

irishtheatre MAGAZINE

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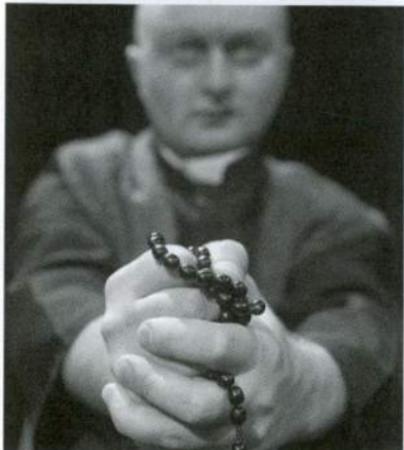


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A Vision Thing

NORTH IS NORTH AND SOUTH IS SOUTH," declared founder members of the Ulster theatre in 1904. A century on, that statement still rings true. A gap in informed understanding between theatre north and south seems always to have existed, and guest editing this edition from Belfast has reinforced this impression. It is not just a question of practical logistical differences, though that is part of it. It is the conceptual: what is burning news in the south may barely raise an eyebrow in the north, and theatre work resonating strongly with one may speak to the other only slightly.

Where interplay has taken place historically, however, the results have proved thought-provoking, even inspiring. So this issue sees a definite northern focus, seeking to enhance north/south theatre understanding, and see how each might illuminate the other. For overall, whatever the systems in place, one thing is surely shared by all: a concern for the theatre creator, and the clearing of creative space for them to flourish. This lies at the heart of what we do, wherever we do it.

Salutary reminder of this came recently, when theatre practitioners packed a Dublin church to say a final goodbye to

Whatever the systems
in place, one thing is
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theatre creator

Eilis Mullan, former artistic director of Dublin Youth Theatre and director of the National Association for Youth Drama, who died in June. Eilis was an inspirational figure to many in this generation of theatre makers. In her packed life, much of it when the arts were neither feted nor courted by official Ireland, she combined fierce determination, practical *nous* and a vision for theatre. At the heart of that was respect for the creative process as being, not at the end of a line of wheels and cogs, but at the beginning of everything. And with this vision, Eilis Mullan was instrumental in establishing the now-flourishing youth theatre movement, proving such an approach can be effective and get big things done.

At a time of beginnings — new Arts Plans and personnel in the Republic, and talks aimed at restoring devolution in Northern Ireland — such examples serve us well. We do not need to keep reinventing wheels. We need systems that follow from, not pre-empt, vision for theatre. And we need respect for creators and the creative process at the heart of that vision. Otherwise, form-filling may become the new theatre. And there won't be a queue for tickets. —Ophelia Byrne



Whose Show is it Anyway?

T HAD BEEN RUMOURED AND HINTED AT FOR MONTHS, AND LAST week, it finally hit the news: The Abbey Theatre's production of *The Shaughraun*, directed by John McColgan, is to tour North America from January 2006, with more than 20 weeks of performances pencilled in at theatres from Toronto to Boston to Washington DC, and

perhaps beyond. "We're looking at Broadway," McColgan told an enquiring journalist, "and Broadway's looking at us."

Hardly surprising. The story broke not in the Irish media but in the U.S. entertainment bible *Variety*, which splashed the story on their website on 26 August, under the headline "Putting Dion in Neon." As reported by *Variety*'s Bob Hofler, McColgan and Moya Doherty's Abhann Productions, best known as the producers of *Riverdance*, are producing the tour of the Abbey Theatre's production of Dion Boucicault's melodrama, which premiered on the Abbey main-stage in June and which, it is now confirmed, will make a return visit there for 12 weeks from 24 November.

Contacted for confirmation of the announcement of the North American tour, Brian Jackson, Abbey managing director, initially called the *Variety* article "speculative in nature".

John McColgan — Abbey board member, chair of its Centenary fundraising committee, director of this production and co-director of Abhann — sees it differently. While the *Variety* article may have "happened slightly earlier than normal," it "will help to give a context of success in the minds of the American theatre owners and promoters." He says that the article was not speculative at all. Nor, he is quick to add, does it indicate that the Abbey and Abhann are in any way out of synch.

"From my point of view," he tells *itm*, "it's an Abbey production. The Abbey are very excited and we're very excited and we're all singing from the same hymn sheet."

He and Abbey artistic director Ben Barnes have been discussing the possibility of a tour, McColgan says, since early in the show's initial run, and Barnes encouraged him to bring prospective American bookers to see the show. "That's what we did," says McColgan. "So we were working in parallel." McColgan says that he and Barnes have based their discussions around the understanding that Abhann, as an outside organisation, will tour *The Shaughraun*.

"In my negotiations with Ben [Barnes], we always said that if this show was a hit that we [Abhann] would look at being the producing arm of it, in what would be a normal arrangement for the Abbey to get their appropriate royalties and appropriate crediting and all of that."

McColgan volunteers the reasons why Abhann are the right independent commercial producers for the job: "The fact that I've directed this show, the fact that we [Abhann] have enormous experience over the past ten years touring in the United States — those are both obvious reasons why that would be a good idea. It's high risk. It's an expensive show."

Well, yes, exactly, and there's the rub. It was clear that *The Shaughraun* ben-

efited from a big budget: many critics commented on the overlay of a lavish and strangely familiar aesthetic onto the play's hoary 19th century blarney — five ex-*Riverdance* dancers, an onstage band, several highly produced song-and-dance numbers, and so forth.

In June, Abbey chairperson Eithne Healy confirmed with *itm* that *The Shaughraun* was the most costly production of the season: "We wouldn't



BROADWAY BOUND?

normally spend that much money on a show," said Healy, "but this is our centenary year." The show was also, to its credit, the biggest box office success of the year, playing to sold-out houses in the latter stages of its run; hence, it would seem, its return to the mainstage at Christmas.

Lurking under McColgan's citation of "expense" and "risk" as reasons for Abhann, rather than the Abbey, to tour

what's news

The Shaughraun seems to be the Abbey's current financial woes, particularly as regards the Centenary programme, which has not generated nearly as much income as had been hoped or expected.

"Maybe we were overly ambitious," Healy admitted to *The Sunday Times* in July. The fundraising "hasn't moved on as quickly as we would have liked," echoed Barnes in *The Irish Times* a month later. In that article, Barnes dismissed the rumoured figure of a €800,000 deficit for the Centenary campaign; based on reports thus far, *itm* estimates €500,000 as a more reasonable figure. Recently and very controversially, the Abbey pulled two long-planned productions from the Centenary programme in the Peacock theatre, a move that Healy confirmed was the result of financial difficulties.

As further rationale for Abhann to tour the production, McColgan says that under its "constitution" (by which we understand him to mean its Memorandum and Articles of Association) the Abbey is not "mandated" to take a risk on an international tour. This is not to say the Abbey cannot tour — two international tours are highly touted elements of the Centenary programme itself — but rather that it cannot endanger its government subsidy in doing so. Given its current financial state, however, the Abbey hardly seems to be in a position to undertake another international tour. But it could well benefit from the kudos and licensing fee generated by a tour produced by a company as well-oiled and well-connected as Abhann.

By the time this article appears, one expects that these issues will have featured centrally at the Annual General Meeting of the Abbey Board and Council

A Critic's SpiegelForum

This year sees a very special *irish theatre magazine* Critics' Forum. A by-now annual feature of festival time, bringing leading critics together to discuss what's on offer, 2004 sees the Forum focus on one specific, mammoth undertaking: the Abbey's "Eighteen Plays in Fourteen Days" as part of the Dublin Theatre Festival. Organised in conjunction with the Dublin Fringe Festival, the Critic's Forum takes place at the SpiegelTent on George's Dock, Saturday 9 October at 1pm. It's free, so come by, have a sandwich and get a whole century of theatre in two hours.

on 4 September, at which, it is understood, that much-debated figure of the Centenary deficit will be revealed. Meanwhile, the necessity of Abbey staff redundancies has been revealed: a restructuring of the Abbey organisation involving the contracts of 1/3 of its workforce was the subject of a staff meeting held 2 September as *itm* went to print. It is understood that Ben Barnes, currently in Australia with *The Gigli Concert* tour, did not attend.

These redundancies were presumably made necessary at least partially by the deficit in the Centenary budget.

McColgan may not feel conflicted by his various responsibilities, insisting that his roles as board member, show director and now international producer

will possess "an absolutely very clear relationship, which will be clearly defined, clearly articulated." He certainly seems to have taken on several challenges this year: to successfully direct an expensive hit in Dublin, to re-establish Abhann in the lucrative American market, and to ensure the financial well-being of the struggling Abbey Theatre.

Two out of three ain't bad.

TOURS FOR ALL

Speaking of world domination ... now's your chance. This year's Dublin Fringe Festival has successfully inveigled a bevy of international philanthropists and theatre impresarios to the city. Their purpose? To find art.

The Andrew Mellon Foundation (which offers grants in higher education, museums, art conservation and the performing arts) together with the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation (which disburses support grants to the performing arts, wildlife preservations and medical research, drawn from financial assets worth about \$1.5 billion) will converge on the capital from 6-10 October when the Fringe hosts the annual Leading National Theatres Conference.

Taking place in Dublin's Clarence Hotel (where most delegates are also staying — hint, hint) and the Fringe's Spiegeltent venue, more than 30 delegates from American theatre venues and European cultural institutions will partake in intensive

conference work while piloting a project to support ensemble-based theatre groups. This will include "culturally specific" theatres and new work that is not necessarily text-based. According to their mission statement, "This is a sector of the theatre community which the foundations feel could expand their relationship to presenters and resident theatres who are traditionally resource rich."

Hell, yeah! "We are looking at how to encourage ensemble theatres to develop relationships with presenters and residence theatres," continues the statement. Delegates include representatives from such US theatres as the Arena Stage, Lincoln Center Theatre and Saratoga International Theatre Institute, as well as European cultural institutions such as the Dutch Consulate and the Goethe Institute.

