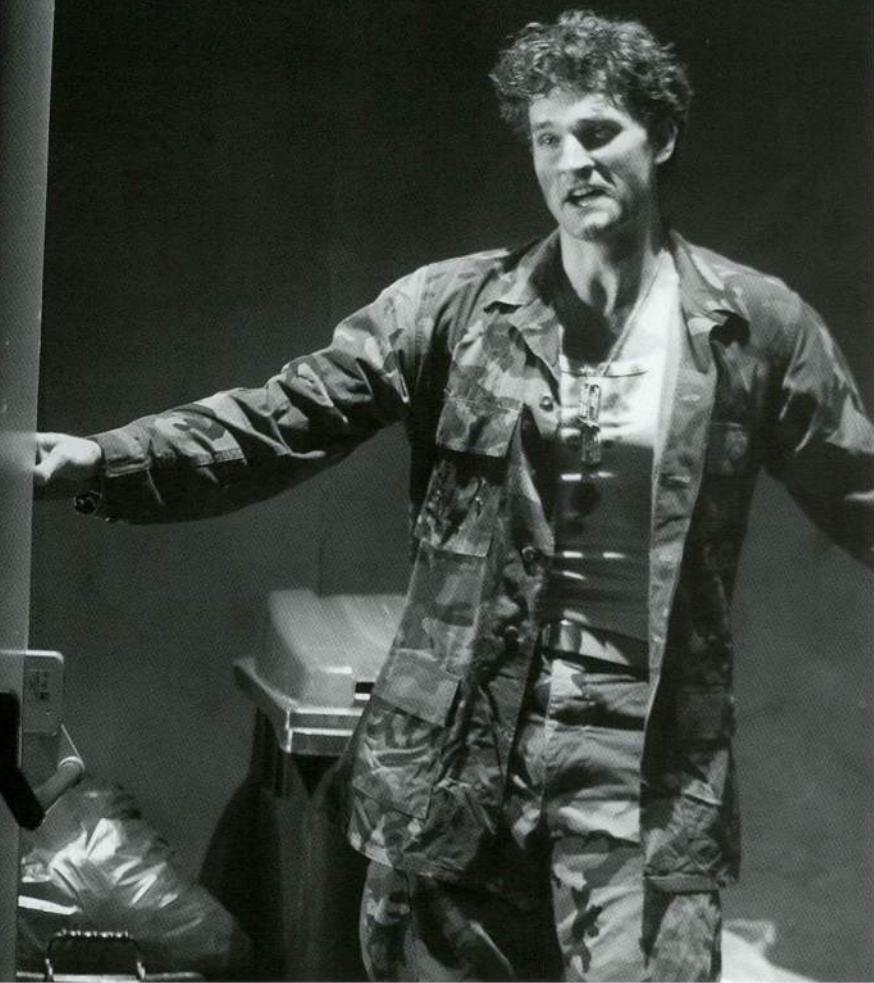
Source Arts Centre, Thurles

BY ÁINE SHIEL

OPERA THEATRE COMPANY HAS ALWAYS recognised that opera is theatre, and this continues to be the case in Handel's *Orlando*, a new production by the company's Artistic Director An-

nilese Miskimmon. The work is based on Ariosto's *Orlando furioso* and was first performed in 1733 with a cast that included two castrato singers. Contemporary productions face many issues, only one of which involves the castrato roles. The "magic" scenes that originally called for elaborate stage machinery are challenging, as are the "Da Capo" arias, which are long, musically beautiful, and often dramatically lethal. Here, Miskimmon makes a virtue of the traditional ABA Da Capo form to create a large-scale unifying structure for the production. As for the magic scenes, the fantasy elements in these are transformed into sequences that suggest delusion or mental illness on Orlando's part, a device firmly rooted in the original, which sees Orlando lose his reason for much of the opera. The castrato roles are sung by countertenors William Towers and Reno Troilus, both well cast. Having sung the title role before, Towers is well placed to deal with its considerable demands, and as the sane Medoro, Troilus provides a lighter timbre and suitable foil to Orlando's ravings.

Handel's opera is not time-specific and is easily transposed to the contemporary setting that Miskimmon and the designer Simon Holdsworth have chosen. Orlando, a soldier, is in love with Angelica. In his absence Angelica has fallen for Medoro, who has



William Towers in Orlando

also attracted the amorous (but unrequited) attentions of Dorinda. Zoroastro urges Orlando to return to battle, but Orlando discovers that Angelica is in love with Medoro. He loses his reason and attempts to kill her.

In the original, Zoroastro is described as a magician, Angelica as the Queen of Cathay, Medoro as an African prince, and Dorinda as a shepherdess. It is here that Miskim-

mon departs most noticeably from the original: Angelica (Natasha Jouhl), Medoro, and Dorinda (Mary Hegarty) become lowly pawns in a larger military picture. Zoroastro (Jonathan Best) is cast as a controlling military doctor, but he too is ultimately a conduit for a higher and insidious force.

Act I opens in a utilitarian hospital ward, and against this backdrop the

low social status of the younger characters is made clear. Angelica stands out for her tart-like appearance, complete with outrageous pink nails and shoes. A certain tension develops between the ordinariness of these characters and the virtuosity and high-flown sentiments of the roles – a tension that prevents the characterization from becoming stereotypical or banal.

Act II moves us to a realm suggestive of hallucination in which Orlando's disintegration can convincingly unfold. Giant poppies, naturalist in detail but fantasy-like in size, are arranged around a park bench. Angelica's unfaithfulness emerges in an exchange between Orlando and Dorinda; his stillness as the news sinks in is followed by a highly impressive rendition of the central vengeance aria. As Towers brandishes a knife, a rifle, and a pistol, a central theme of the production becomes apparent: that soldiers trained to kill inevitably carry their military experiences over into domestic life.

Act III returns us to the military ward, this time with giant poppies signalling Orlando's continued mental disarray. After a convincingly brutal attempt on Angelica's life, Orlando is sedated by injection. Accompanied by a shower of poppy petals and muted strings, Towers sings the aria "Now sweetest oblivion" with great beauty. At this point it seems oblivion

– whether voluntary or involuntary – is the only way out for tormented soldiers. The real poignancy of the production is, however, reserved for the end. Medoro appears in military uniform with Angelica at his side, and the story seems set to repeat itself. Angelica doesn't have the intellectual capability to rescue herself or any of her men from the debilitating effects of military life. To reinforce this, Orlando is seen at the close against a field of poppies. A visual reminder of world war and the current situation in Afghanistan, we understand that Orlando and Medoro are just two of many ill-used soldiers.

This is theatre with a clear political thrust, and also impressively performed opera. Best and Towers were particularly vocally assured, and Jouhl's voice was clear and agile. Hegarty represented the fullness of Dorinda's character well, moving constantly between comedy and heartache. Directed from the harpsichord by Christian Curnyn, the period instrument orchestra maintained a purposeful momentum and generally disciplined ensemble. The performance was enthusiastically received with a standing ovation by a near-capacity first-night audience at the Source Arts Centre, Thurles.

Áine Sheil is a postdoctoral researcher at the School of Drama, Trinity College Dublin.

Living in the Aftermath

New writing and new settings explore the post-ceasefire psychological landscape of Northern Ireland. Our critics trace the fall-out.

ROCK DOVES

by Marie Jones

Directed by Ian McElhinney

Set Design: Charlie Corcoran

Lighting Design: Daniel Meeker

Costume Design: Chris Rumery

Sound Design: Drew Levy

With: Marty Maguire, Natalie Brown,

Tim Ruddy, Johnny Hopkins

The Donaghy Theater, Irish Arts Center,
New York.

6 Sept–28 Oct 2007. Reviewed 19 Sept.

BY BRIAN SINGLETON

IT IS A TESTAMENT TO THE SIGNIFICANCE of the tiny cultural powerhouse of all things Irish in Manhattan that it has secured the world premiere of Marie Jones' new post-ceasefire Belfast play. At first glance it is far from the usual fare for cultural export to the expatriate community, given its character list of runaways and rejects from the Protestant paramilitary underclasses. Nevertheless, it is very much a harsh though humane portrait of the current state of a community in Ireland – built on opposition to the nationalist agenda – that has been destabilised by peace.

The play is set in a derelict building inhabited by the alcoholic Knacker whose survival strategy is not to wash in order to prevent anyone from getting close enough to mug him. He sits on an armchair like Beckett's Hamm in this *Endgame* of a room obsessing over territory and his 'wife', alcohol. His only friends are the pigeons – the rock doves – who inhabit the rafters and coo gently while a violent society erupts on the outside. The stage set by Charlie Corcoran is a metaphor for the human detritus that three decades of violence has washed up within its walls. Knacker's entertainment is to relive imaginary television programmes from his past, such as *Ironside*, from an era of fantasy when the evil were always punished by the good. Marty Maguire plays Knacker on the right side of the stereotype he so obviously is; the violent drunk's uncontrollable rages subside during the play to reveal a humanity that society all around him has failed to express.

Knacker's only human friend is Bella (played by Natalie Brown), a prostitute who runs a brothel con-



Marty Maguire and Natalie Brown in *Rock Doves*

trolled by the paramilitaries in return for a roof over her head. Both had been homeless in London and Bella continues to nurture Knacker with food and drink and to calm his rages. The other unlikely part-time inhabitant of the derelict room is Lillian, a cross-dresser formerly known as Mervyn. His is an unlikely character whose whole life has been tortured by a lack of acceptance of his transvestism. Tim Ruddy plays Lillian with a good deal of machismo, as if he is clearly uncomfortable in women's clothes, though clearly portraying the heterosexual male's desire as fetish. We learn that Lillian survives in the paramilitary world by playing Tina Turner in drag in the social clubs. There are inferences that some in the gang world might be bisexual, but Jones steers away from

the politics of the queer, content with this display of difference halfway between gender and sexuality.

Into this detritus-like metaphor for the social apocalypse caused by the Troubles comes 'The Boy' who is on the run from Top Dog, who has put out a contract on him for informing. Dublin actor Johnny Hopkins, with a flawless Belfast accent, plays the Boy as a young tough whose back story reveals him to be a very self-aware, accommodating young man desperately seeking acceptance from the paramilitaries turned hoodlums who are fighting a turf war for their criminal activities. The Boy stumbles into this derelict room unaware of the other inhabitants and much of the first act is taken up with over-long confrontational stand-offs between characters circling each other with their

secrets and identities. Only latterly do these edgy expository encounters settle down so that the back stories of the characters are revealed, cracking the hard surface of their personalities.

Apart from some topical asides regarding the anomalous peace that reigns in post-ceasefire Belfast, and the tragedy that is inflicted on the characters because of it, the political backdrop is kept outside this emotional and poignant tale of human kindness between those rejected by a very abnormal society outside. The humanity and moments of tenderness evinced in the short encounters between Knacker and Bella and Knacker and the Boy stand as testament to the opponents of the new 'terror' of self-interested criminality. But when Lillian informs on the Boy-informer, tragedy ensues which thrusts her out of this micro-community of humanity.

McElhinney directs with an overarching harshness that frames the mini-moments of tender human interaction. He paints a picture of an emotionally scarred society at the edges of which marginal characters struggle to survive, literally and emotionally. There are no iconic sounds or images of the Troubles in the production, and it is a long time before we realise that Jones' play identifies Loyalty as its source. Devoid of self-pity, Jones' misfits may lie, and one might die, but the message is of the

innate desire for survival through the company of strangers.

Brian Singleton is Head of Drama at Trinity College Dublin.

SCENES FROM THE BIG PICTURE

by Owen McCafferty

Prime Cut Productions

Directed by Conall Morrison

Set Design: Sabine Dargent

Lighting Design: Nick McCall

Costume Design: Joan O'Clergy

Sound Design: Phillip Stewart

With: Séainín Brennan, Maria Connolly, Chris Corrigan, Niall Cusack, Julia Dearden, Branwell Donaghey, Karen Hassan, Paddy Jenkins, Gerard Jordan, Packy Lee, Ivan Little, Conor MacNeil, Matthew McElhinney, Neal McWilliams, Eleanor Methven, Marc O'Shea, Marcella Riordan, Joe Rea, Paddy Scully, Bronagh Waugh,

Finlay Welsh.