The annual conference occurs in a different location each year, and word is that Dublin Fringe board member, Tammy Dillon, has been instrumental in attracting the consortium to Dublin. Bea Kelleher,

executive producer of the Fringe, explained to *itm* that theatre companies infrequently tour to or from the United States and that the conference presents an opportunity to redress that situation.

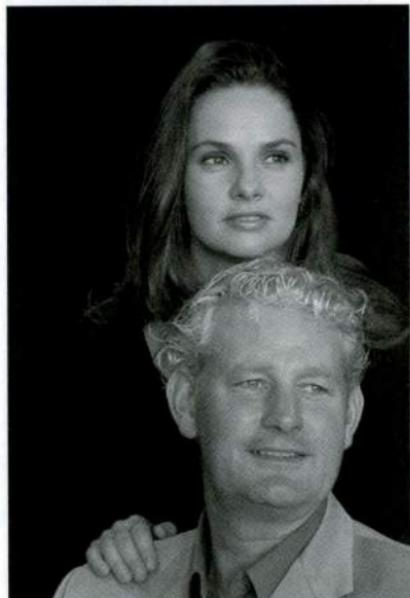
Between a reception specially laid on by the Department of Arts, Sport and Tourism together with discussion panels featuring such speakers as Fiach MacConghail and John Waters, the conference will examine how international touring functions, how the Irish arts have

Networking

The 11th annual Theatre Shop Conference – a key international networking event – will take place at Liberty Hall, Eden Quay on Friday 1st October (10am - 5.30pm). Further information from their website or 01 6704906. Also from Theatre Shop: the third edition of the invaluable Irish Theatre Handbook is now available...

what's news

evolved and will also present the opportunity for discussions between art makers and commissioners. Delegates will naturally be curious to see productions from both the Fringe and the Dublin Theatre Festival. You know where to find them ...



UPCOMING PRODUCTIONS

For 2004's festivals, see dublintheatrefestival.com, fringefest.com, and belfastfestival.com... Following its run at the Civic Tallaght, Quare Hawks/ The Civic Theatre *Speaking In Tongues* by Andrew Bovell (pictured) plays Mermaid Arts Centre (21-25 Sep); Everyman Cork (27 Sep-2 Oct); Backstage Longford (4-6 Oct); Belltable Limerick (7-9 Oct) and Siamsa Tire (11-16 Oct) ... Kabosh presents *Elizabeth* by Dario Fo, opening at Belfast O'Mac (21-25 Sep), then touring Monaghan, Enniskillen and Armagh before playing the Dublin Fringe Festival at the

Viking Centre (5-9 Oct) ... Following its Edinburgh success, Storyteller's *Hard to Believe* by Conall Morrison plays Mermaid Arts Centre (30 Sep-2 Oct), An Grianan (5-6 Oct), Cork's Opera House (Half Moon Theatre, 11-16 Oct), Watergate Kilkenny (18-19 Oct), Limerick's Belltable (20-21 Oct); and Belfast's Studio (22-23 Oct) ... Upstate Theatre Company/ Patrick Kavanagh Centre present the premiere of *The Green Fool*, after Patrick Kavanagh, adapted by Declan Gorman, opening at Droichead Arts Centre on 6 Oct, then playing the Patrick Kavanagh Centre (11-12 Oct) followed by an extensive countrywide tour ... *Fusion*, a new piece of theatre-in-education by Kevin Lavin in collaboration with TEAM, opens FIZZ FEST Arts Festival for Young People at Space @ The Helix (11-13 Oct), and tours post-primary schools to 17 Dec ... The Corn Exchange presents *Dublin by Lamplight* by Michael West in collaboration with the company at Project Space Upstairs (28 Oct-20 Nov) ... Next from Prime Cut is *A Number* by Caryl Churchill, which opens at Letterkenny's An Grianan (1 Nov) and then tours Down and Lisburn before playing Project (19-23 Oct) as part of the Fringe Festival, and Belfast, Coleraine, Derry and Galway ... Replay Productions present *Fairytales Heart* by Philip Ridley at O'Mac (1-6 Nov), Market Place Theatre, Armagh 15-17 Nov), and Island Arts Centre, Lisburn (24-25 Nov) ... Blue Raincoat stage *A Brief Taste Of Lightening* by Malcolm Hamilton at Sligo's Factory (8-13 Nov) which then tours to An Grianan (16 Nov), Mermaid (19-20 Nov), and Galway's Town Hall (25-27 Nov) ... The Helix' autumn programme includes Fishamble's premiere of *Pilgrims in the Park* by Jim O'Hanlon (22-27 Nov) ... ©

Casting a MAGIC-NET

MAGIC-NET, a major three-year European theatre collaboration project, came to Cork in June for its culminating festival, *Isn't It Magic*. **PÁDRAIC WHYTE** reports.

REPRESENTING THE CULMINATION OF MAGIC-NET, an eclectic three-year European theatre project, the *Isn't It Magic* theatre festival in Cork encompassed seven original and innovative European co-productions staged from 2-6 June 2004. A rich and varied event, it featured productions inspired by the work of diverse figures from Shakespeare to Orwell. ■MAGIC-NET began in 2001, when with the aid of

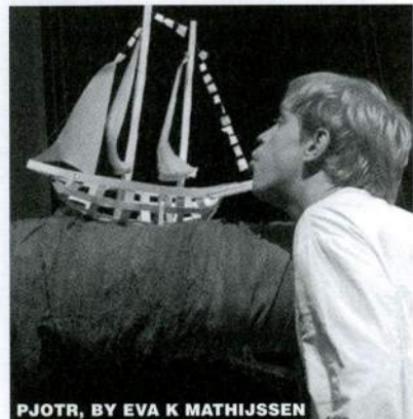
European Commission 'Culture 2000' funding, 15 theatre companies from 12 countries came together to create a Europe-wide theatre network. As well as developing international co-productions, this aimed to initiate artistic exchanges between directors, actors, dramaturgs and theatre educators, and artistic exchanges with and between young people. Various models of working with young people were adopted by the different theatres, while classic European texts were the project starting point. Since then, over 500 artists and young people have participated, while annual meetings have been held

in Frankfurt (Oder) in 2002 and Palmela, Portugal, in 2003. The third and final meeting in Cork, hosted by participant company Boomerang, showed the results of the three-year process.

The themes and issues explored in many of the productions were often highly complex and abstract, yet offered particularly high quality forms of theatre. Such was the case in *Hours of the Devil*, devised by Teatro O Bando (Portugal), Teatr Mumerus (Poland), carrousel (Germany) and Theater an der Sihl (Switzerland), and staged at the Granary on 5 June. Adapted from the writing of Portuguese author

what's news

Fernando Pessoa, the production was extremely relevant to contemporary global culture and politics, exploring the similarities and differences between three major world religions: Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. Under the excellent direction of João Brites, three actors, each speaking a different language, displayed superb physical aptitude. The complexity of the piece and



PJOTR, BY EVA K MATHIJSSSEN

the highly coded *mis-en-scène* demanded an extremely theatre-literate audience.

At the other extreme was an adaptation of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by carrousel Theater in collaboration with het MUZtheater (the Netherlands), Teatro Guirigai (Spain), Teatret Vårt (Norway) and Pilot Theatre Company (UK). Playing Firkin Crane on June 5, this focused on the adventures of four young lovers in modern-day Athens airport. Unfortunately too much emphasis was placed on contemporary cultural references to the detriment of plot and characterisation, leading to an oversimplification of Shakespeare's text.

Gerald Bauer's *Searching for the Enemy*,

produced by Boomerang (Ireland), Theatre Der Jugend (Austria) and Shade Interactive (Netherlands) at Firkin Crane on 6 June, struck a satisfactory balance. Inspired by George Orwell's *1984*, it made the act of accessing and exploring often very difficult themes effortless for audience members of any age (*see review*).

A pity then that festival audiences did not feature young people in more significant numbers, particularly at the lower end of 15-25 target age group. Young people have been active project participants throughout, says Trish Edelstein, a festival co-coordinator and Boomerang artistic director, and parallel events involving affiliated groups were held at previous annual festivals. But this was not possible at *Isn't It Magic*, she says, due to timing and the complex co-ordination of this international project. The festival dates suited the many professional companies involved in the seven co-productions, but not the youth exchange element, and the latter will be held later this year in Berlin. And while the shows presented were "aimed at young audiences, they were for all audiences", Edelstein believing that "the kind of audience that will be open to seeing foreign language plays, by companies from countries where theatrical styles can be markedly varied from what we usually see here, is something that needs to be cultivated."

To this, the Cork MAGIC-NET festival can be viewed as having made a valuable contribution. It was also successful in creating an exhilarating new forum for European cultural exchange resulting in exciting works. Though this project is ending, participants are hoping to continue the network, and have begun a new project based on *The Odyssey*. Hopefully this new voyage will also reach our shores. 

There's another major theatre birthday this year, argues **HUGH ODLING-SMEE**, and it too deserves to be celebrated.

THERE ARE TWO THEATRE BIRTHDAYS this year. One, as everyone knows, is that of the Abbey, being rightfully marked with a year-long celebration sparking both fireworks and erudition as befits 100 years of noted dramatic life. The other, little known, is the Ulster Literary Theatre (ULT), which began Ulster drama 100 years ago in December 1904. This company lasted only thirty years, had its best times before the First World War, and ended its days regurgitating its greatest hits like a fading rock star. Not much to rejoice about there then?

Not true. We should be loudly celebrating this unsung collection of geniuses, solicitors and house painters, for without their efforts as the first serious theatre company in the north, today's companies, writers and practitioners would not have had the foundation on which, knowingly or not, they have built.

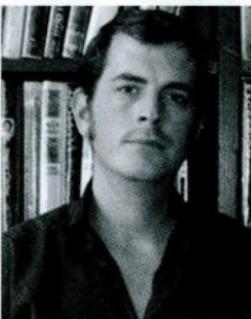
The ULT actually wanted to be a branch of the Irish Literary Theatre, but was rebuffed by Yeats and the parent body. Unconcerned, the ULT declared "Damn Yeats, we'll write our own." And from 1904 on they did so, producing only new theatre works in which, in the words of one fledgling journalist, for "the first time I saw the kind of people that I knew and lived among in Co. Antrim and Co. Derry."

The influence of that action continues through to today. *Over the Bridge* (1960),

Pentecost (1985) and *Caught Red Handed* (2003) exhibit the same impulse bred by the ULT: that of putting on stage the ridiculousness, passions, wit, and false idols seen on Ulster streets over the century. The ULT began a constant straining for a way to analyse northern society without having to be unionist or nationalist, but without rejecting roots, that remains a dilemma for many of today's theatre writers, directors and actors.

Who knows what would have become of this work if, like the Abbey, it had been accorded status and money. Instead, the north's inability to see theatre as a proper job for a grown up (which lingers to this day) stifled the ULT's growth, condemning the artists in the company to either head south or to London. An independent theatre company that could pack Belfast's large-scale Grand Opera House with new writing was left to fall apart.

But if a birthday means anything, it means reflecting on the past to move into the future. Today's northern theatre practitioners can and should look to the ULT as the wellspring of their work. They should take courage that their pre-occupations and standing are built on 100 years of tradition. That deserves to be celebrated.



Hugh Odling-Smee is Curator of the Theatre and Performing Arts Archive at Belfast's Linen Hall Library.



Copyright Considerations

Copyright in theatre recently became a high-profile issue with the widely-reported *Stones in His Pockets* case at London's High Court. A complicated decision on a complicated case resulted (see over). But what about Irish copyright law? What are the industry standards here — and the issues of which Irish theatre makers should be aware? **BELINDA McKEON** investigates, while **KAREN FRICKER** looks at the *Stones* case itself.

THEATRE IS A COLLABORATIVE ART. A WRITER BRINGS a script to a director, ideas and suggestions flow, and changes occur. The director brings the script to a rehearsal room, with actors and a designer, and, depending on the nature of the working relationship between them, further changes in language, character and plot may occur — large or small. A work devised between all parties involved complicates the matter even further. To whom does such a work belong? Should this be established in more than just an unspoken understanding? And if things go sour, as they did in the recent *Stones in His*

COPYRIGHT CONSIDERATIONS

Pockets case, on whose side are the dice likely to fall? Does the *Stones* case suggest that, in legal terms, the idea of authorship is primarily bound up with the act of writing, and that everything else is considered as merely a helpful addition?

The problem is that theatre companies tend not to have, or to use, formal contracts, and that is bad practice. If you commission and pay someone to write a play, even on the promise of future revenue, then it obviously should be done in a professional fashion, and it should be done in contract.

Where copyright is concerned, the answer is yes, says Jonathan Newman, a barrister who teaches and practices in the area of intellectual copyright. "Copyright can only apply to what is written down. It affects the form, not the content; the fixed mode, not the idea." Ideas and suggestions from sources other than the original author which shape that form, then, no matter how central they may prove to any eventual success, are not protected by the Irish Copyright and Related Rights Act 2000. In Irish copyright law, just as in the UK, neither does the protection accorded to the author of a play extend to anyone who may revise or make minor additions to that play. The form itself — in this case, the literary or dramatic form, must be clearly contributed to in order for joint ownership of a work to be recognised. The key point here is not so much what this law excludes — ideas, revisions or additions — as what it can yield to include. Copyright rests with the author; but in cases where the contributions of another person or persons are crucial to the form taken by a play or another piece of theatre, the law will recognise a multiplicity of authors. "Under Irish law," says solicitor James Hickey, head of Entertainment Law at Matheson Ormsby Prentice, "the author is still potentially a number of people." In addition to the individual who first came up with the idea for a play, and wrote the first version of it, the director who collaborated to create further contributions, and the actors who developed it significantly through weeks of improvisation could be credited as authors. In this way, collaborative work could be reasonably well served by copyright law, with each artist involved in the creation of the work being protected to the extent of their contributions of their original work. The issue, however, is how this can come about. And this, says Hickey, is part of the problem in Ireland.

"The problem is that theatre companies tend not to have, or to use, formal contracts, and that is bad practice," he explains. "If you commission and pay someone to write a play, even on the promise of future revenue, then it obviously should be done in a professional fashion, and it should be done in contract, setting out the rights of the theatre company and of the original author."

The judgement in the Brighton versus Jones case rested on the fact that Jones had signed a contract, as author, under a standard agreement negotiated by the Writers' Guild of Great Britain — the Theatrical Management Association writer's

The Stones Copyright Case

KAREN
FRICKER
enters the
wonderfully
baffling
world of
British
copyright
law

THOUGH IT HAS BEEN WIDELY REPORTED that Marie Jones was the victor of the *Stones in his Pockets* London High Court case brought against her by Pam Brighton, the actual result was not so clear-cut. The judge who decided the case declared that it could not be said that one party had wholly succeeded and one party had wholly failed. Jones successfully defended her authorship of the play, but Brighton was dealt a potentially powerful card, in that the judge ruled that Brighton "is a person whose consent is needed for new contracts by Ms Jones" to exploit the copyright of the 1999 version of the play. How could this have happened, given that Brighton's claims of co-authorship were overturned?

Welcome to the wonderfully baffling world of British copyright law. This stuff is confusing, but it's important: the *Stones* case was the first in British legal history to examine the copyright provisions of the standard TMA (Theatre Management Association) writer's contract, and is considered to have potential ramifications for other media, including film and music.

We hope the following will make things a bit clearer. If it doesn't, please don't sue us.

1996: Marie Jones writes and Pam Brighton directs a new play, *Stones in his Pockets*, for Dubblejoint Theatre Company in Belfast. Jones signs a TMA contract with Dubblejoint for *Stones*. The play opens and is a mild success.

1999: Brighton and Jones have parted ways. A version of *Stones*, rewritten by Jones, opens at the Lyric Theatre, Belfast, with Jones' husband Ian McElhinney as director. The production is a mega-success, transferring to London's West End and beyond, with the result that Jones is now widely believed to be very wealthy.

NOVEMBER 2001: Solicitors working for Brighton and Dubblejoint notify Jones (in what, in legal-ese, is called a "letter before action") that each party is bringing a case against Jones. (We don't have the space here to consider Dubblejoint's case, as it was not about copyright).

COPYRIGHT CONSIDERATIONS

It was accepted by all involved that the 1999 version of the play reproduced substantial parts of the 1996 version; it remained to be proven if Jones had indeed incorporated all or part of the draft opening script into the 1996 version.

Brighton's primary claim is that she was a joint author with Jones of the 1996 script of *Stones*, based on contributions she says she made during rehearsals in 1996. Her secondary claim is that, in the 1999 version of the play, Jones had infringed Brighton's copyright on what became known as the "draft opening script" of the 1996 version – notes written by Brighton outlining action and potential dialogue for the first scenes of the play, which Brighton had given Jones, voluntarily and unsolicited, after workshops and before Jones started writing the play. It was accepted by all involved that the 1999 version of the play reproduced substantial parts of the 1996 version; it remained to be proven if Jones had indeed incorporated all or part of the draft opening script into the 1996 version.

MAY 2004: The High Court sits in London to hear the case.

18 MAY 2004: Mr. Justice Park gives his verdict. He dismisses Brighton's claims to co-authorship of the 1996 version, as she did not devise dialogue or make a significant contribution to the plot of the play; her rehearsal room contributions had been interpretative and not creative. Further, the fact that Jones had a signed TMA contract with Dubblejoint as writer of the script was a legal objection to the joint authorship claim.

However, the judge rules that Jones had used Brighton's draft opening script in the creation of the opening of the 1996 script – not her suggested dialogue, but elements of plot and action. Because Brighton freely gave that script to Jones, she was not initially in infringement of Brighton's copyright by using elements of that script. However, the 2001 "letter before action" effectively revoked the implied consent for Jones to use the draft opening script. The court rules that Jones cannot in future exploit the 1999 script without Brighton's permission. Jones tells the press that it is now likely that certain sections of the play will be rewritten or removed.

Following the judgment, the parties agree on a license fee of 12.5% for use of the draft opening script, the judge having indicated that he intends to award a 10-20% licence fee.

19 MAY 2004: Dubblejoint (for which Brighton serves as production director) issues a press release calling the result "much more a draw than a victory" for Jones, because each side had won one of the two aspects of the case.

25 MAY 2004: Mr. Justice Park rules that Brighton must pay her own costs and 70% of Jones' legal costs for the case, a figure estimated to be about £400,000 sterling. Jones' solicitor says that Jones has been declared "decisively the overall winner" of the case. Brighton says she is "shocked" and that she "will probably go bankrupt."

agreement of 1993. In Ireland, says Loughlin Deegan, Executive Producer of Rough Magic, such a uniformly agreed contract for commissioning plays, or other arrangements with writers, does not yet exist; contracts used by theatre companies have, until now, been standard commissioning contracts with no comprehensive clause in relation to copyright.

But all this is about to change. Deegan, among others, has long been vocal about the need to draw up an industry standard contract, and the blueprints of two such contracts — one for commissioning writers, one for performers — have recently been commissioned by Theatre Forum, and are available in sample form to view (by members) on its website. The sample commissioning contract, says Deegan, "tries to establish clearly that actors have no ownership of the work." Clause 17.1 of the sample contract states that the writer "is or will be the sole owner of the copyright in the Play." Meanwhile, the sample performers' contract "grants to the performer all copyright in ... the products of the performer's services under this agreement throughout the world in all media." "I think it is right and proper that, in best practice, ultimately, copyright rests with the writer," says Deegan. James Hickey agrees: "The company should agree, in the contract, with the writer that the distribution of rights is between the company and the writers, but not to anyone else. Everyone else is excluded, and if anyone else is involved in contributing ideas, they should enter into a contract that they give any copyright in the contributions to the company. If you want to avoid problems, you have to do this formally and professionally."

Yet work of the kind in which it can be difficult to single out an original author or authors — collaborative, improvisational or devised theatre — is on the increase in Ireland, and it's here, Deegan acknowledges, that there exists "a grey area" even in the newly proposed contracts. "With regard to co-ownership, there is nothing yet," he says. "If your work is more collaborative by definition, or design, then there is no industry protocol



DEEGAN

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If your work is more collaborative by design, then there is no industry protocol out there — that will probably have to be a separate contract.