Waterfront Hall Studio, Belfast.

7-29 Sept 2007. Reviewed 14 Sept.

BY TOM MAGUIRE

WHEN *SCENES FROM THE BIG PICTURE* opened in London at the National Theatre, it would have been inconceivable that a cast of twenty-one professional actors would be involved in a single production in Northern Ireland. Four years on, Prime Cut was able to offer the citizens of Belfast their first opportunity to look at their city through this kaleidoscope of snap shots. The effort, then, was something to be celebrated;



Ivan Little and Julie Dearden in Scenes From the Big Picture

the question remained whether or not it would be worth it.

Designer Sabine Dargent provided a large screen backdrop onto which images of the city were projected. The best of these were evocative and poetic; others provided a rudimentary sign-posting, such as showing a monochrome picture of the inside of a shop when the action moved there. The rest of the space was left almost entirely clear: when required, portable items of battleship grey furniture were moved into position on the white map of the city painted on the black floor. When not in the scene, the actors sat on chairs along each side of the stage. At moments the whole cast moved in an ensemble, weaving through each other in a rumble of overlapping voices – but in the main, each strand was presented through a series of individual scenes, unfolding chronologically over a night and day.

Notes in the programme made much of McCafferty's attachment to his native city, but the vision of Belfast here is of a dystopia. The city is populated by individuals filled with fear: of violence, of cancer or of loneliness. Couples lie to each other, or do anything to avoid the truth. Partnerships between a drug dealer and his woman, teenage hoods and their mates, or drinking buddies, are just ways of ripping each other off. Respite is found in drink or drugs, or out in the hills behind the city, or in looking out to space at a meteor shower. These are not the idealisations of Hollywood movies, just small people grubbing out a living, away from the warm glow of post-ceasefire wealth, a theatrical soap opera.

The Belfast presented here is a place of the imagination, yet its panoptic scope omits both migrant populations (longstanding or new to

the city) and the impact of the host of new commercial and retail developments which now mark the cityscape. In a number of its characterisations it reiterates familiar images of working-class life as drunken, violent and culturally barren. Women are mothers, wives and whores, almost uniformly incapable of existence independent of the men. While some actors, for example, Ivan Little as Bobbie Torbett and Paddy Jenkins as Shanks O'Neill, were able to flesh out their roles to make them theatrically engaging, others – particularly the youngest cast members – struggled to lift them beyond the formulaic and appeared to be overwhelmed by the space. The finest moments came from Eleanor Methven (Theresa Black) and Niall Cusack (Dave Black), a couple separately coming to terms with the fate of their son, one of the disappeared, on the day that the search for his body ends. Here the writing allowed the actors to develop sophisticated and emotionally committed performances, simultaneously spare and psychologically rich.

The most satisfying mosaics are where each individual element contributes to the whole. Too often, however, I was aware of the gaps between. The writing is uneven in tone and quality to my ear (never mind the London award): we don't hear enough of McCafferty's ability to wring poetry out of the Belfast de-

motic. The set felt perfunctory and unfinished and the lighting by Nick McCall was full of dark spots and shadows even at the height of the summer's day, presumably in deference to the demands of front projection against the screen. While Morrison's direction provided for some slick transitions between vignettes, with one scene melting away into the next, this framing device was inconsistent and the production seemed marooned between box-set naturalism and more expressionistic possibilities. Congratulations then on achieving quantity: the next challenge is to provide enough funding to support consistent quality.

Tom Maguire lectures in Drama at the University of Ulster.

MACBETH

by William Shakespeare

Replay Productions

Directed by Richard Croxford

Design by: Ross Edwards

Lighting Design: Conleth White

With: Victor Gardener, Matt McArdle, Bronagh

Taggart, Neal McWilliams, Niall Cusack, Niki

Doherty, P.J. O'Reilly, Rosie McClelland,

Richard McDowell and Fra Gunn

Crumlin Road Gaol, Belfast

17 Oct – 3 Nov 2007. Reviewed 26 Oct.

BY LISA FITZPATRICK

A DISUSED PRISON IS NOT THE MOST obvious setting for Shakespeare's

tragedy of greed and ambition, but Richard Croxford's staging of *Macbeth* in the Victorian Crumlin Road Gaol is an eerie and haunting interpretation of the work for a contemporary Northern Irish audience.

A number of recent productions across the Province have used politically significant sites, or geographic features, to explore the psychological post-ceasefire landscape. Other examples include Kabosh's *The Waiting Room*, staged in the deserted Ebrington barracks, and Big Telly's current touring production, *Bog People*. In *Macbeth*, the history of the Troubles in its bloodshed, guilt and grief subtly resonates at moments, such as in the brutal murder of Macduff's wife and children, Lady Macbeth's frantic hand-washing, and Macbeth's anguish after Duncan's murder: "Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood / Clean from my hand? No; this my hand will rather / The multitudinous seas incarnadine, / Making the green one red." The references are never laboured, however, and the effect is moving and thought-provoking.

The evening begins with the spectators queuing outside the locked gates on Crumlin Road, until figures in long, black, hooded robes appear from inside the gaol to usher them through huge doors into the vaulted entrance gateway. Here they face another, closed metal door. As the door crashes shut behind, leaving the

spectators in the dark, moans and shrieks ring out over the sound system followed by the lines from scene one. The first scene with the witches is performed entirely through sound, making clear its function as a prologue as it transports the audience from the everyday world to the dark and dreamlike world of the play.

The door into the prison courtyard opens on the scene at the camp near Forres. The shadowy spaces of the yard are only slightly illuminated by Conleth White's atmospheric lighting, and the confusion and noise of the scene emphasise the violence of the plot and prepare the spectators for the darkness of Macbeth's story. Ross Edwards' design is largely monochrome, with the actors costumed in black leather armour, black kilts, boots and cloaks, so that they blend into the shadows.

For Macbeth's first encounter with the witches, the spectators are led into a wasteland exterior, where the witches dressed in white blood-stained shifts emerge shrieking from the gloom. Macbeth, played by Victor Gardener, and Banquo played by Matt McArdle, enter, and the fatal prophecy is pronounced, followed swiftly by news that Macbeth has been appointed Thane of Cawdor. The action then moves to the narrow entrance hall of the main building, where Lady Macbeth sits all in black, holding a letter from her husband.



Rosie McClelland, Niki Doherty and P.J. O'Reilly in Macbeth

Using the length of the hall to pace and spin, she reads his news with delight. It is the first image of their relationship represented in the play and it is a startlingly contemporary one, allowing the audience to see the two as a passionate young couple, and suggesting the motivation behind Macbeth's lust for power is not only his scheming wife, but his own loving desire to make her Queen. Played by Bronagh Taggart, this Lady Macbeth is not without her softer side. Her eventual breakdown in the famous hand-washing scene reveals what all this scheming and bloodshed has cost her.

The action proceeds into a vaulted hall enclosed by gates, where two

tiers of cells open from metal balconies reached by a spiral staircase. This environment of metal and concrete produces an echoing sound that adds to the eeriness. As we pursue Macbeth deeper into this harsh labyrinth, the set begins to function as an expressionistic backdrop to the action, so that the protagonist is both imprisoned by and punished for the terrible tragedy that is now far beyond his control.

The staging eliminates the distance between audience and the performers, demanding a style of performance that relies simply on the delivery of the word and the playing of the action. This produces some beautiful moments, such as Macbeth's

psychological disintegration in the banqueting scene, which uses all the levels of the performance space, taking him from a crumpled heap on the floor to the top of the banqueting table in one violent, startling movement. Both Taggart and Gardener approach close and speak their soliloquies directly to the audience.

The other roles are played by Neal

McWilliams as Malcolm, with the excellent Niall Cusack as Duncan, the Doctor, and the voice of Hecate. Others in this talented cast include Niki Doherty, P.J. O'Reilly, Rosie McClelland, Matt McArdle, Richard McFerran and Fra Gunn playing multiple roles.

Lisa Fitzpatrick lectures in Drama at the University of Ulster.

Hard Men and Broad Brushstrokes

Gangland violence, exploitation and women as victims – new productions explore enduring stereotypes of tough masculinity.

THE GOOD THIEF

by **Conor McPherson**

Gare St Lazare Players

Directed by Judy Hegarty Lovett

With: Conor Lovett

On tour, 6–27 September 2007

Reviewed 24 September at Station House

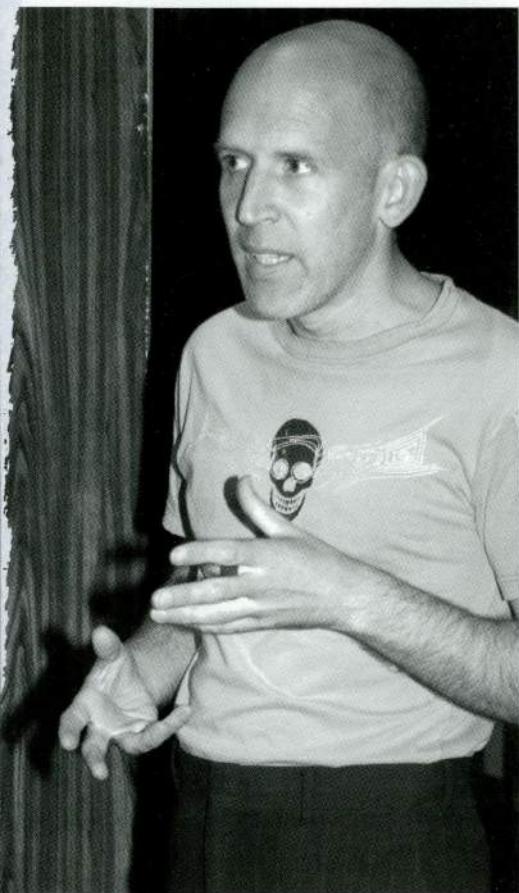
Theatre, Clifden

BY CHARLIE McBRIDE

OVER THE PAST NUMBER OF YEARS, Gare St Lazare Players and actor Conor Lovett, have become closely identified with the writings of Samuel Beckett – especially through their acclaimed stagings of his prose works. The success they have enjoyed with the Beckett texts stands

them in good stead in their touring production of Conor McPherson's *The Good Thief*. As was the case in previous productions, *The Good Thief* is presented without props, scenery or elaborate lighting, relying for its effectiveness mainly on the quality of Conor Lovett's performance. And the great skill in handling narrative which Lovett displayed in the Beckett works is equally evident in his subtle, assured rendering of McPherson's monologue.

First staged in 1994, McPherson's tale of a hired thug on the run has lost little of its topicality, with gangland violence continuing to dominate the news headlines. The play's nameless



Conor Lovett in *The Good Thief*

narrator, a Dubliner, relates how his attempt one day to put the frighteners on a businessman goes horribly wrong, resulting in several deaths. Our narrator flees the scene, taking with him the businessman's less than grief-stricken widow and young daughter. The trio hide out for a while down the country. However, it isn't long before the hoodlum's for-

mer associates track him down, with grim consequences. Yet amidst all the violence the eponymous 'good thief' reveals some measure of abiding decency, not enough perhaps to secure him redemption but sufficient certainly to spare him our total condemnation.

McPherson's sinewy prose vividly conjures a harsh underworld milieu of seedy bars, casual brutality and volatile relationships where the loyalty of neither friends nor lovers can be relied upon. While this might sound like bleak fare, the play also has a strong vein of mordant black humour which ensures that it manages to be funny as well as grim.

Conor Lovett may look somewhat unprepossessing as a supposed hard man but he deploys McPherson's lines with a sure sense of timing and emphasis that brings story and character alive and makes the most of the piece's mix of tension and comedy. Even a momentary lighting blackout didn't faze him, reacting with a discreet double-take that got an appreciative laugh. His delivery is low-key and matter-of-fact, which imbues his story with all the more emotional clarity and draws the audience in. While recoiling from the things that he does, we still find ourselves empathising with him at some level.