COPYRIGHT CONSIDERATIONS

out there yet. That will probably have to be a separate contract."

The key phrase here is "collaborative by definition." Because unless writers, directors and performers engaged in a collaborative creative process take care to define the nature of that engagement, they leave themselves vulnerable to loss, disappointment or even exploitation of one kind or another where copyright is concerned. "This is something, in particular, that younger companies need to be aware of," says Deegan. "Because it might be grand when you're starting out on the work, and you say "we're all friends", but suddenly the play is invited to Edinburgh. And then Geneva, then Vienna, Montreal. And suddenly someone is making a huge amount of money."

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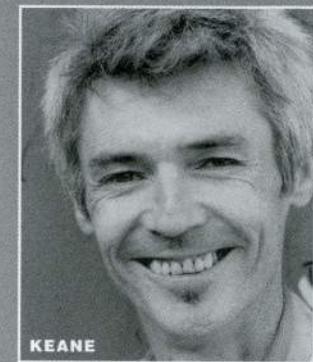
And someone else could be losing out. "Once in every ten years, it happens," says Hickey, "there is a successful play. And then there are problems over bits of paper and people having signed over their rights. It's like a house fire; you only ever look back at what insurance you have when there is a problem." And in the collaborative context, where everyone may appear to be an author, he says, it is crucial to draw up a formal agreement of copyright at the outset, setting out exactly who the authors are. "There are usually driving forces behind these things," says Hickey. "Usually one or two leading forces, and they should be acknowledged as the copyright owners." Even if there are more than two leading forces, such an agreement, while technically more intricate, must be reached. "Four people working in a theatre company, with a close-knit relationship, agreeing to co-own; that is a perfectly sensible solution."

Technically, there are two options for the construction of collaborative agreements. Hickey uses an analogy from the music business to explain them. The Lennon-McCartney solution involves two people recognised as authors, to whom all others involved in the shaping of the piece sign over their copyright. The other option, where all (or most of) those involved are contractually acknowledged as co-authors, and co-owners of copyright, is colloquially known as 'the U2 solution'. Both are workable solutions, says Hickey, "as long as you work out that it is one or the other." But both, potentially, can give rise to strain, and authors should be aware of this in drawing up contracts. "In the first case, there can be strain because those who sign over their rights think that they made a contribution. In the second, sometimes the lead contributor comes to think the arrangement unfair," says Hickey. "Neither solution is ideal, I can't recommend one over the other. You have to assess each case on the facts and do your best." Copyright law exists not only to protect the author or authors of a play, of course; the company which invests in producing it must also safeguard its

intellectual property. A company which commissions a play and neglects to agree a clear contract with its author can find itself losing out badly in the event of a box-office success.

Still, until a template for collaborative contracts is introduced, companies will have to find their own way towards best practice. Raymond Keane, artistic director of Barabbas, a company famous for its work in devising and improvisation, remembers how he and his co-founders, Veronica Coburn and Mikel Murfi, "learned as we went along to be business people." At first, they considered themselves to be the writers, assuming ownership of the work for its first run, but once the company began to commission work from outside the original trio, they became aware of the need to draw up something more precise. "Intellectual property," says Keane, "that's the key phrase." This became especially pertinent when Barabbas began to work with other actors on the devising of shows — for example, during 2002's Barabbas ... the festival. "Five actors did two of the shows," remembers Keane. "They spent a month devising, and then we wrote the shows out of that. But we were always clear that we were the owners. We say, you'll create work, but we manage and own it."

This should ensure that legal wrangles over the ownership of ideas will be avoided. But does the need for contractual provisions about who gets credit for what risk compromising that necessarily uninhibited flow of collaboration between authors, directors and actors; might it be restricted by a business-like mentality — or even by resentment on the part of those required to sign their copyright away? "I don't think so," says Keane. "You pay a fair fee and ask people to come on board with that. And when we pool ideas, they get a lot back from that, and we get something out of it too." But this discipline is matched by a certain degree of flexibility, adds Keane. "I suppose if an actor won't sign a contract, wants to have their ownership, you have to look at the case and decide. But it has to be decided, and well before you start."

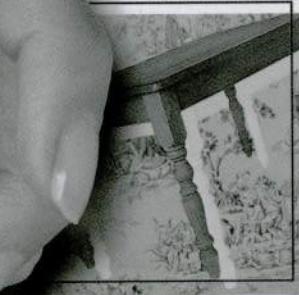
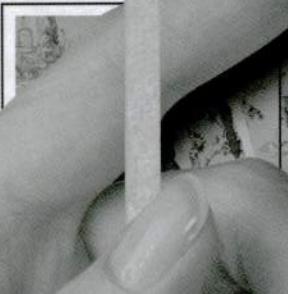
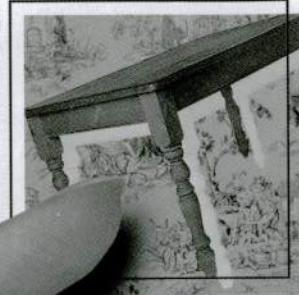
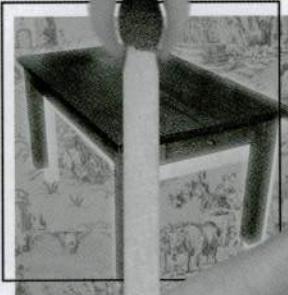
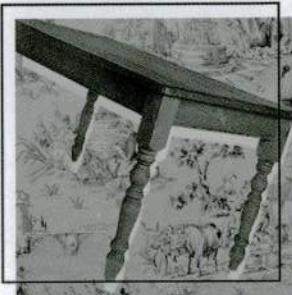


KEANE

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Burning Ambitions

If real-life space, time and budget concerns were suspended, how would you commemorate 100 years of Irish theatre, and look forward to 100 more?

JANE DALY, theatre producer, kicks off the final submissions of this series with the ceremonial burning of an oversize farmhouse kitchen table ...

THE ADRENALINE RUSH I GET AT THE IDEA OF producing theatre with no space, time or budget constraints is overwhelming. After twenty years of creative penny pinching and pleading (or, let's be honest, begging), my first act of decadence would be the ceremonial burning of an oversize farmhouse kitchen table to commemorate the past 100 years and to mark a new phase in Irish theatre. This particular item of furniture seems to have decorated too many Irish stages since I first saw a professional play in 1975. I don't deny that many of these ubiquitous tables have offered accommodation to countless remarkable characters speaking the extraordinarily beautiful, moving and often hilarious words of great Irish playwrights. But, somewhere in the past 5 years I saw one kitchen table too many and a touch of exhaustion crept into my otherwise passionate enthusiasm for Irish theatre.

So, having re-ignited my passion for theatre-making with the symbolic kitchen table exorcism, I would approach talented individual theatre makers I know who find it impossible to make their ideas a reality under the prevailing system — a system where people have to set up their own companies to make

work because few existing companies are equipped to provide opportunities for young, or indeed, established theatre-makers with ideas; a system where directors of arts centres have insufficient resources to commission work from independent theatre artists.

So, imagine a world where theatre-makers are encouraged to have vision and ideas — the bigger and more unrealistic the better. Playwrights are commissioned without the standard caveat — “we can’t afford more than 5 actors.” And, just for a moment, imagine being able to tell a director that, “Yes, actually, you CAN have a full 6 weeks’ rehearsal plus tech week and five previews following a six-month development process”. Many of our European neighbours can work like this — can we? And, is it really only about money or is it about how we spend it? In twenty years’ time, when I’m living in blissful retirement somewhere, drinking coffee probably at a kitchen table, I’d like to see Irish theatre-makers and producers approaching their work in an “anything’s possible” frame of mind, in the knowledge that the systems in place are there to support rather than impede their visions and dreams.

But, a world with no space, time or budget concerns is just that, a dream ... isn’t it?

Jane Daly is a freelance producer; Producer, Theatre Shop; and Lecturer in Theatre Management at NUIG.

Accelerate!

Is Irish theatre keeping pace with the speed of change — or sliding into heritage centre mode? **TOM CREED,** joint Artistic Director of Playgroup, considers.

WATCHING MARK DOHERTY’S PLAY TRAD AT THE RECENT Galway Arts Festival, I was struck by how it simultaneously celebrated and satirised every major Irish play of the last 100 years. In it, a 100-year old son proclaims to his even more ancient father that we have had enough of dwelling on tradition, that we should pay more heed to the present. Might there be in this a message for the next 100 years of Irish theatre?

Certainly, in the next century, Irish theatre needs to follow in the footsteps of the great Irish plays of the past in engaging with and confronting the nation and the world head-on with work which is provocative and of the moment. But the Ireland of today is not the Ireland of 100 years ago and the theatre we make and how we make it needs to reflect this. German director Thomas Ostermaier describes the theatre of today as “theatre in the age of its acceleration.” Irish theatre needs to keep pace with that speed of change.

WITHIN REACH:
David Pearse in *Trad*

ROS KAVANAGH



I think we need to be very careful in our revival of plays from the last hundred years. Are these stories crying out to be retold today, or are we letting the theatre slide into heritage centre mode? Have plays been overlooked, perhaps, in our attempts to define a "canon"? Is there a reason (other than an economic one) to revive the same five or six plays over and over again? To dwell on revivals at the expense of new work is to convert our theatres into museums.

We should instead attempt to create conditions in which new work can flourish. We should aspire to creating ensemble companies, in which theatre artists can learn and develop their craft on an ongoing basis, rather than every production having to be a new collision of individuals. We should look to the theatres of Europe and beyond to be inspired and challenged by truly contemporary artists and methods rather than resting on our laurels.

The last 100 years of Irish theatre are like an elderly relative — full of wisdom to impart, deserving of our attention, respect, and care — so let's have a big birthday party to celebrate everything this elderly relative has achieved. But we need to live our own lives and not let tradition hang like a millstone around our necks. Ultimately, our real concern should be how we can take our legacy and move on from it into the future.

Tom Creed is joint Artistic Director of Playgroup; a Director of the Everyman Palace Studio, Cork; and current participant in the Rough Magic Theatre Company's SEEDS II directors' programme.

Pushing Parameters

ADRIAN DUNBAR

wants theatre upfront in the city, at home in the country – and pushing parameters wherever.

WITH UNLIMITED CASH FOR A CELEBRATION OF IRISH THEATRE I would first move the Abbey Theatre to the old Carlton Cinema site on O'Connell Street. An integral part of our cultural consciousness, it properly belongs on Dublin's 'front street' in a prominent location, with an open, bright, state-of-the-art building featuring a plaza with a sculpture of our great dramatists in conversation.

I would build The Kathleen's Island School for Dramatic Arts on 'the island' in my hometown of Enniskillen for 25 students annually. This market town, and place of Wilde and Beckett, would enable actors to learn, in Edward Bond's words, an understanding of the waterwheel as opposed to the dynamo.

I would pull theatre North and South together to create a Derry-based Island Touring Company. Given our size as a cre-

ative community, we can best achieve critical mass in theatre if we combine together, and explore our diversity. Visiting our huge and beautiful stock of venues, desperate sometimes for professional work, it would be funded by the venues and both Arts Councils.

Focusing on theatre as spectacle would push the parameters of who we are both as people and theatre makers. I would direct a project marking the epic *March of O'Sullivan Beare* from West Cork to Leitrim in 1603. With issues of tribalism at its core, the theatrical retelling of this homeric voyage would help us understand the country today. Starting in Cork, with 1,000 people, the RTE Symphony Orchestra and a core of theatre practitioners and companies, the journey would be revisited section by section. Scripted by our greatest dramatists, engaging with people in each district, and featuring a new orchestral score, it would be broadcast live to the nation each evening.

I would give the Lyric Theatre £8m to rebuild on its Stranmillis site so it continues as a force for good in Belfast, protects its modern canon and is saved as the North's only production house.

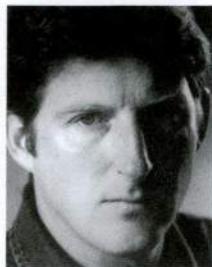
Finally, I would create a national theatre archive in Athlone, collating in one place at last a complete database of all theatre records. This international resource would testify to the huge legacy Ireland has left the arts in this area, that shows no sign of letting up, and in my opinion is about to enter a golden era of the female consciousness, bringing the female perspective to the fore.

Adrian Dunbar is an associate of the Guildhall School of Music and Drama in London.

Time Now, Please ...

'VE ALWAYS BEEN A BIT OF A DREAMER, AT WAR WITH MYSELF to keep my feet on solid ground. But working as a designer in Irish theatre helps to keep one grounded — and sometimes ground down. Increasing budget constraints means that theatre artists — scene painters, sculptors, mask and prop makers — have to look elsewhere (usually film) for a living wage, when to me the essential theatre investment is access to innovation and the expertise of all theatre arts.

But with an unlimited budget I'd go mad, building a big off-off theatre in the heart of Dublin with masses of space. Music, opera, bookshops, gardens, young people queuing for tickets, a buzz to revive every tired heart. Directors, actors, carpenters, welders and



MONICA FRAWLEY,
designer, calls time
on constraints that
grind theatre down
and imagines new
environments.

BURNING AMBITIONS

writers sharing a cafeteria and bar, where all kinds of problems could be worked out — that would be performance art in itself.

Then I'd wander around European theatres, storing up innovation and excitement. We're still an island and despite best intentions get a bit parochial. There's nothing to compare to an invigorating spell on other turf. And meanwhile I'd pay for trauma counselling for everyone making theatre in Ireland these past few decades — a tough time. The lack of outlets for any real discussion on the direction of theatre, and the treatment of theatre makers, has led to feelings of frustration and impotence among them, and to the setting up of the Association of Theatre Artists. We need something drastic to kick-start the old energy and enthusiasm and love for theatre that most of us feel.

Never again would my heart stop as an actor peers out of the darkness saying:

"Is Monica out there? I just want to know is this dress/wig/pair of Wellingtons/mad-looking bloody makeup actually going to stay like this?"

In my state-of-the-art theatre rehearsal time would be at least eight weeks. Anything less seems to constrain production values and turn our work into something of a treadmill. Never again would my heart stop as an actor peers out of the darkness saying: "Is Monica out there? I just want to know is this dress/wig/pair of Wellingtons/mad-looking bloody makeup actually going to stay like this?" Never again would an actor gasp: "I didn't know the thirty steps would be so steep." Because we'd always have a proper rehearsal set in a proper rehearsal room with enough height and space and light and air to make everything clear and possible.

So I'd try to create the best working environment; we'd only put on shows we want; audiences would flock in; and I'd still be up a ladder arguing passionately at ninety-five. Because we mostly 'do it for love' and that's something you can't buy or sell.

Monica Frawley is a set and costume designer.





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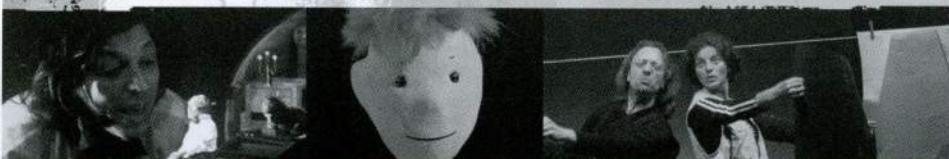
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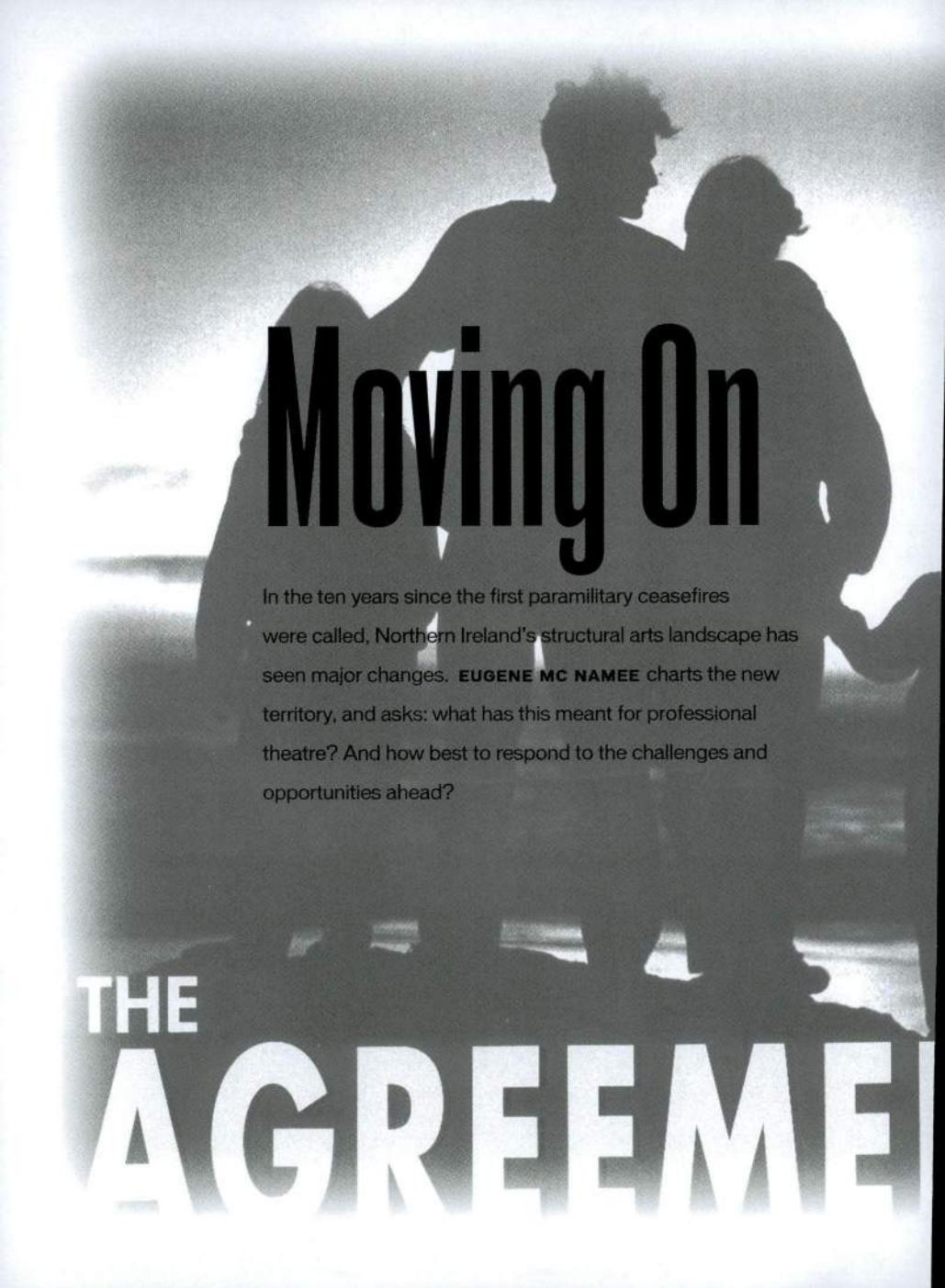
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Hannah & Hanna (Age 12+) 20-21 Sept
The Happy Prince (Age 6-10) 22-23 Sept
What Can I Do? (Age 2-4) 22 & 25 Sept
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ConTempo String Quartet (Age 7+) 24 Sept
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Pied Piper of Hamlyn
Rueben the Comedian
Billy Bubbles
Beauty and the Beast





Moving On

In the ten years since the first paramilitary ceasefires were called, Northern Ireland's structural arts landscape has seen major changes. **EUGENE MC NAMEE** charts the new territory, and asks: what has this meant for professional theatre? And how best to respond to the challenges and opportunities ahead?