For all his thuggish ways, there's a hapless quality about his character which is all too human. He's not the

master of his own life, indeed he has trouble even figuring his life out – ‘I felt sad all the time. But I’m not sure what I felt sad about’ he remarks at one point. Conor Lovett’s finely-tuned performance, along with Judy Hegarty Lovett’s deft direction, make that life compellingly and unsettlingly real.

Charlie McBride is a Government of Ireland research scholar at NUI Galway.

LOVE, PEACE AND ROBBERY

by Liam Heylin

Meridian Theatre Company

Directed by Brian Desmond

With: Aidan O’Hare, Shane Casey,

John Desmond

Granary Theatre, Cork

10 – 22 September 2007

Reviewed 19 September

BY RACHEL ANDREWS

IF LIAM HEYLIN’S FIRST PLAY - DIRECTED by Brian Desmond and produced as part of a Meridian double bill - references any form of cultural expression in Ireland today, it is television and cinema rather than theatre. His dramatic exploration of the lives of two petty criminals has much in common with the socially relevant RTÉ drama, *Prosperity*, or with a film such as *Adam and Paul*, both of which drew directly from real life to shine a cold, raw light on characters adrift from society, unable to eat from the fruits

of Ireland’s new found wealth.

Similarly, Heylin, a court reporter used to documenting the lives of others, turns himself outward in search of his dramatic subject matter: this play is inspired by interviews carried out with former prisoners of Cork Prison, as well as his own observations in the courtroom. If the result of his research is gentler and less searching than that of the aforementioned television drama, it is no less socially realistic or convincing. It, too, forms something of a snapshot of forgotten Irish life, a play that gives voice to those still rarely seen or heard.

It is because he knows his subject matter so intimately that Heylin rarely takes a wrong turn during the piece. His characters – small-time criminals Gary (Aidan O’Hare) and Darren (Shane Casey) – are delicately formed portraits of chaotic, violent, but not necessarily vicious personalities, struggling to walk along the straight and narrow. Heylin treats them with wry compassion, although he remains carefully unsentimental, and the beauty of this little drama is that we end up rooting for the duo – if only Gary could make it good with his wife and children; if only Darren could impress his New Jersey-based girlfriend – even as we are asked to unflinchingly confront the reality of their behaviour.

Cork forms the backdrop to the play, and following in the footsteps of

a range of playwrights – most notably Enda Walsh – Heylin mines the twist and lilt of the city's accent to root his characters within their environment, establishing, amid the slang and the self-deprecating humour, a working-class world of absent fathers and husbands, of tinnies drunk in the neighbourhood park, and of tough but sympathetic local gardaí.

Unlike Walsh, there is nothing surreal about Heylin's prose; this writer's strengths lie elsewhere. Drawing on his journalistic discipline, he has crafted work that is tightly controlled, fixed in the vernacular, which shows an ear for vivid dialogue. One might have looked, at times, for less naturalism and more use of the theatrical medium – the best sequence in the play involves a marijuana-induced discussion on life and the meaning of it between Darren and his pet dog (played by John Desmond, who also operates as the 'cast of thousands'). But this is not to take from the admirable restraint of this novice playwright, nor, indeed, from the understated hand of director Desmond, who applies a light touch throughout. In fact, in holding back from self-indulgence, Heylin has written a play that says much about the lives most of us know – or care – little about.

Rachel Andrews is a journalist and writer based in Cork city.

ROBERTO ZUCCO

by Bernard-Marie Koltès,

translated by Martin Crimp

Bedrock Productions

Directed by Jimmy Fay

Set Design: Paul O'Mahony

Lighting Design: Sinéad Wallace

Sound Design: Vincent Doherty

and Ivan Birthistle

With: Andre Bennett, Antonia Campbell

Hughes, Kathy Kiera Clarke, Andrea Irvine,

Ronan Leahy, Dermot Magennis,

Aaron Monaghan, Catriona Ní Mhurchú,

Marion O'Dwyer, Michael Winder

Project Arts Centre, Dublin

25 Aug – 8 Sept 2007. Reviewed 27 Aug.

BY SARA KEATING

"WE HAVE NO RAISON D'ÊTRE", A security guard whines at the beginning of Bernard-Marie Koltès' strange and dark drama, *Roberto Zucco*. Unfortunately, this existential quibble becomes the overriding manifesto for Bedrock's production of Koltès' ultimately meaningless play.

The programme note tells us that *Roberto Zucco* is not an attempt to investigate the character of the notorious Italian serial killer, Roberto Succo. It is "more interested in studying people's reactions [to him] than in revealing his innermost soul." In its attempt to do so, the play is structured as a series of vignettes: short expressionistic sequences in which Zucco interacts with a world that he appears entirely uninterested in being part of. By the



Caitriona Ni Mhurchú and Aaron Monahan in *Roberto Zucco*

very nature of its form, then, the experience of watching the play is deliberately fragmentary, discontinuous. *Roberto Zucco* is not a narrative of the real Succo's life – his motivations for murder, his disturbed psychology. It is a series of moments that attempt to capture the complex interactions between a social deviant and his victims, whose uniform dysfunction is designed to deconstruct the very idea of a "social norm."

The play opens with Zucco's escape from a psychiatric prison ward

in a devilish act of trapeze. As the scenes unfold, we watch as Zucco kills his mother, rapes a young girl, holds a woman hostage, kills her son, steals a car, escapes from the hands of the law again, and finally kills himself. All in a day's work for a mass-murderer, we know, but if *Roberto Zucco* is about the victims, then how do his victims react?

The answer perhaps provides the most objectionable element of Koltès' play, as most of the victims seem to enjoy being subjected to Zucco's vio-

lent whims; the psychopath brings out the sadomasochistic tendencies that Koltès apparently believes are inherent in human nature. However, taking offence at *Roberto Zucco* – at the representation of women, for example (women who are by nature attracted to men who hurt them and who enjoy being raped) – would be to give too much credit to the play, which, to echo the security guard's opening statement, seems to have no *raison d'être*. Its bite-sized scenes carry no momentum, its characters have no depth, and its unfolding action asks no important ethical, aesthetic or political questions.

Director Jimmy Fay failed to create pace or atmosphere in the stilted production at the Project Arts Centre, despite the resources of a strong ensemble cast and an inventive design team. The sound design by Vincent Doherty and Ivan Birthistle provided a chilling soundscape between scenes, but had it underscored the action too, it might have offered the impetus and sense of danger lacking in much of the unfolding action. Meanwhile, the eerie fog of Sinéad Wallace's lights gave the production a *Sin City* style that seemed almost wasted in the cavernous space of the Project's upstairs theatre. Un-credited multimedia images provided an extra visual element to the production. However, projected on a skewed divided wall with numerous exits built

into it, many of the images were difficult to interpret, while their accompanying titles were never entirely legible, their key words obscured by the structure's central fissure.

Paul O'Mahony's stylish scaffold set provided a structure from which Aaron Monaghan as Zucco managed to give a highly physical performance, although, despite his best efforts, the skeletal psychology offered by Koltès' script did not allow him to construct a convincing emotional journey for the criminal. Antonia Campbell Hughes was as convincing as is possible as one of Zucco's vapid, vacuous victims (Koltès' misogynistic portrait being so shallow that he could not even afford the girl a name). The other performers struggled between hysteria and blankness as the script asked them to wildly emote without motivation; a waste of a dream cast of Irish actors.

A real-life story with such dramatic dimensions – a story, essentially, of pimps, prostitutes and patricide – sounds like a recipe for a theatre production that might rival the mainstream medium of contemporary cinema. But Koltès' take on Succo's life seems so inextricably mired in obscurity that, ultimately, Bedrock's production seemed unsure both of what the play might be trying to say or why, indeed, it might matter.

Sara Keating is a critic and journalist.

PICASSO'S WOMEN**by Brian McAvera**

The Focus Theatre

Directed by Brian McAvera, Mary Moynihan

and Joe Devlin

Set design: Annemarie Woods

Lighting design: Kevin Smith

With: Aisling McLaughlin, Cathy White and

Barbara Dempsey

The New Theatre, Dublin

18 Oct – 3 Nov 2007. Reviewed 3 Nov.

BY PETER CRAWLEY

"THERE ARE ONLY TWO TYPES of women," Pablo Picasso once remarked: "Goddesses and door-mats." These, essentially, were the categories the artist granted his muses, a steady stream of whom he chose to worship, then wipe his feet on. In Brian McAvera's play – or, rather, a collection of monologues afforded to eight of Picasso's women, three of which have been staged by The Focus Theatre – some effort is made to reconfigure their floundering faces, so to speak, to deliver them from cubism and free the artist's subject.

It is a point perfectly understood by Annemarie Woods' set, a dense cluster of chairs stacked and interlaced to form three thick walls, which, lamplike illuminated by Kevin Smith, stands as a sculpture in its own right, taking the apparatus of an artist's 'sitting', and turning it into a prison.

As an effort of liberation or art-historical revisionism, however, the production is doomed to failure. Tinged with irony and self-defeat, even McAvera's title realises that at the full stretch of his research and compassion, these women will always be defined by their relationship to the artist; the eight monologues package them as simply another Picasso collection. That may explain the choking frustration in the writing, largely expressed by two of the night's speakers: Fernande Olivier, Picasso's tragic first love, and Olga Koklova, Picasso's mentally-unravelling first wife.

Fernande, played by Aisling McLaughlin, is a perpetual victim, her pre-Picasso history a litany of use and abuse, and her life after him a slow decline into ill health and misery. As directed by McAvera himself, McLaughlin's woes gather, unalleviated by her sense of reverence ("having been touched by... genius") and a cumbersome way with sexual metaphor: "as if inside me his brush was recreating another me... drawing my canvas in the rose of my flesh, opening my body to the flush of ripening paint."

As director of Fernande, McAvera is inclined to overcompensate for the staid monologue, pushing McLaughlin into listless movement, designed, you feel, to suggest a sense of entrapment (which was literally the case



Barbara Dempsey, Cathy White and Aisling McLaughlin in Picasso's Women

with the shut-in Olivier). There is a difference between pitiable and sympathetic, however, and McLaughlin is unable to avert the trajectory of pathos to tedium. "To be forgotten is worse than to be dead," she concludes, relaying Picasso's words, then adding: "What if you're both?" Worse still, what if nobody cares?

There is more potential in Cathy White's Olga, the Russian dancer, to demonstrate some fiery spirit, but though White has been granted permission by her director Mary Moynihan to be as crazy as possible, and afforded a faded ballerina costume to accentuate the tragicomic pose,

McAvera only really allows her the role of vengeful harpy. Each speaker narrates her tale from beyond the grave, but Olga, ruined by madness, has been damned to an afterlife filled with art historians, "all of 'em wanting to talk Picasso". And talk Picasso she does, her bitterness running from his temperament – "he had all the affection of a buzzsaw in a Siberian forest" – to his sexual performance: "Wasn't very good in bed mind you." (Really? Did something happen to his brush?) It might seem like a good comic kiss-off to have Olga stalking the afterlife to admonish Picasso some more – hell hath no fury like a

muse scorned – but there's something unusually cruel in that imagined conclusion, never allowing Olga to rest in peace.

Why The Focus Theatre's production should conclude with the story of Gaby is anyone's guess. It makes no sense chronologically (Gaby's was a relatively brief fling between the other two). The relationship had little historical consequence (it didn't become public knowledge until the 1980's). And if the production was simply interested in presenting a woman who finally asserted herself against the eclipse of Picasso's ego, surely the more complicated Françoise Gilot would be a meatier way to finish.

Under Joe Devlin's direction, however, Barbara Dempsey presents the most successful monologue of the night – less for the oh-so-daring Montparnasse bohemian reports of promiscuity and profanity, and more because they recognise the power of stillness. Dempsey, turning in a performance of coiled eroticism, doesn't move from her chair for as long as possible, letting her words command focus.

To finish with Gaby, the sexual predator, the one that got away, is an understandable manoeuvre away from a project that, at best, peeks behind the artist's canvas at the personalities suffocated by his cruelty, and, at worst, simply uses those imagined,

overlapping perspectives to form a cubist portrait of the man who defines them still.

Peter Crawley is News and Web Editor of this magazine.

THE DUKE OF HOPE

by **Conor Grimes and Alan McKee**

Tinderbox Theatre Company

Directed by Michael Duke

Designed by Niall Rea

With: Chris Corrigan, Claire Connor,

Tony Flynn, Tony Devlin, Andy Moore,

Jack Quinn, James Doran

On tour, 18 Oct - 24 Nov

Reviewed 3 Nov at the Drama Studio,

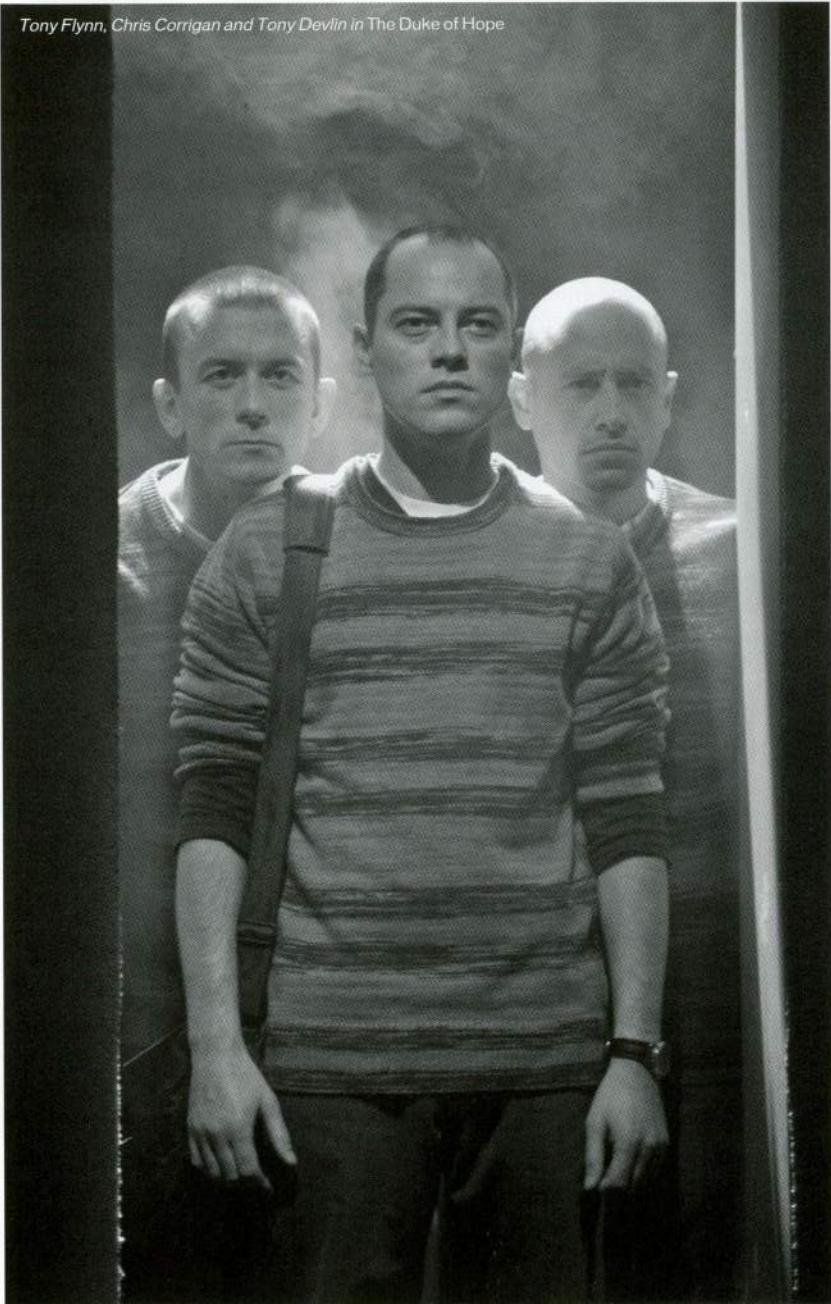
Queen's University, Belfast

BY CAROLE-ANNE UPTON

Actors Conor Grimes and Alan McKee made their reputation as comic actors in *The History of the Troubles (accordin' to my Da)*, the hugely popular 2002 satire which they co-wrote with Martin Lynch. They've turned again to writing, but this time it's a full-length play scripted without the support of a playwright, and the result is disappointing.

With a strong cast led by Chris Corrigan, an experienced director and designer, two successful comics writing, helped by a resident dramaturg, Tinderbox would seem to have all the ingredients for a theatrical feast. The Belfast audience was certainly hungry for laughter: you could feel them

Tony Flynn, Chris Corrigan and Tony Devlin in The Duke of Hope



CHRISTOPHER HEANEY

willing this production to indulge their taste for hearty entertainment. But in the end it just didn't deliver. *The Duke of Hope* proved a meagre offering, at best half-baked.

To say that this piece deals with the crisis of masculinity would be an overstatement. It tells the story of Mel, the central anti-hero who suffers from "alcohol intake, terrible diet, inability to focus on the important things" and spends his whole time in the pub instead of going to visit his father, who lies seriously ill in hospital. We watch him drinking and agonising, fraternising and fantasising. What we have here is more or less the classic stage Irishman, and a missed opportunity for parody.

The play presents a whole series of unreconstructed stereotypes based on gender, sexuality and ethnicity. Claire Connor, the only female actor in the cast, plays two mothers: one pigeon-toed and nagging in nylon overalls and thick glasses; the other ambitious and humourless, the demanding wife. She also plays the real and imaginary objects of Mel's desire: the tight-suited, high-heeled librarian; the drummer from the Corrs (fresh from the shower); and an insatiable French 'concert pianist and swimwear model'.

There's more than a touch of homophobia and xenophobia running through the narrative. At one point Mel ends up in flip-flops (he has dogshit on his trainers). Mel is anx-

ious not to "look like a poof". His fear is confirmed when the barman asks: "What's with the Riga rent boy look?" Later, there's a whole section of pointless dialogue when the drunk Mel observes that a four-year old boy with a "poncey Irish name" – it's Fiachra - "looks gay". Foreigners are an easy target. There's a Polish barman, whom Mel imagines shooting dead, because "he was unable to accept that even the immigrant barman was mocking him".

The way the play attempts to justify all this puerile humour is by framing the narrative as a foray into the subconscious of Mel, who presumably represents the (Northern Irish?) Male. But the production soon conveniently forgets the problematic that it set out to explore, and seems content instead to indulge in an affectionate celebration of its clichés of masculinity.

The main character is shadowed on stage by two alter egos, Drunk Mel and Shoulda Woulda Coulda Mel. The physical embodiment of the alter ego, a dramaturgical device deftly deployed in Brian Friel's *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* or Peter Nicholls' *Passion Play*, is here clumsily reproduced. The scripting of the two additional Mels offers little in terms of interrogation and the unimaginative direction leaves two strong actors, Tony Flynn and Tony Devlin, looking like spare parts on the set for much of the time.

The action is set mostly in the back bar of the Duke of Gloucester pub. One of the few satisfying images in the production is the old barfly George, a character study well observed by Jack Quinn, who literally appears as part of the furniture, thanks to Niall Rea's design.

The dramatic structure is reminiscent of the successful format of *The History of the Troubles*, with a series of loosely connected sketch-vignettes interspersed with popular songs and plenty of physical 'play' acting. But without the essential element of satire *The Duke of Hope* lacks substance, and the popular aesthetic in this theatre looks more rough than ready, with its rubber pints, artless musical numbers and incongruous puppetry. Alternating scenes of male fantasy with te-

dious pub conversation creates a repetitive, slow-moving drama that allows little or no development for secondary characters, such as Des, whose single dimension was played to the hilt by James Moran.

Where the production felt most confident was in the gags and one-liners which are undoubtedly its strongest feature. Instead of supporting the comedy, however, the dramatic form seemed to straitjacket it with its awkward dramaturgy and the burden of being meaningful. "Serious comedy" is how Tinderbox describe this work, but without a clear set of values it barely fits the description on either count.

Carole-Anne Upton is Professor of Drama at the University of Ulster.

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Communication Breakdown

New and emerging directors take on the challenge of plays that represent the impossibility of communication and personal connection.

FEWER EMERGENCIES

By Martin Crimp

Randolph SD | The Company

Directed by Wayne Jordan

Lighting Design: Sinead Wallace

Costume Design: Jessica Hilliard

Sound Design: Vincent Doherty & Ivan Birthistle

With: Susannah De Wrixon, Ruth McGill,

Ciaran O'Brien, Karl Quinn

Project Cube, Dublin

Aug 16 - 1 Sept 2007. Reviewed 31 Aug.

BY IAN R. WALSH

WITH FOUR OF HIS PLAYS (ONE A translation) produced this year, Martin Crimp is now a clear favourite with Irish theatre companies. Randolph SD | The Company's production of *Fewer Emergencies* offers us some good reasons why this is so. The production consists of a trilogy of three playlets: *Whole Blue Sky*, *Face to the Wall* and *Fewer Emergencies*. All follow Crimp's form of 'postdramatic theatre'. Gone are the fundamentals of drama – the business of representation and the structuring of time. We are thus denied any individual characters or sense of place. The actors parts are designated by numbers 1, 2,

3, 4 and the stage directions for all three plays read: Time: Blank; Place: Blank.

A less imaginative director may thus be tempted to offer us a bare stage and moody lighting but Wayne Jordan, who both designed and directed, opts for a gaudy set consisting of a small platform of bright green Astroturf with a small globe-shaped bonsai tree planted in its corner. The actors all wear brightly coloured and neatly tailored clothes contributing to a suitably synthetic Legoland aesthetic. The artificiality of representation is thus clearly and cleverly marked.

By doing away with character, language itself becomes Crimp's protagonist. In all three short plays it is not the person who speaks the language but the language that speaks the person. Again, the temptation might be to concentrate on language exclusively in performance, turning the play into a pretentious poetry recital (cue white faces, black polo-necks and torchlight) but Jordan marries constant movement to the text. His skillful actors swirl around the platform



Ruth McGill in *Fewer Emergencies*

set, continuously varying levels, and eyeballing the audience who are placed around the stage. These movements are tightly choreographed. The actors deliver each move with a precision matched only

by the razor-sharp staccato delivery of their lines. Add to this Sinead Wallace's varied and atmospheric lighting design that keeps perfect pace with the changing rhythms of the three plays and the overall effect is

one of being caught in – and delighting in – a whirlwind of fragmentation. The deconstruction of dramatic convention becomes the event.

Within all this organised anarchy there is the semblance of plot. In *Whole Blue Sky* we enter the mind of a middle-class woman who wishes to leave a loveless marriage. Susannah De Wrixon, Ruth McGill and Karl Quinn narrate the woman's desires, fears and anxieties. All give a different delivery and have a signature physical presence: De Wrixon in both word and actions is commanding but vulnerable (this was further emphasized by the actor's pregnant state); McGill comes across as cold and questioning with stiff postured poses; while Quinn laconically slouches around the set, delivering lines with a sense of distain. As the conversations and questions become cyclical, the state of the woman's paralysis becomes apparent. Like Beckett's tramps, she ends professing that she will leave but all the actors speaking her lines remain on stage.

Ciaran O'Brien then enters menacingly to begin *Face to the Wall*, which tells of a Dunblane-style school shooting. The other actors' bodies become alert and movements quicken as O'Brien tries to speak the man's story. He falters in the telling and is prompted by the other actors. This is deliberate, robbing the story of any sense of authenticity and creating a sense of unease. Each time a child is

shot the actors click their fingers. This simple affect coupled with an empty child's seat placed on the platform pierces the heart. The high energy piece ends in the crescendo of a 'twelve bar blues' song, the upbeat tempo and harmonies of which are wholly at odds with its subject matter: the disintegration of a postman tortured by depression who wishes to stand with his 'face to the wall'.

The last play, *Fewer Emergencies* presents us with a narrative of absurd optimism in the face of a litany of horrors. The speakers continue to talk of things 'looking up' with 'fewer emergencies than there used be' despite reporting on strangled babies, burnt-out cars, and random shootings. Finally, one of the speakers claims that 'Things are getting brighter' as the lights begin to dim, until the last few lines are delivered in total darkness. This ending is itself an apt metaphor for the achievement of this production. Crimp's postmodern vision of an unstable world where truth is relative may leave us in the dark but the formal innovations of his script, expertly interpreted by Randolph SD | The Company, promise the theatre a bright future.