THE AGREEMENT



TEN YEARS ON FROM THE FIRST MAJOR paramilitary ceasefires, and five years since the Good Friday Agreement, Northern Ireland has changed remarkably. Even as the institutions of devolved government remain suspended the huge reduction in political violence has largely shifted the emphasis in local politics from constitutionality to materiality; education, health, employment, the environment. The overall ethic is explicitly one of building a new economically vibrant, inclusive, and tolerant society. Culturally, institutions since the Good Friday Agreement have been playing catch-up to this new constructive politics. Artistically any political comment must match the increased subtlety of the political context, even if the familiar themes of the Troubles are still, to some extent, being worked through. Structurally, insofar as theatre companies rely on public funding they are having to learn to dance to a different political tune. Funding along the lines of '*l'art du possible*', mooted as the arts administrator's motto in the Arts Council of Northern Ireland's 1970/71 annual report, is replaced by 'in what way is your art working for everybody's sake?' Solely for reasons of space, and in that none of the established independent theatre companies could survive without public funding, the structural rather than the artistic impact of this is addressed here. What is politics seeming to demand of art generally, and what of theatre specifically? What effect this is having on theatre practitioners, and how might things be improved?

BEING CREATIVE: THE WORKAHOLIC POLITICS OF DEVOLVED ART

WHEN DEVOLVED POLITICAL POWER CAME TO NORTHERN IRELAND it came in a unique package, and the first move by all departments was to set in place consultations on how to do their own jobs. From these processes a range of documents were issued to let the general public in on the conclusions. The most comprehensive was the *Programme for Government*, which declared itself "the Executive's contract with the people of Northern Ireland ... to provide open, effective and accountable government ... to make a difference to the lives of our people, enabling them to grow as a peaceful, fair and inclusive community." The magic ingredient to create this gold from the lead of past division and violence was to be 'creativity'. Creativity was defined in a cross-departmental strategy docu-

ment *Unlocking Creativity* as "imaginative activity with outcomes that are both original and of value." The task of fostering creativity was identified as cutting across four Departmental briefs: Trade and Industry; Culture, Arts and Leisure; Education; and Further and Higher Education, Training and Employment. The mission of these departments was to "develop the capacities of all our people for creativity and innovation, and so promote and sustain the social, cultural and economic well-being of Northern Ireland." In true post-modern style, creativity was to be as much about employment as self-expression.

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Creativity was defined in a cross-departmental strategy document *Unlocking Creativity* as "imaginative activity with outcomes that are both original and of value."

It is clear from *Unlocking Creativity* that a particular weight of expectation fell on the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure (DCAL) and on its principal arts funding conduit, the Arts Council of Northern Ireland (ACNI). Like other departments they had to take on board current management and policy imperatives of central UK government in relation to "public service delivery", "growing the creative economy", "targeting social need." They were also to support and promote artists and the arts. Additionally and crucially they had the task of promoting and celebrating the idea of 'cultural diversity' as an alternative to ingrained notions of religious, political, ethnic or national difference. This social imperative necessitated the re-casting of 'culture' in anthropological terms: culture as the expression of life as lived, as opposed to culture as artistic excellence. DCAL, in *Face to Face*, its follow-up strategy document to *Unlocking Creativity*, derides the "petty politics of high arts and low arts" in favour of "a common vision ... where arts and culture can create a tapestry of interwoven threads and strands of life that can represent the true face of Northern Ireland and the creativity and courage of its people."

A subsequent ACNI strategy document, *The Arts; inspiring the imagination, building the future* (2001), seemed to take its cue directly from the DCAL position, stating: "the emphasis on the arts as a discrete sphere of activity is yielding to a broader conception of culture that locates it within a social and economic setting ... the potential of the arts to promote tolerance, contribute to citizenship and embed peace is limited only by our imagination." The strategic goals of ACNI for 2001-2006 were set accordingly, emphasising aspects of artistic educational outreach and access for new audiences. In May 2003 Roisin Mc Donough, CEO of ACNI, in a congratulatory address to Voluntary Arts Ireland, a new body established with ACNI funding as part of the Voluntary Arts Network to promote the voluntary arts sector (and something of a poster child for the new art politics), pointed out forcefully that the Arts Council had re-invented itself as "a development agency,

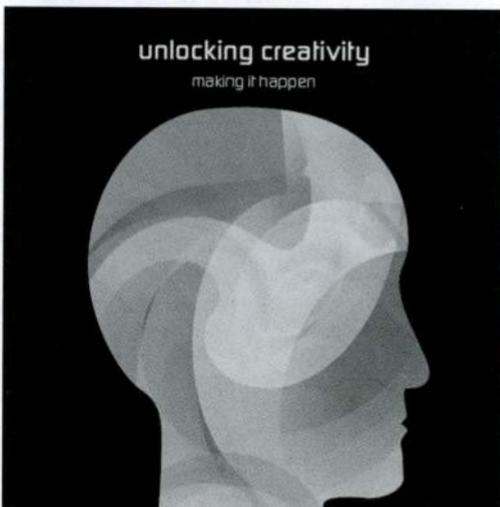
rather than as a simple funding body." She referred to the "obligations to identify trends, redress imbalance, fuel creativity, even at times to ignite that creativity itself." This language strikingly mirrors that of the Republic of Ireland's Arts Plan which was recently set aside by the newly-elected Arts Council of Ireland, in what seemed at least a partial rejection of such a strong developmental vision. The direct policy line on arts funding then from central to devolved government to quasi-governmental body (ACNI) was and is directed towards utilising art as a tool in producing a new creative society. Art for art's sake is fine, but art creating creativity, and creativity creating a prosperous peaceful society is much better.

FUNDING THEATRE IN THE CREATIVE AGE

THERE ARE THREE PRINCIPAL PUBLIC FUNDING SOURCES for professional theatre companies in Northern Ireland. These are, in order of importance, basic government grant, lottery money and local authority grants. The ACNI has distributive control over the first two of these.

Basic government grant or 'grant in aid' money stands at £11.6 million in 2003/4 (up from around £7.1 million in 2000/2001) of which 75% was distributed and the rest used for developmental initiatives (such as an integrated online ticketing system) and self-administration. The drama artform category received about £1.7m of this money in 2003/4. While multi-annual funding is not guaranteed, there is a certain perception that it is easier to stay on this funding ladder than to get on it, and former ACNI officer Robbie Meredith suggested in a recent controversial *Fortnight* magazine interview that such a perception may be well founded.

In 1995, ACNI was also empowered to distribute another significant source of finance made available through the National Lottery to the arts in Northern Ireland. Lottery funding, at around £7.5m in 2003/4, is calculated at 2.8% of the



**UNLOCKING
CREATIVITY:**
The Making It Happen
document

The smaller end of lottery funding provides the easiest route for less established groups to get money in order, for example, to develop or to tour new work, though the numbers of applicants for it are ever increasing.

national total raised. It may be held over from year to year, allowing for money to be saved and spent on large projects. It assumed particular importance as a source for special capital expenditure grants in the mid and late 1990s, the boom years for lottery revenue. This, in line with a Northern Irish governmental policy of having appropriate arts facilities within 20 miles of all citizens (originating in ACNI's 1995 *To The Millennium* strategy document) allowed for the successful construction of a whole series of very well equipped regional theatre spaces and arts centres. Latterly, the focus of lottery funding has shifted away from capital expenditure and towards individual project grants for organisations in line with specific programmes laid out by the Arts Council — all of which operate on the principle of 'additionality', i.e. funding cannot support the existing programme of the organisation. Project based funding may vary widely year on year. The smaller end of lottery funding provides the easiest route for less established groups to get money in order, for example, to develop or to tour new work, though the numbers of applicants for it are ever increasing. Some projects may be funded on a multi-annual basis.

City and District Councils are playing an increasing role in arts promotion. Both Belfast and Derry City Councils have fairly large annual arts funding programmes of over £1 million. The local District Councils have very little or no direct arts organisation funding, but do almost all now employ a dedicated arts officer with responsibility to develop local art and bring high quality art to the local area. For both City and District Councils the support for arts is very much a part of a local development agenda, with varying focus on economic impact or 'quality of life' issues such as civic pride. The new regional theatres, capitally funded to a large degree by the Lottery, are financed by and under the control of District or City Councils. These theatres and their audiences constitute a new frontier for independent professional theatre companies.

The vast majority of funding available to theatre companies must pass through the hands of ACNI, and getting to access this money means fulfilling very stringent criteria of social responsibility. Nick Livingston, Strategy Development Director at ACNI, commented in interview for this piece that theatre is a particularly important artform in the overall governmental vision of using art to produce positive social change. Theatre, he pointed out, has obvious requirements of creativity, co-operative working and the continual search for new participants — all within an economic framework of providing employment, stimulating the local economy and generating revenue. Gilly



Campbell, ACNI Theatre Officer, noted in interview that this importance of theatre was reflected in the fact that theatre did well from the ACNI budget, garnering over 20% of the basic funding available for distribution.

LARGE SCALE:
Belfast's Grand
Opera House

VIEW FROM THE GROUND

THE PICTURE PAINTED ABOVE IS OF A COMPREHENSIVE AND integrated funding system, increases year on year in 'grant in aid' funding, relative funding parity with the rest of the U.K., new initiatives from the Arts Council, new venues and the growth in interest in the arts at local government level. One might reasonably expect the theatre sector to be rejoicing in its good fortune. Yet the most comprehensive study of *Revenue-funded Independent Professional Theatre Companies*, conducted as a *Needs Analysis* by Angela McCloskey for ACNI in 2002, found widespread disillusionment, frustration and low morale among practitioners. Of the problems identified in the report, few have been comprehensively addressed.