Ian R. Walsh is a PhD Candidate in the School of English and Drama, UCD, where he also teaches.

NEW DIRECTORS FESTIVAL 2007**THE GRANARY THEATRE****HOWIE THE ROOKIE****by Mark O'Rowe**

Directed by Eoin Ó hAnnracháin

With: Nick Kavanagh, Stephen McCann

9 – 13 Oct 2007. Reviewed 12 Oct.

THE COUNTRY**by Martin Crimp**

Directed by Adam McElderry

With: David Ramseyer, Ruth Hayes,

Aoife Williamson

16 – 20 Oct. Reviewed 16 Oct.

DUSA, FISH, STAS & VI**by Pam Gems**

Directed by Sinead Dunphy

With: Maighread Wall, Lorraine O'Keeffe,

Jacqui Kelleher, Caroline Hay

23 – 26 Oct. Reviewed 26 Oct.

THE SMALL THINGS**by Enda Walsh**

Directed by Olan Wrynn

With: David Coon, Caroline Hart

30 Oct – 3 Nov. Reviewed 3 Nov.

BY CLAIRE-LOUISE BENNETT

THE NEW DIRECTORS FESTIVAL AT THE Granary Theatre in Cork was initiated in 2006. This year a further four directors, furnished with a small but facilitating budget, were given the opportunity to promote their directorial skills. At first glance, the selection of

material seemed familiar and undaring, however each text presents the director with significant challenges.

The festival kicked off with Mark O'Rowe's *Howie the Rookie*. Since Eoin Ó hAnnracháin's production was the ice-breaker it inevitably established a standard for the festival; an accomplished opener, it raised the bar high. The monologue is a form very familiar to Irish audiences. However, oration in a theatre space is a notable challenge for even the most seasoned of actors; in lieu of a world represented on the stage, the actor's task is to create images that are at once fantastic and credible.

O'Rowe's visceral descriptions of the body in action make such tricky simultaneity possible. Director Eoin Ó hAnnracháin did well to cast Nick Kavanagh in the role of the Howie Lee. Kavanagh displays a physical awareness and dexterity from the word go; stalking the stage on the balls of his feet like a ravenous cougar, we feel the range and potential of his appetites. His embodiment of physical activity and restlessness successfully highlights the primeval element of O'Rowe's portrayal of young male energy, so that alongside the urban landscape of a Dublin estate is an inner space made up of pulsating veins, white-knuckles, twitchy wrists, throbbing lungs, spittle, blood and sweat.

The depiction of the body in a hos-

tile environment reveals Howie Lee's vulnerability and the necessity of remaining alert, perched on the brink of violence, and at the same time magnifies the materiality of that environment, its textures, lines, temperature and moods. Together these create a sensory odyssey, a privileging of the external, and creates an exhilarating contrast to psychologically motivated drama which tend to prioritise inner states. Kavanagh's was certainly a hard act to follow and Eoin Ó hAnnracháin prudently opts for a more insouciant pitch in his direction of Stephen McCann in the role of the Rookie Lee. In contrast to Howie Lee's restless flexing he has adopted casualness as a subterfuge; despite the persistent smirk it is soon apparent that Rookie Lee's nonchalance is feigned. Interestingly, this lack of verve alters the focus somewhat so that Rookie Lee's presence and stature is much less substantial than Howie Lee's; this is unexpected and succeeds in imbuing the second monologue with a pathos which anticipates the horrific but somehow inexorable ending.

Fantastic and entirely credible, Ó hAnnracháin's rendering of *Howie the Rookie* is a fine achievement and on its own was enough to convince me of the value of the New Directors Festival: an assessment strengthened by the standard of the second production, Martin Crimp's *The Country*.

Crimp's work presents peculiar challenges to the director and even the most renowned have, in my opinion, made a hash of it. It is a source of some bemusement to me that productions of Crimp's work tend to curtail emotional content. Since Crimp's plays themselves are frequently moving, shocking, disarming and visceral, I attribute this 'coldness' not to a deliberate aesthetic trait inherent in his work, but to directors mistaking the lament for the decline in emotional behaviour for cynical solipsism – hence a surfeit of 'mannered' and slick productions. It is somewhat telling that a production directed by a newcomer, Adam McElderry, is one of the most engaging and gratifying stagings I've seen.

The Country occupies ambivalent territory: it is a piece which seems naturalistic but in fact debunks the possibility of representing human behaviour as a cogent reality. Nothing is quite as it seems. Where mainstream drama would give a visiting alien the impression that humans are fairly accomplished at being human and doing human things, in Crimp's world humans are awkward creatures: the faculties available to them let them down; talking, reason, ambition are exposed and appear facile.

In contrast to the pastoral myth of a tranquil idyll, the landscape in *The Country* is indifferent to human sentimentality. In Crimp's universe the





David Coon and Caroline Hart in *The Small Things*

human does not occupy a venerated position, and the distinguishing quality of the play is how a non-human element, nature, dominates, dwarfs and satirises the human contingent. The tracks we make across the earth, taking us from one known place to an anticipated other, the control we have exerted over the environment, the systems we are perennially faithful to, do not signify an harmonious relationship with nature. They serve to minimise the opportunity to encounter something more substantial, more powerful and more adept at

surviving than ourselves.

Alienated from the natural environment, the characters in *The Country* appear self-conscious and their complaints and misdemeanours insignificant trifles. *The Country* isn't 'about' events or circumstances, it simply illustrates disconnection. McElderry's set design is sensitive to this. Although the action takes place in a kitchen, there are few domestic signifiers: the house is not cosy or lived-in and its inhabitants seem strangely exposed. This sense of vulnerability is enhanced by a group of

unnatural trees looming outside, visible through a large window which dominates the stage picture.

The physical work McElderry has done in this production should also be noted. It successfully demonstrates detached souls trapped in the trajectory of remote orbits. The motif of paths and routes endures throughout the play until finally, Corrine, played with judicious precision by Ruth Hayes, goes for a walk and "the track – that's right – 'gave out.'" She continues until she reaches a stone chair whereupon she sits down and notices 'that the stone had started to devour my heart.' The line, repeated, is possibly one of the more devastating claims I've heard made by any character and is sufficient proof that Crimp's writing does possess an emotional core, or strand at least. Dave Ramseyer was well-cast, managing to be both sinister and utterly craven at the same time, while Aoife Williamson's spirited coquette provided an uncomfortable contrast.

The decision by Sinead Dunphy, director of the third show, to stage Pam Gems' *Dusa, Fish, Stas & Vi* might have been motivated by the opportunity it appears to offer female actors in a time when male-dominated casts are the norm. However the reason *Dusa, Fish, Stas & Vi* has an all female cast is because it's a feminist piece written in the 1970's. Dunphy has adapted the play so that it appears to

be a contemporary story of four women struggling to find 'a sense of purpose and individuality.' However, divested of the context within which it was first conceived, *Dusa* loses fire and its credibility is compromised. Conviction from the actors is crucial to elevate it from an abrasive display of female dissatisfaction and self-pity, and the young cast don't appear to have identified with their characters sufficiently enough – a good thing since it indicates life choices have improved for today's young women. However, this surely begs the question of why Dunphy chose to stage it. Because there aren't enough plays with good female roles?

The production of Enda Walsh's *The Small Things* is a testament to the importance of informed decision making. A macabre fairytale which explores the promise and terror of 'outside' to even more devastating effect than *The Country*, *The Small Things* is a haunting and infectious exploration of how our ability – or lack of ability – with language defines our world. The capacity of a young child to hope and imagine is thwarted with appalling authority by the Chip Shop Man, an evil character who still casts a formidable shadow in the minds of Man and Woman, even as they are nearing the end of their lives. Stories which demonstrate the lasting effect of events that befall us as children are especially

distressing: they suggest we are powerless, and the depiction of a wasted life is deflating. However Walsh's play is also a celebration of language and the pleasure talking of 'small things' bestows upon Man and Woman is palpable.

Olan Wrynn's previous life as a set designer was apparent but it's clear his skills don't stop there. *The Small Things* was captivating from beginning to end; both David Coon and Caroline Hart gave measured and unhurried performances which signalled the advanced years of their characters much more effectively than any dithering, back-rubbing or wincing. Here was a sensitive portrayal of older people reflecting on life, seeing its humour, still affected by its injustices but, enabled by their fertile imaginations, no longer lonely. Walsh's affinity to magical realism prevents a bleak vision of life. The invention and vitality of the human being is revered, perhaps because the characters in these plays, in contrast to *The Country*, know the nature of where they are.

Overall the New Director's Festival was a success, showcasing work by up-and-coming directors and actors; Tony McCleane-Fay is to be commended for initiating this worthwhile and valuable project.

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

KNOCK 3 TIMES

by Gaye Shortland

Meridian Theatre Company

Directed by Johnny Hanrahan

Sound design: Cormac O'Connor

With Raymond Scannell, Fiona Condon, Frank

Bourke, James Browne

Granary Theatre, Cork

10 – 22 Sept 2007. Reviewed 19 Sept.

BY RACHEL ANDREWS

AT ITS BEST, EXPERIMENTAL THEATRE raises standards. Challenging, perceptive and intellectual, it can interrogate the art form and push at its boundaries. In fact, an encounter with a superbly constructed piece of experimental theatre – no matter if we do not understand what it is about – can be among the most rewarding and stimulating of theatrical experiences.

For this to happen, however, something crucial has to take place: the drama has to make a connection. Theatre is, after all, a public art – and a work lives or dies by the manner in which it engages with its audience. The difficulty with this collaborative work between writer Gaye Shortland and Meridian – the second of a double bill presented by the company – is that it has become too preoccupied with itself, and has lost sight of its viewers in the process.

The premise is, in theory, a fascinating one: a cross-dressing Stephen (Raymond Scannell) remains shut up in his room, longing to reveal himself

to his adoptive siblings – primarily to his sister Martha (Fiona Condon), who herself has her own dark secret. Surrounding these two are their gangsta-rap obsessed brother William (James Browne) and drifter Kerrigan (Frank Bourke), who is sleeping on the couch while he attempts to figure out his life.

The narrative, which begins promisingly, sparkling with Shortland's spiky Cork humour – used to such effect in her last collaboration with Meridian, *Mind That 'Tis My Brother* – soon begins to slow and stall, the humour dissipating into sombre emotion that ultimately weighs the writing down. In this, Shortland is not helped by a production that, in an attempt to convey the extent to which communication has broken down between this orphaned family (Martha takes on the role of the harassed, short-tempered mother), creates a series of slow-motion confrontations that distort and disjoint a play already lacking in dramatic cohesion.

Director Johnny Hanrahan has long followed the unsteady route

that is non-mainstream theatre, and it is to his credit that he is unafraid to continue experimenting after many years working in the business. There are many occasions when his investigations have worked beautifully, for example, in his previous work with Shortland, when he managed to straddle the boundaries between dynamic, wonderfully engaging narrative and the magical possibilities of the theatrical format. This production is crying out for such a transitional point; instead it delves too far inside its intellectual probing, leaving no space for the actors to engage emotionally with their characters, or to flourish in their roles.

Only sound artist Cormac O'Connor appears comfortable with the direction Hanrahan is attempting to take, and his jagged, grinding soundscape connects perfectly with the overall sensibility of the show. This is not enough, however, to enliven this production, which, in an effort to walk along the edge of the theatrical format, stumbles towards un-engagement and falls off into tedium.

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Alternative Sources of Energy

Theatre companies cast aside the dramatic canon this season, seeking inspiration from film, novels and poetry. Our critics follow their lead.

THE IDIOTS

by Lars Von Trier, translated by

Stephanie Kate Burgarth

Pan Pan

Directed by Gavin Quinn

Set Design: Andrew Clancy

Lighting design: Aedin Cosgrove

With: Sarah Brennan, Katy Davis, Derrick

Devine, Sonya Kelly, Susie Meyer, Bush

Moukarzel, Will O'Connell and Dylan Tighe

Project Arts Centre, Dublin

10 – 13 Oct 2007. Reviewed 13 Oct.

BY PETER CRAWLEY

WHAT'S THE DEAL WITH DOGME? The fundamentalist doctrine of filmmaking, which first brought Lars Von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg to international attention, had an approach so ascetic it practically etched its strictures into stone tablets: Thou shalt film on location. Thou shalt not use artificial lighting. Remember to keep thy camera wobbly.

The unexpected by-product of such commandments, it seems, is to have provided rich pickings for a theatre starved of its own fresh morality tales, and which has also proven eager to adapt the dialogue-driven,

grubby realism of Vinterberg's *Festen* and now Von Trier's *Idioterne* for the stage. More than that, however, Selina Cartmell's staging of David Elbridge's *Festen* adaptation for the Gate in 2006 and now Gavin Quinn's theatre version of Von Trier's *The Idiots* for the 2007 Ulster Bank Dublin Theatre Festival show two different theatrical minds responding to the stimulation of transposition. Where Cartmell has imbued her version with a lyrical command of Festen's dark strands but a formal adventurousness quite apart from the source material (her "split screen" techniques, for instance, would have been a flagrant violation of Dogme's dictats), Pan Pan's version of *The Idiots* strips it down to something that is part drama, part installation, part experiment (which seems totally in accordance with the rules).

We begin with a cluttered tableaux, an impressive crowd of 36 bodies standing before the retracting doors of Andrew Clancy's flexible set, a structure both industrial and sterile. The performers face us, staring us down. That sense of confrontation is



The cast mixing professional and non-professional actors in *The Idiots*

the soul of Von Trier's story, established in the first scene, when a group of apparently intellectually disabled diners cause a commotion in a restaurant. The disability is, however, a rouse, a performance shrugged off as easily as an actor retreating to the wings, and, in a mildly jarring post-dramatic device, every actor in Pan Pan's production performs under their own name, in their own clothes. When Dylan Tighe (expertly played by Dylan Tighe) reveals the underground movement of revolutionary pranksters to new recruit Sonya Kelly (a convincing Sonya Kelly), the inscrutability of their politics begs a familiar question: what are you rebelling against?

The radicalism of the group, and the battle cry to release "your inner idiot", presents itself as another glorification of opting out: Dylan's adherents live together in a Killiney commune (no, really), sponging off state benefits and generally exploiting the hand-wringing charity of others through quarrel and coercion. Actu-

ally, it's a little like the faux-begging industry of *The Threepenny Opera*, but if Brecht's face-front polemic is unsettling, Quinn's can be laughably blunt. "Who's really being exploited?" asks Dylan at one point, meaning the intellectually disabled or the PC-somnambulists, but as he eyeballs the audience, it is hard not to feel that it's us.

There is some genuine friction in the casting, though, which matches eight professional actors in central roles with 28 non-professionals, some of them intellectually disabled; a risky manoeuvre that heightens our discomfort. "Fuck," announces a shocked Sarah Brennan, unable to maintain her feigned idiocy of playground twitches and facial contortions (they call it "spazzing") when she discovers two people with Down's Syndrome over her shoulder. The gesture is almost one of self-admonishment on Pan Pan's part, an abrupt slap into recognising the exploitation of disability in both idea and performance. But it also rein-

forces a surprisingly conservative arc to the piece. For all the heedless utopia they seek, it's a burgeoning relationship between Katy Davis and Will O'Connell, or a tender coupling between Bush Moukarzel and Sarah Brennan, or even Derrick Devine's refusal to "spaz" in public, that seem more radical.

The theatre, which cannot help but reflect society back to itself, doesn't fare too badly either. Quinn may not be able to resist a few Live Art clichés but he is taking genuine risks in blurring the lines between performance and reality, and though it is hardly in thrall to the film, that agenda is utterly faithful to the Dogme ideals.

Ultimately *The Idiots* doesn't really pose a challenge to society – it neither deplores nor celebrates the doomed anarchy of its movement – it simply affronts and disquiets a portion of society (which is to say, audiences) for the effect. That lack of political coherency may explain the production's seemingly rootless conclusion, in which we watch Tighe, outside a living room window, leading the entire cast through a rendition of Alphaville's 'Forever Young'. But, much like the tune, the electric charge of the experiment and the sly conviction of the performance linger long in the mind.

Peter Crawley is News & Web Editor of this magazine.

CIRCUS

by Raymond Keane

Barabbas

Directed by Raymond Keane

Set design: Sabine Dargent

Lighting design: Sinéad McKenna

Costume design: Suzanne Keogh

Composer: Trevor Knight

Dramaturg: Jocelyn Clarke

With: Ken Fanning, Trevor Knight,

Colm O'Grady, Tina Segner

Project Arts Centre, Dublin

30 Oct - 10 Nov 2007. Reviewed 1 Nov.

BY SEONA MAC RÉAMOINN

THE MOMENT YOU ENTER THE TRANSFORMED Space Upstairs at Project and are met with colourful bunting, a clown or two and the immediately recognisable rattle and hum music of a Big Top, you sense this experience might be magical and masterful. It is both and more. Raymond Keane's first circus for Barabbas had better not be his last. With subtlety and simple sophisticated skill, we are privileged to enter into a special place where we can be awed and enchanted, laugh and be sad, as we follow a story of life and love within the circus world.

Loosely based on Fellini's film, *La Strada*, the narrative structure of the young girl who joins a small circus and becomes a playful clown, an adroit juggler, a lion jumping through hoops, and a graceful trapeze artist, allows the charming and



Trevor Knight in Circus

talented cast of four to display their consummate skills within a context. We share in her innocent and beguiling journey, as she learns the skills and codes of the circus from her two skilful and entertaining mentors. But this is life too; soon a love triangle emerges and disappointment for one of them lies ahead. The poignancy of that 'three into two won't go' theme is palpable but the elaboration of the jealousies and the re-engagement of the rejected suitor is both amusing and touching.

Keane, as director and invisible ringmaster, has teamed up with two circus artists (Ken Fanning and

Tina Segner of Tumble Circus) and street performer, stuntman and actor Colm O'Grady to sublime effect. They are multi-talented and play all the acts in this small travelling circus, from showman knife-thrower to red-nosed humorous clown. And, of course, there is the fourth performer: Trevor Knight, composer and one-man band, sits aloft the circus ring producing musical conjuring tricks of seduction, suspense, jollity, romance and sadness. He is almost a scene stealer when, in a delightful inverse of animals being cajoled into behaving like humans, he slopes about the

ring in the guise of a disgruntled lion who, quite understandably, will not obey his ringmaster's cracked whip instruction and will not jump through any hoop, at any price.

We watch too the aerial brilliance as the trapeze flies above our heads in Sabine Dargent's wondrous set. By now the Big Top ceiling at Project seems to stretch far into the skies so complete is our engagement. The familiar bed of nails hovers below the romantic flying artists and we watch the gravity-defying exploits with suitable respect. But just as we are settling into this new world, tragedy strikes. A fatal fall. A trapeze artist has lost her new lover and colleague, and a clown has lost his partner, companion and friend. He is bereft and the haunting image of his frenzied circling of the ring seeking solace is heartbreaking.

This is a circus that should come to visit every town and village for its exuberance and its humanity. The performers are fizzing with charm and skill in mime and movement – there is but one word spoken throughout. No high-tech effects either; the body is the instrument of grace and communication. This is Raymond Keane's first solo run since recent changes at Barabbas and he has wrought a marvel.

Seona MacRéamoinn writes about dance and theatre.

THE THIRD POLICEMAN

by Flann O'Brien

Adapted by Jocelyn Clarke

Blue Raincoat Theatre Company

Directed by Niall Henry

Set Design: Jamie Vartan

Sound Design: Joe Hunt

With: John Carty, Patrick Curley, Kellie Hughes,

Ciarán McCauley, Fiona McGeown

and Sandra O'Malley

The Factory Performance Space, Sligo;

Town Hall Theatre, Galway

17 Oct – 3 Nov, 2007

Reviewed 19 Oct in the Factory Performance
Space, Sligo

BY DIARMUID O'BRIEN

LIKE MANY IRRECOVERABLE O'BRIEN fans, I have a reluctance to welcome any new revival or surge of interest in his works. The worry, I suppose, is that he might become too acceptable. You see, Flann isn't meant to be some prescribed, canonical master of Irish literature like all the others: he's *ours* – the unreliable drunk you befriend on your own but with whom you have the best craic. Yet I didn't baulk righteously at the news that Blue Raincoat were going to have a go at O'Brien's proto-post-modern novel, as they are the only crew I know of who are wayward enough to possibly pull it off. Not too surprisingly, then, their production of *The Third Policeman* is a heady delight.

The play opens, appropriately enough, on a book – which is itself



The Blue Raincoat ensemble in *The Third Policeman*

open, and about the size of a king-size bed. Standing somewhat lopsidely upon it is the unnamed narrator (a compelling and lingering performance from Sandra O'Malley) who suddenly begins to relate the peculiar events leading to, and lunatic events following, the night he committed his greatest sin and forgot his name. Thus begins our disorientating tumble through a dark, lavishly satirical, and particularly Irish, dreamscape.

The narrator is comforted along his

journey by his immortal soul, who "for convenience" he calls Joe, played with an ethereal playfulness (and a carefree summer hat) by Kellie Hughes. Any concerns about implanting a feminine presence into O'Brien's overwhelming male worldview are dispelled as, together with O'Malley as the lead, the casting proves an inspired dichotomy.

Then there are the two officers of the impossible police station: the archetypal parochial guard, Sergeant

Pluck (Ciarán McCauley) and the wide-eyed mad inventor Policeman MacCruiskeen (John Carty). McCauley and Carty's comic indifference, amiability, and all-consuming obsession with bicycles deliver the hardest laughs and the most memorable set-pieces. Patrick Curley and Fiona McGeown step up to a variety of roles and mimely mechanics; the former memorable as a gentleman who is holding steady at forty-eight per cent bicycle, though only as a result of Sergeant Pluck's benevolent bike-stealing policy.

Director Niall Henry succeeds in balancing the gleefully evasive text and Blue Raincoat's precision physicality, drawing a meticulous performance from all, although the recursive, uninterrupted, hundred-minute play loses pace on occasion. Joe Hunt actually surpasses his high standards with his high-quality sound and music production, evocative of silent comedies and childhood bicycles, augmenting the high-energy antics onstage.

Jocelyn Clarke's previous two collaborations with Blue Raincoat were *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and its sequel, rendering him unusually qualified to tackle their twisted Irish cousin. However, every literary adaptation has to have casualties. I was disappointed that the footnotes on the crackpot philosopher de Selby, for me the funniest feature of the

novel, proved too cumbersome to be included, but was joyed to note (shameless anorak that I am) upon after-show inspection, that the artful handwriting on the great book/dais was none other than the footnotes. A loving detail from Jamie Vartan, whose striking retro-industrial and bicycle-mad design furnished the play with a clever meta-fictive texture.

Diarmuid O'Brien is a writer based in Galway.

MOLLY BLOOM

An extract from Ulysses by James Joyce

Upfront Theatre

Directed by Liam Carney

With: Eilidh O'Dea

The Teachers' Club, Dublin

25 Sept– 9 Oct 2007. Reviewed 5 Oct.

BY DEREK WEST

MOLLY BLOOM HAD A VERY SOLITARY bedtime in night-town, on October 5th, at the Teachers' Club, her musings shared among a mere handful of citizens. Sad to say, it's a form of theatrical suicide: to hope that stray punters, finding no room at the Gate, might happen instinctively upon this scarcely-publicised piece on the dark side of Parnell Square.

Besides, Joyce did not write this for the theatre – it's what Declan Kiberd calls "the warm subjectivity of interior monologue" – so to transpose it to the stage presents problems that were

not resolved in this production. Molly's flow of thought (conjuring up images of past encounters, love-making, Gibraltar and Howth Head) is enacted on the internalised stage of the mind and memory. To listen, for instance, to Pegg Monahan's RTÉ interpretation of the part, or to read it silently, affords a less distracting access to Molly's world. The physical presence of a sentient being does not necessarily heighten illumination – in this representation, Molly's libidinous, emotional self does not materialise adequately. What should be uninhibited is muted, even modest, and what should be voluptuous is intimated almost exclusively by Eileen O'Dea's gravelly voice.