Major issues remain. Most professional companies are based in Belfast, but the infrastructure for Belfast has not been completed, and there is a lack of mid-scale theatre space provision in the Belfast area, a legacy of the decades of underfunding for

MOVING ON

A major issue remains the lack of mid-scale theatre space provision in the Belfast area, where most companies are based, a legacy of the decades of underfunding for which the recent lottery windfall has not yet compensated.

which the recent lottery windfall has not yet compensated. The report saw the lack of new companies as a worrying sign for the future, and identified growth as being choked by the initial difficulty of getting on the grant in aid funding ladder. It pointed out that the seemingly impressive level of grant in aid provision for theatre is skewed by the fact that almost two-thirds of this money goes to just two institutions, the Lyric Theatre and the Grand Opera House — justifiably enough in terms of their running costs as large scale organisations, but leaving little to go around everyone else. It also identified the complexity of funding structures and application forms as a major problem for the sector. These have left many companies querying whether they are exhausting more resources than they are gaining in the ongoing management of a mixed portfolio of multi-criterion grant applications.

There are also those for whom this is much more than just a practical issue. Ian Hill is one high-profile local arts commentator who has been acerbic in his condemnation of the capitulation of the ACNI to an agenda of social engineering at the expense, in his view, of promoting excellence and lobbying central government effectively for art as art. Similar views are expressed privately by many in the theatre community. All this at a time when lottery revenue is shrinking through falling ticket sales — and with the possibility of a cataclysmic reduction if, as is rumoured, lottery money is diverted to London's Olympic bid. Many companies have grown to depend on this revenue to fund activities such as script development and touring.

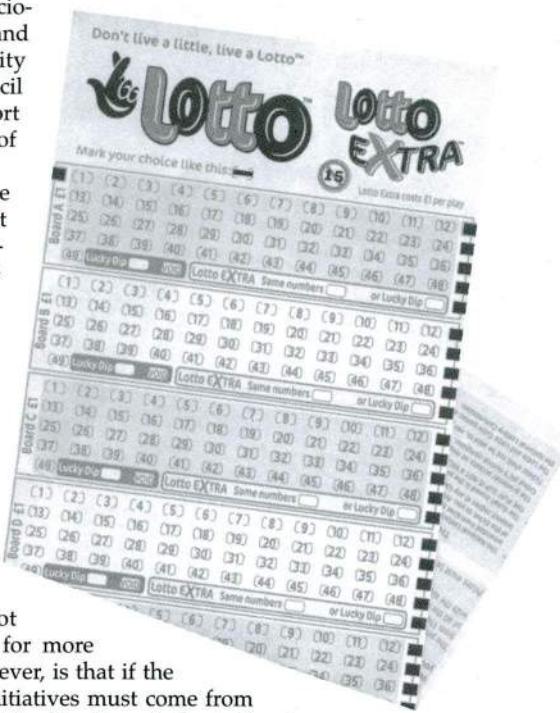
EVER FORWARD

HOW THEN SHOULD THEATRE PRACTITIONERS HELP THEMSELVES, given the funding landscape sketched out above? A preliminary step would seem to be to organise an effective co-operative and lobbying body along the lines of the Community Arts Forum, Voluntary Arts Ireland, or the Theatre Forum in the Republic of Ireland. The arts lobby which protested against Belfast City Council funding cuts two years ago has faded into the shadows. Practitioners will privately admit that there is a certain corrosive spirit of competition between theatre companies, largely attributed to the fact that everyone is chasing the same limited funds. It would seem in everyone's interest for some of these funds to be devoted to a body to promote joint concerns.

Such a body, by providing an obvious point of contact, could facilitate co-operation, particularly in the city of Belfast where most professional practitioners are based. The seeds of such co-operation exist, as recent ventures such as joint auditions and

script development projects have illustrated. As well as a forum for the sharing of ideas and experience, ideally also across art-forms, the body could initiate the necessary internal conversation of the theatre community to enable it to argue coherently for a larger share of the public money available. This is true whether the argument is made on the basis of the socio-economic value of theatre — and there are recent Belfast City Council and English Arts Council reports which strongly support this — or the inherent value of art, or some hybrid.

Finally, there needs to be some strategy for development of the sector. Again, through co-operation, pressure could be brought to bear on ACNI and DCAL to provide this. Such a strategy would need to resolve the conundrum of the lack of venues in Belfast, and the wealth of venues elsewhere which for various reasons programme very little new theatre work. The government would, presumably, welcome imaginative proposals to help the sector — so long as these did not amount to a simple demand for more money. What seems clear, however, is that if the sector is to be improved the initiatives must come from the theatre community itself. The Northern Ireland Theatre Association was recently formed, absorbing the Theatre Producers Group, to promote theatre interests and may grow to fulfil this role, being currently staffed by one part-time administrator. At a time when politics is structurally directed towards demanding the social profit of creativity, it is incumbent on theatre producers as artists to be creative in their response.



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Eugene Mc Namee is a Marie-Curie Fellow at the Sociology Department of University College Cork, researching cultural developments in Northern Ireland in the period 1994-2004. He is also reviews editor of Belfast's Vacuum Newspaper.

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All Made Up

DECLAN GORMAN offers an excerpt from his adaptation of **THE GREEN FOOL** by **PATRICK KAVANAGH**, being premiered by Upstate Live in association with the Patrick Kavanagh Literary and Rural Resource Centre, Inniskeen, County Monaghan on 11 October at the Kavanagh Centre, before touring nationally.



DECLAN GORMAN WRITES: 2004 is the centenary of Patrick Kavanagh's birth. The Centenary Committee, based at Inniskeen's Patrick Kavanagh Centre, invited Upstate Live to contribute to its programme. We proposed a liberal adaptation of Kavanagh's early autobiography, *The Green Fool*, not previously staged. I sought license to develop a dramatic structure allowing us not simply to 'copy over' the episodic original book, but also to reflect imaginatively on the making of the memoir, the contemporary responses to it, and its impact on Kavanagh's life as an artist. The Kavanagh Estate responded generously to this approach. The play opens, therefore, in the 1950s, with Kavanagh, now about 50, visiting the London attic room where he wrote *The Green Fool* in 1937. Older Patrick invokes the memory of his younger self, calling up his recollections of growing up in Inniskeen. This extract is the opening of the play.

PRELUDERecorded soundscape. Distant wistful music on the melodeon. The steady rhythm of inexpert typing on an old typewriter. On the recording, the voice of the younger Patrick Kavanagh mingles with voices from family members and neighbours — reading snatches from The Green Fool. In his cramped London attic, young Patrick sits atrophied, like a wax sculpture, at a typewriter. Below, in the arena of his childhood, three figures enact snatches from the book in stylized, slow motion — almost a dance — ghostly. Sound trails off. All freeze.

MR WILSON (off) You are quite certain it was this house. I've never actually looked into the attic.

OLDER PATRICK (off) It was this house alright. I remember the stairs. Miss Ives on the stairs ... (*Attic door opens. Older Patrick is shown in. Young Patrick remains frozen.*) It was owned by a Miss Blois and her sister. They had a tea-house on the ground floor.

MR WILSON Yes. They were my distant relatives. My mother inherited the house some years ago. Oooof! Rather dusty! Would you like to be left alone?

OLDER PATRICK That would be very kind.

MR WILSON You wrote your poems up here? Look a typewriter!

play excerpt

OLDER PATRICK That's the typewriter! Poems yes. And a book. A silly book. A supposed memoir. *The Green Fool*. A poor enough effort.

MR WILSON I'm sure it was a good book, Mister Kavanagh. You are much renowned in literary circles, I believe.

OLDER PATRICK (*chuckles*) Renowned. There's a good word.

MR WILSON Well, I'll leave you to your memories.

OLDER PATRICK Thank you. (*His host leaves. Patrick moves around the tiny room. He murmurs in an ironic sing-song.*)

Flares
Announce a reception committee
For me entering a city
And all this for an unthrifty
Man turned fifty ...
(*He glances in a dusty mirror.*)
Hmmmm.

Every old man I see
Reminds me of my father
When he had fallen in love with death
One time when sheaves were gathered.
(*Turning now to the still figure of his younger self.*) And ah, here sits the young Patrick Kavanagh at his spanking new typewriter! Kindly supplied by Miss Blois on a spring day in nineteen and thirty seven. The rest of the world preparing for war and Paddy Kavanagh preparing for elusive fortune and easy fame. (*He manipulates Patrick's head and limbs, as if testing a tailor's dummy for ease of movement.*) Remind me, young Patrick, how the world appeared to us then ... then ... before Kavanagh the dog took to the grog ... before ... before failure of a kind ... (*He claps.*)
A clap of falling rock declares

Enthusiasm!!!!?

Silence and stillness. Then suddenly young Patrick begins to type methodically. Older Patrick reads over his shoulder.

OLDER PATRICK When I was about two years old I was lying one evening in the onion box that had been converted into a cradle ... (*Below, Mary Kavanagh, Patrick's sister, begins to rock the makeshift cradle.*) I looked up and saw

PATRICK I looked up and saw for the first time the sticky black oak couples of thatched roof. If I did not see stars it was my child observation was at fault for the blackbirds had pecked holes in the thatch — to the very bone in places. The blackbird was a great enemy of old thatch and in its search for the little red worms in the decayed straw would stop at nothing ...

James Kavanagh now stirs and sits up in his remembered bed.

JAMES ... At three o' clock on a summer's morning he would begin his attack ...

PATRICK ... and by six, narrow sunbeam ribbons like wedding festoonery would be stretched from roof to floor in peasant homes ...

JAMES ... or as happened more often, spitting rain would startle the sleeping faces of children in their beds ...

James reaches under the bed and hoists an umbrella above his sleeping wife.

PATRICK ... and indeed I often heard father tell of a wet night when he had to hold an umbrella over himself and my

mother in their bed.

OLDER PATRICK Stop!!! (*Suddenly the cradle stops rocking. All freeze on the main stage.*) Lies, lies, a pack of lies! The whole thing a pack of lies!!!

Patrick looks up, stunned, then begins to type frantically, replacing one page with another, with another, with another. On the childhood stage below, family members and neighbours come and go at heightened speed.

PATRICK Chapter One, 'Angelhood.'

JAMES (*sings*) A starry night for a ramble.
In the flowery dell.

OLDER PATRICK Lies!

PATRICK Chapter Two, 'A Break with Tradition.' The Kavanaghs build a new house.

NEIGHBOUR Begod James, ye'll have to be taken out the window if ye die upstairs!