James Joyce and O'Dea are sold short by parsimonious production values: in the lighting – the number of lamps available to the Teachers' Club was limited, but Molly's face, the main focus of attention, deserved more amps; and in design – the sparsely-furnished set looked as though it had been dumped into the space, the cold walls of the theatre too obtrusive – after all, this was meant to be a love-nest, still warm from the full-blooded, healthy rutting of Blazes Boylan.

O'Dea gave no indication of being fazed by the empty rows. She launched into Molly Bloom with verve, intelligence (not to mention a prodigious memory) in a well-modu-

lated voice that held the thread of the monologue and conveyed a husky sensuality. She deserves credit for a finely-tuned sense of the rhythm of the writing, even if she was inclined to take it too quickly at the start; as the performance proceeded, she gave herself over more freely to timely pauses in the outflow of words.

While her voice was redolent with desire, the movement within the piece failed to convey the carnal quality of her preoccupations with copulation, urination, menstruation, and possibly masturbation. The ritual of the chamber pot was coy – do you really put the bed pan on a stool or do you squat? This was altogether too sanitised and never was a text crying out so much for a robust earthiness.

The production set out to "do" the Molly Bloom thing. There may have been direction, of the actress's verbal inflections, but it was barely discernible. The direction had little to contribute to the physical expression, because there was hardly any. These were the factors that worked against a fine core performance. O'Dea deserved better and, with more labour on the theatrical potential of the piece, it could find a more assured spot in the Joycean repertoire.

Derek West is currently writing an evaluation of Creative Engagement, an arts scheme for post-primary schools.

BOG PEOPLE**Inspired by the poems of Seamus Heaney****by Lucy Caldwell, Nicola McCartney****and Francis Turnly**

Big Telly Theatre Company

Directed by Zoë Seaton

Composer: Neil Martin

Lighting design: Conleth White

With: John Hewitt, Barbara Adair,

Vincent Higgins, Claire Lamont, Aine O'Sullivan,

Michael Lavery

On tour, 20 Sept–27 Oct, 2007

Reviewed 16 Oct at Lyric Theatre, Belfast

BY DAVID GRANT

FOR SEAMUS HEANEY A REMARKABLE feature of the bog has been its preservative power. In poems such as 'Bogland', 'Bog Queen' and 'The Tollund Man' he marvels at the way in which archaeological finds of ancient bodies bring past and present into close proximity. In *Bog People*, Big Telly's suite of short plays inspired by Heaney's verse and performed by an impressively diverse ensemble company of actors, this idea finds expression in a wide variety of forms.

Bogland by Francis Turnly begins the cycle, flitting episodically between four time zones: an ancient past and three more recent periods defined by successive generations of Planter and Gael. At first there is some fascination in trying to unravel the various narrative strands and the wry humour of John Hewitt's farmer leavens the mix. But the novelty quickly palls only to

dissolve into a half-hearted attempt at masked ancient ritual, redeemed only by Neil Martin's stirring musical score.

By contrast, the next play – Lucy Caldwell's *Toner's Bog* – provides a refreshing antidote to Turnly's cod mythology. Two scenes co-exist on stage, each informing and complementing the other. John Hewitt and Michael Lavery are grandfather and grandson sparking off one another with gusto, while the subject of their chatter, the discovery of an ancient grave, is illustrated by the parallel action of an archaeologist (Claire Lamont), the mother of the boy in the play's other scene and her assistant (Aine O'Sullivan) debating the rights and wrongs of disturbing the dead. The overall effect is lively and enlivening, Michael Lavery making an especially memorable Lyric debut in a performance that was as irreverent as it was engaging.

The second half of the programme takes the form of a triptych by Nicola McCartney based on Heaney's poems 'Kinship', 'Field of Vision' and 'Tollund Man in Springtime'. In the first section Vincent Higgins as a nameless wanderer encounters another restless spirit given eerie life by Claire Lamont. This densely poetic piece, reminiscent of Yeats' 'Purgatory', produces flashes of passion but the meaning proves hard to follow, especially in Conleth White's gloomy lighting.

The second section provided the undoubtedly highlight of the evening –



Barbara Adair in *Bog People*

Barbara Adair's feisty geriatric approaching the theme of buried memory in a tellingly tangential way. From her wheelchair she addresses the audience as if we were visitors to her care home. The other residents are vividly evoked and we are left in no doubt of her impatience with their inadequacies. And almost without realising it, we are transported back to her wartime girlhood and her unexpected encounter with a black GI who comes to a terrible end in the murky depth of an Irish bog.

The skill of McCartney's storytelling and of Adair's exquisite capacity to manipulate the mainly teenage audience was breath-taking. This was a palpable tour de force and illustrated both the effectiveness of a writer coming laterally at the brief to honour Heaney's vision and the difficulties inherent in the more direct approach adopted in the other plays. The evening concluded with a finely balanced ensemble performance in-

volving the whole cast which deliberately drew together the varied strands of the programme in a powerful climax, giving full expression to the fineness of the words with an impact that the recorded speech which began the programme lacked.

Though flawed, this was nonetheless an ambitious undertaking and a fitting component of Big Telly's twentieth anniversary celebrations, epitomising the admirable readiness of the company, and more particularly, of its director Zoë Seaton to take risks. Although there was an uneasy blurring of traditional story-telling and physical theatre, as the action progressed, linking themes emerged and the overall feeling was of an integrated programme with the baton being deftly passed from script to script with a fluency that belied the production's collaborative authorship.

David Grant is a lecturer in drama at Queen's University, Belfast.

Delving into Conflict

Two productions set out to unearth secrets and cultural tensions between different communities – in South Africa and Ireland.

BONES

by Kay Adshead

Calypso Theatre Company

Directed by Bairbre Ni Chaoimh

Set and Costume Design: Diego Pitarch

Lighting Design: Nick Anton

Sound Design: Denis Clohessy

With: Susan Fitzgerald, Evelyn Duah,

Solomon Ijigade, Tower of Babel

Samuel Beckett Theatre, Dublin

29 Aug–8 Sept 2007. Reviewed 6 Sept.

BY IAN R. WALSH

THERE WAS MUCH TO LIKE IN CALYPSO'S Irish premiere of British playwright Kay Adshead's *Bones*; sadly, the simplistic politics of the piece was not one of them. Described by the author as 'Theatre for Change', the production fails in its motives. Where it succeeds is in its fusion of theatrical styles, strong performances and beautiful stage imagery.

The play takes the form of a two-hander with a chorus, and is situated in contemporary Johannesburg. Jennifer (Susan Fitzgerald), an elderly Afrikaans woman, is keeping vigil over her dying husband when a group of black South Africans come

to excavate her rose bushes in the hope of finding their buried ancestors. What they find is a much shallower grave, containing the bodies of men tortured to death. Prompted by the promise of salvation from her servant Beauty (Evelyn Duah), who claims to commune with the dead, Jennifer uncovers some secrets of her own. She reveals that long ago she witnessed her husband, then a policeman in the apartheid regime, torture a boy to death and bury him. She chose to keep her husband's actions secret knowing that this enabled him to continue his campaign of murder. After this confession of guilt, Jennifer hands over the ownership of her house to a forgiving Beauty.

The story is an obvious allegory for the political process of truth and reconciliation that has taken place in post-apartheid South Africa. What is problematic is that *Bones* converts the process of reconciliation into that of redemption. To reconcile is to restore harmony but to redeem is to release from blame.

Interrupting the naturalistic exchanges between the two women

with energetic sonorous singing and dancing is the multi-ethnic troupe *Tower of Babel*, led by percussionist and singer Solomon Ijigade. Their contribution gives a sense of Africa and adds to the magical atmosphere created by Nick Anton's striking lighting design.

Susan Fitzgerald manages sensitively to imbue her cold character with much humanity while Evelyn Duah, strong throughout, is mesmerising when possessed by the dead. Bairbre Ní Chaoimh directs assuredly, making full use of the versatile stage design by Diego Pitarch. In this design the chorus surround a platform stage with a bed in its centre, a large expressionistic tree lies to the back with the tortured figure of a boy (played by Duah and a member of the chorus) hanging from it at various intervals. The bed of Jennifer's dying husband is later revealed as a pit – a metaphor for the cruel man's soul as something empty and lacking? Indeed, the husband is never given a body on stage; he is represented by a dip in the bed and a spotlight. His soul's salvation is not the target here but his wife's, and perhaps his physical presence would distract from this.

There is great pleasure to be had in the wealth of artistic talent and virtuosity on display, in the 'total theatre' created. However, Calypso states a commitment to theatre as 'a catalyst

for social change' – but when a play provides narrative closure an audience is not empowered towards change, since all problems presented in the drama are resolved. Sam Shepherd has remarked: 'resolution is strangulation'. It is in its resolution that *Bones* fails in its objectives.

In the penultimate scene Beauty is possessed by the spirit of the boy that Jennifer witnessed being tortured and murdered by her husband. Behind Beauty and Jennifer the lights come up on the figure of the boy hung in the tree that is upstage. When Beauty grants forgiveness to Jennifer, speaking as the boy's soul, the figure of the boy raises his arms and makes his body into the figure of a cross. The concept of redemption is clearly marked in this Christ-like image.

The ease at which redemption is granted to Jennifer and those who did not speak out against apartheid is troubling. Is it up to a western playwright to grant such absolution? With the play's 'happy ending' we are presented with a closed argument, there is no space for debate or inquiry. The audience is without a voice and made as collusive in Adshead's agenda as her character Jennifer was in her husband's atrocities.

Bones' reduction of the recent history of South Africa to a Christian parable is too simplistic and robs a wonderfully theatrical production of any

political impact. In this, despite admirable motives, the play's engagement with the South African political situation ultimately felt as shallow as the grave dug under Jennifer's rose bushes.

AT PEACE

by Declan Gorman

Upstate Live/Upstate Theatre Project

Directed by Declan Gorman

Set design: Laura Howe

Lighting design: Eamon Fox

Costume design: Fiona Roberts

Sound design: David Brandt

With: Tunji Sotimirin, Andrejs Polozkovs, Robert O'Connor, Vanessa Keogh, Kārlis Krūminsleva Aleksandrova-Eklone, Adeoti.

On tour, 18 Sept – 3 Nov 2007

Reviewed 2 Nov at Civic Theatre, Dublin

BY FÍONA NI CHINNÉIDE

IT IS NOT CLEAR WHAT UPSTATE THEATRE and writer Declan Gorman were trying to achieve through the final part of 'The Border Chronicles', *At Peace*: there were simply too many ideas fighting for space on stage. This production was bogged down with ideas, the 'multi-layered drama' begging for the stern hand of a merciless dramaturg – or indeed an excavator who might unearth what meaning was intended in this jumble of stories and symbols.

The play opens with the discovery of the Glenamara Bog Man, disinterred during works on a cross-bor-

der road construction site. This archaeological find triggers all sorts of mysterious events, including the appearance of mythological figures on the roofs of construction huts, fratricide, a romance across the barricades, and even the appearance of the Bog Man himself in the bar at Dublin Airport. Ok, that much we know is meant to be a figure of the imagination – but in much of the rest of this production it is unclear whether humour or seriousness is the intent.

Three main stories are presented. We have the Latvian story: Martins, night watchman on the construction site, gets drunk on St Patrick's Day, his frustrations and jealousies are unleashed and he 'murders' his younger brother Janis. Martins goes on the run; Janis sportingly comes out of his coma; Martins' girlfriend, Daina, unsportingly leaves him anyway.

Then there is the Irish story: Oisín has recently left his wife, Alice – whom he calls Niamh – and moved back to Ireland from the States (his Tír na nÓg). He falls for the archaeologist on the site, who, improbably, falls for him. Iris hails from a Loyalist background, so when Oisín's Republican paramilitary history is revealed (through that old reliable plot device: the overheard conversation) there is trouble.

However, Oisín's love for Iris leads him along the path of righteousness,



Ieva Aleksandrova-Eklone and Tunji Sotimirin in *At Peace*

and he decides to give himself up – shortly before he gets a bullet in the head.

The third story focuses on the Nigerian experience: Ogunseyi, an artist-musician and foreman on the

bypass project and Charity, an asylum seeker, who seeks his help in her appeal to stay in Ireland. Ogunseyi does not believe her story and refuses to help her, he has too much to lose. In this one story, there was the glim-

mer of something interesting to explore, but it was never developed.

It is not clear why these three particular stories were brought together (along with various other sub-plots, vignettes and random events not described here) other than the publicized exploration of Baltic, Celtic and Yoruban mythologies. However, these mythologies were mere ornamentation, and the three 'real' story-lines were even less credible than the strange creatures writhing on top of the construction hut.

And in this, there lies a serious problem. While any project that seeks to forge relationships with local communities – especially across borders, perceived and real – is to be lauded, there is a responsibility of representation that comes with such an engagement. This production reinforced rather than exploded false stereotypes, adding little depth to received impressions. Were this my only encounter with new communities, I might believe that all Latvian males get drunk and violent, and that Nigerian men and women spontaneously break into dance at the drop of a yellow napkin.

Unless this was all meant to be *funny*, in which case a different director with a more detached perspective than the play's author, Declan Gorman, might have been more consistent in tone and more clear in

intent. We simply don't know how to read it when Leon, a former IRA training officer, slopes out on stage like a lame Gestapo officer or cartoon villain, complete with hammy accent, collar up and hat pulled down. Directorial decisions such as giving multiple roles to less experienced and weak actors further reduced the production to cartoon silliness at times.

There is one wonderful scene towards the end, when Charity is being deported back to Lagos. A chorus-line of immigration officials swirl her about the stage on an office-chair during preparations for take off, movements smoothly choreographed to the tune of the voice-over from Captain JJ McInerney, which is funny and clever and succinctly identifies all that is wrong with Irish attitudes towards our new communities. As a theatrical sketch it succeeded beautifully; unfortunately, one scene does not a production make.

At one point Martins is told "You'll wander aimlessly, you'll never find your way back" – this production doesn't wander aimlessly, but crashes blindly about the stage. Instead of a kaleidoscopic view of migrant experiences, *At Peace* is a confused cacophony of unclear purpose.

Fíona Ní Chinnéide is Reviews & Books Editor of this magazine and Editor of Youth Drama Ireland.

Staying Forever Young

Young people take to the stage as creators, characters and performers in classic and devised texts.

DANTI-DAN

by Gina Moxley

Gallowglass Theatre Company

Directed by David Horan

Set Design: Laura Howe

Lighting Design: Eamon Fox

Costume Design: Marie Tierney

With: Sarah Greene, Ian Lloyd Anderson,

Dorothy Cotter, Jennifer Lavery,

Frank Prendergast

On tour 23 Oct – 08 Dec 2007

Reviewed on 22 Oct at the Mill Theatre

BY DEREK WEST

Gina Moxley's 1970's Cork is vibrating with testosterone, an avid inquisitiveness about the function and effect of copulation. It is summer: days linger, with ample time for unholy speculation. The Pope has yet to visit his beloved "young people of Ireland", but he might be shocked by their prurience about the mechanics of kissing, the analogies between the male member and elements of the full Irish breakfast. Language is brutally direct - but all the F***'s and C***'s are uttered with self-conscious giggles - and euphemisms for bodily

parts abound.

This is, as Moxley says, about a "stumble towards sexual awakening". Even if it is comic in the telling, this awakening for her characters is a painful process to satisfy a relentless, itching curiosity. Off-stage are parents - uninformative, domineering or neglectful - and an intimidating church. The "young people" must find their own way, with disapproval rather than help.

Moxley has populated her stage with needy youngsters: Dan, infantile mind in an adult body; Dolores, timidly stepping towards maturity; Noel, randy and feckless, edging towards work and parenthood; Ber, caught by the conflicting drives of hormones and ignorance ("We were only standing up"). But the Gallowglass revival of this 1995 play seems to be mostly about Cactus, a triumphant creation, a tricky slip of a girl, who cuts an anarchic swathe through the last summer of innocence. Sarah Greene gives a startling performance in this role. She inhabits the character in word, tone, gesture and physique. She holds the atten-

tion of the viewer – controlling, seductive, defiant, deviant – and leaves one questioning the motivation of her actions: is it malevolence, mischief, curiosity? What impels her? An urge to inflict pain, to take pleasure in watching the consequences, or an unswerving drive for self-satisfaction? She is a kind of wild child, an untrammelled force of energy that plucks what she wants from the tree of life at will.

The eponymous hero, Danti-Dan, presents more difficulty. There has long been a fascination in drama with the exploitation of the simpleton (Lenny Small, Steinbeck's "developmentally disabled" migrant; John Mills' imbecile, Michael in *Ryan's Daughter*; and most recently, Pat Shortt's Josie in *Garage*) and the fate of the bewildered innocent coming up against the mysteries of sexuality. Ian Lloyd Anderson strives hard to get inside the role of the man-child/child-man, but somehow – even with the long-shorts, the lariat, the lines about Trigger and Rawhide – this cross between cowboy and car-counting nerd doesn't ring with the same authenticity that Moxley finds with Cactus.

The play thrives best on its salty dialogue (the abrasive rattle of Cork slagging) and sensual imagery from a bygone decade: the tang of cheese 'n' onion, the smell of the ironing, wet togs wrapped in a towel. It falters be-

cause the summer has to end and plot has to intrude. The melodramatic twist (innocence must die – no give-away here, we've been too well schooled in the story of beauty and the dolt) is less impressive than the spicy sum of the parts.

THIS IS STILL LIFE

Devised by the cast and Brokentalkers

Dublin Youth Theatre

Directed by Feidlim Cannon and Gary Keegan

Set & Costume Design: Lian Bell

Sound Design: Peter Morrow

Lighting Design: Sarah Jane Shiels

Technical Director: Killian Waters

Project Arts Centre

14 -18 Aug 2007. Reviewed 15 Aug.

CAUCASIAN CHALK CIRCLE

By Bertolt Brecht,

in a version by Frank McGuinness

National Youth Theatre

Directed by György Vidovszky

Set & Costume Design: Fergal Murphy

Composer: Béla Faragó

Lighting Design: Eamon Fox

Choreographer: Eszter Gyevi-Biró

Peacock Theatre

28 Aug – 1 Sept 2007. Reviewed 1 Sept.

BY SEONA MAC RÉAMOINN

WHILE EMPLOYING CONTRASTING STYLES in content and tradition, these two youth theatre productions treaded some common ground, and engaged in parallel choices that gave particular definition to their very different

productions. Both Dublin Youth Theatre (DYT) and National Youth Theatre (NYT) were clearly aware of the importance of presentation. Both engaged very talented stage designers, suggesting they were also aware that with large casts the physical space is very important, and is an integral part of a new play - in the case of *This is Still Life* - or in re-imagining an established work such as *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*.

Overall there was imagination and perspective in their choices of staging. Lian Bell for DYT and Ferdia Murphy for NYT are both designers with a very good take on creating environment, and both excel not only in the representation of a specific context for a play but also the inhabiting of that space by the performers.

Another way in which both companies explore parallel routes was in their choice of work. Both of them told stories: in the case of DYT it was about making new work and collaborating with the actors about their own lives; for the NYT it was the play-within-a-play. The added dimension of conscious storytelling in both was enriching. It explored memory and its inherent fallibility but also its importance for personal integrity and individuality and for a communal sense of who we are and where we belong.

This Is Still Life was a construction from the ground up, with the in-

spired collaboration with Broken Talkers as directors and writers, shaping and determining the route the play would take. Feidlim Cannon and Gary Keegan have been acquiring a reputation for site-specific work, and their involvement was instrumental in giving this show an edgy, contemporary urban feel, with a strong visual dimension. This was about lives where people collide, sometimes haphazardly, and about the memories we take on our individual and collective journeys.

The narrative was in different segments, dancing from one set of memory fragments to another. These shards of memories were rooted in the hilarious and poignant memories of childhood and young adulthood, of school and school plays, while a brilliantly recreated photograph of a school play revives and underlines the unreliability of such recollections. The remembering moved on to more personal and individually difficult memories which needed to be excavated with tenderness, and often with pain as they involved insecurities around home, divorce, love or loneliness. But interspersed also there were snapshots intimating the way that the current and future generation's lives would be transformed by media.

In Lian Bell's imaginative, flexible and multi-world set, she created endless separate spaces for memories to



Dublin Youth Theatre/ *Brokentalkers' This Is Still Life*

be re-enacted and reinhabited. Technology, as you might expect, was an integral part of this production, and finely tuned. Particularly memorable were the video inserts which demonstrated that far from being over manipulated by media, these 'screenagers' are well up to subverting it for their own entertainment and ambitions. They also seamlessly counterpointed the earlier recollections of individual events, from a Holy Communion to an absent parent.

A recreation of a Spanish TV soap was hilarious, but there was a dark side looming in this urban jun-

gle. A gently knowing take on an iconic music video lured audience and characters away from a familiar view of their own city onto the streets with no name. It showed that it is possible for a city to be atmospheric but also alienating, scary and even unknown. The thriller element was underlined with pulsating music, and spliced shots of empty classrooms could have referred to films including *Bowling for Columbine*. This play showed that the iPod generation is alive, alert and witty, as testified by their final mobile-phone messaging stunt with the audience.

The Caucasian Chalk Circle was a more traditional, though ambitious play, whose environment is a recreated Soviet peasant and rural past. Not a familiar place for this generation, who probably know Russia more via its media profile as a home of entrepreneurs and owners of football clubs. So there are memories to be reclaimed here and stories to be told, and a strong grasp of the narrative is required. This is a confident and visually engaging production where the marriage of text and direction works in an invigorating and coherent way. Frank McGuinness's version of Brecht's play is porous and fluent in texture, and György Vidovszky's energetic direction has an instinctive feel for the rhythm of the text: he leads his young, spirited ensemble on their epic journey from civil war to surreal courtroom drama, helped enormously by Ferdia Murphy's imaginative design.

This is a play within a play and in that sense is a great choice for a youth production, as it invites participation in artifice and offers theatrical perspective. The journey in the play is both real and imagined; there are miles to be travelled, obstacles to be overcome, as a child is abandoned by his mother and hidden by a servant girl at the outbreak of civil war. Our heroine passes through many stages and debates about life, love, betrayal and friendship in her endeavours to

protect the child, before facing a legal wrangle with the biological mother.

Ferdia Murphy's design allows for action on two levels, so that the large cast can move easily. He creates spaces within spaces for smaller incidents and minor encounters that need not dominate the whole. The use of ladders, barrels and cupboards that double as exits, entrances and rooms is vital to the success of keeping the pace steady in a complicated, highly physical and energetic production. The grey costuming for the peasants and the occasional swathes of scarlet for proletarian protest are well thought out, and Vidovszky's fellow Hungarian team of choreographer and sound designer makes this an ensemble production as well as performance.

In Brechtian style, there are songs to be sung and they are also well woven into the production. Vidovszky's directorial skill in marshalling such a large and, at times, uneven cast seems effortless. He succeeds in revealing talent and encouraging enthusiasm without disturbing the essential ensemble tradition. They engage us and we journey with them in body and spirit, without a pause, right up to the final session as it unfolds before the comically corrupt judge. Then we come to the line in the sand, and that infamous chalk circle is drawn to determine judgment and offer a lesson that transcends borders and time.



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By Sam Shepard
Directed by Annie Ryan

**Three Atmospheric
Studies**

The Forsythe Company
Dublin Dance Festival

The Burial at Thebes

A version of Sophocles' Antigone
By Seamus Heaney
Directed by Patrick Mason

The Seafarer

By Conor McPherson
Directed by Jimmy Fay

The Brothers Size

By Tarell Alvin McCraney
Directed by Tea Alagic

Three Sisters

By Anton Chekhov
in a version by Brian Friel
Directed by David Leveaux

Big Love

By Charles Mee
Directed by Selina Cartmell

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