OLDER PATRICK Juvenile nonsense!

PATRICK Chapter Three, 'Schooldays', Chapter Six, 'Pilgrimage' ...

Thunderclap!

NEIGHBOUR T'will be a bad evenin' for the Holy Well.

OLDER PATRICK You never went to a Holy Well!!

PATRICK Chapter Thirteen, 'The Drover.' Fourteen, 'Patriotism.' Fifteen, 'The

Poems reproduced with the kind permission of the Trustees of the Estate of the late Katherine B. Kavanagh through the Jonathan Williams Agency.

Hiring Fair.'

FARMER Are ye for hire, son? Can ye milk?

PATRICK I can milk anything but a hen!

OLDER PATRICK You never hired out.
It's all made up!

PATRICK Nineteen, 'Fever.' Twenty-four, 'The Grey Dawn' — or how I became a poet. Twenty-nine, 'A Visit to Dublin.' How I mistook Oliver St. John Gogarty's maid for his mistress.

MAID Wait till I see if the Doctor is in.

OLDER PATRICK Foolish lies ... dangerous lies.

PATRICK Thirty one, 'Between Two Stools' — farmer or poet what will I be? Thirty two — 'In London!' Patrick Kavanagh leaves the land, arrives in London, and begins his famous memoir of his happy life at home in the townland of Mucker, Iniskeen, County Monaghan, Ireland. Book published, reputation established, money in the bank. The end!

He rips the final page out of the typewriter. Older Patrick grabs it from him and crumples it into a ball.

OLDER PATRICK Lies, lies, the whole thing a pack of lies. Juvenile nonsense and lies!

All vanish below. Patrick looks up at him.

PATRICK Who the hell are you?
The play continues.



Through the Leaves

Book reviews editor **PATRICK LONERGAN** reports on new developments in Irish theatre publishing.

A LARGE AMOUNT OF SUPPOSEDLY "Irish" drama is actually produced for audiences living in other countries — and that's been the case since at least the time of Boucicault. Even so, the number of new Irish plays currently being produced abroad is surprising — as is the fact that so few of them seem likely to appear here any time soon.

Anto Howard's *Scattergood* is a useful case in point. Produced in 2003 in New York, the play is set in Trinity College, and focuses on the relationship of a student of medieval literature with his English lecturer. Howard is exploring the relevance of chivalric love to modern Irish society, providing an interesting take on the standard Irish story of a young man being guided — or misguided — by an elder male. The script is now available from Dramatists Play Service.

Another welcome publication — available now from the Gallery Press — is Derek Mahon's translation of *Cyrano de Bergerac*, which was produced earlier this year at the Royal National Theatre, featuring Stephen Rea (pictured). That play has of course been a staple of Ireland's amateur and student sectors for many years, and Mahon's new version looks set to be popular with those groups in par-



ticular. It has a nice Irish flavour that should ensure that it replaces Anthony Burgess's translation as the standard text for Irish audiences. It's also great fun. Also due from that publisher is a new stage adaptation of Patrick Kavanagh's *Tarry Flynn* by Peter Fallon, which coincides with a production in Pennsylvania this September.

The highlight of recent publishing has to be two new Conor McPherson volumes from Nick Hern. *Shining City* premiered at the Royal Court this summer (see review) and plays at the Gate from September. With a nod to Tom Murphy's *Gigli Concert*, *Shining City* blends the best features of McPherson's writing — his ability to portray human isolation, his presentation of

characters who say everything except what they really mean, and more. His *Plays 2* also showcases those skills, collecting *The Weir*, *Port Authority*, *Dublin Carol*, and the previously unpublished *Come On Over*, the short play that was produced somewhat controversially at the Gate in 2001. Interestingly, McPherson himself took the photos of Dublin that appear on the covers of both books.

One to watch out for is Christopher Murray's biography of Sean O'Casey,

IVAN KYNE

which is due from Gill and Macmillan this November. The book promises to shed new light on O'Casey's life and work, and is sure to make essential reading. Another important publication is Joan Dean's *Riot and Great Anger*, a study of stage censorship in twentieth century Ireland, from the University of Wisconsin

Press. Although Irish theatre was never subject to official state censorship, Dean shows how numerous plays were "censored" — through the withdrawal of funding, media pressures, or audience protest. It's a fascinating book that has as much to say about contemporary Irish theatre as it does about our past.

Reading the Centenary

The Abbey's centenary has been marked with the publication of several new books on the theatre and its place in Irish drama. In this special book reviews feature, **PATRICK LONERGAN** considers some of the most recent studies, and asks how much we really know about Ireland's national theatre.

IN 1947, TWO PROMINENT DUBLIN intellectuals staged a walkout from an Abbey Theatre revival of *The Plough and the Stars*. Their protest attracted wide approval from the public and media, causing artistic director Ernest Blythe to ban the pair from the theatre for six months.

Our knowledge of the Abbey's history might make us assume that this walkout had something to do with politics — with the play's treatment of republicanism, with O'Casey's communism, with religion, Irish neutrality, or some such issue. But the protest was, in fact, largely against the play's poor standard of acting, and its appalling production values. The protesters were using the Abbey's past to criticise its present under Blythe, invoking memories of the 1926 *Plough* riots to attack the theatre on aesthetic grounds.

This incident, recounted in Lionel Pilkington's *Theatre and the State*, offers a useful way of thinking about the Abbey's history. It illustrates the importance of the theatre's golden age of Synge, Yeats,

and Gregory — an era that's significant not only in its own right, but also because it became the standard against which most subsequent periods in Irish theatre were evaluated. But the story also shows that a look at the less glamorous periods of the Abbey's history may be worthwhile today. After all, contemporary readers may find it difficult to understand why Irish audiences rioted at the premieres of *The Playboy* and *The Plough*, but a desire to protest against a production's shoddy standards is something that we can all relate to.

Any new book about the Abbey therefore has to come to terms with two different approaches to the theatre's history. On the one hand, we have the big picture: the received version of the Abbey's history, which focuses mainly on the famous 1904-1926 years — and which has now become so familiar to us that it needs to be re-evaluated and demystified. And at the same time, it's clear that we need to look again at the apparently minor inci-

book reviews

dents and people in the Abbey's past, using them to fill the many gaps in our knowledge of the theatre.

Starting with the big picture, we have Christopher Fitz-Simon's *The Abbey Theatre*, an accessible account of the theatre's "first 100 years". Although it doesn't identify itself as such, the book isn't far from being an official history, with a preface from Ben Barnes and a listing of plays premiered at the theatre since 1904. What makes it appealing is Fitz-Simon's inclusive approach to the subject. He gives equal weight to all periods of the Abbey's past, using an array of photographs and illustrations to highlight the importance of actors, designers, and directors — as well as writers — to his narrative. His blend of the visual and the literary nicely broadens our sense of the Abbey's achievements during the last 100 years.

Another book that presents the Abbey's past from rewarding new perspectives is Karen Vandevelde's *The Alternative Dramatic Revival*. Vandevelde looks at the Abbey's early years, showing how it was only one of many institutions that laid claim to the title of Ireland's national theatre at the beginning of the twentieth century. She discusses how the theatre emerged at a time when such groups as the National Players and Theatre of Ireland were also organising themselves — making the early Abbey's self-appointed national status seem disturbingly reminiscent of

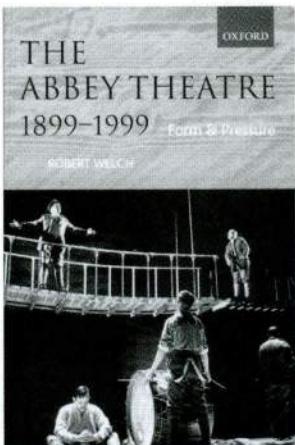
Monty Python's "People's Front of Judea" skit from *The Life of Brian*. Vandevelde makes clear that the Abbey's right to call itself Ireland's national theatre has always been contested. Importantly, she draws on previously overlooked historical sources to present alternative visions of what an Irish national theatre might have been — and may become.

Perhaps the ideal way to understand the Abbey is by reading Christopher

Morash's *History of Irish Theatre, 1601-2000*. The book was originally intended as a follow-up to DES Maxwell's *Modern Irish Drama*, which restricted itself to the period 1891–1980. Morash expands the chronology and remit of that study, breaking new ground in Irish theatre scholarship in the process. He shifts the emphasis from drama to theatre, using material such as box office receipts, seating arrangements,

touring routes, and newspaper reports — telling the story from the perspective of writers, performers, managers, and audiences. His decision to start the history in 1601 allows him to refute the myth that there was no Irish drama before *The Countess Cathleen*, which means that he repositions the Abbey as only one element — a very important one, of course — in a 400-year history of theatre in this country.

Like other recent publications — notably Shaun Richards' *Cambridge Companion to Twentieth Century Irish Drama* — Morash's book undermines many



myths and misconceptions about the Abbey. Among the most significant incidents now being reconsidered are the *Playboy* and *Plough* riots of 1907 and 1926. The work of Ben Levitas, Lionel Pilkington, and others allows us to recon-

plays should be understood as occasions of impassioned protest — not undertaken by a mob, but by people who were committed to theatre as an essential element of national life. The representation of these events as the theatrical equivalent to football hooliganism may have made the Abbey famous. But it may also have institutionalised a Yeatsian contempt for Irish audiences, fostering an unwillingness to enter into debate that has, arguably, persisted throughout the theatre's history, as the example of Ernest Blythe banning protestors from the theatre — rather than addressing their concerns — shows.

RECENT AND FORTHCOMING PUBLICATIONS ON THE ABBEY THEATRE

ALBERT DEGIACOMO

TC Murray, Dramatist – Voice of the Irish Peasant
(Syracuse, 2002)

CHRISTOPHER FITZ-SIMON

The Abbey Theatre, (Thames and Hudson, 2003)

ANNE FOGARTY

Irish University Review 34.1, Special Issue: Lady Gregory
(2004)

BEN LEVITAS

The Theatre of Nation (Oxford, 2002)

CIARA O'FARRELL

Louis D'Alton and the Abbey Theatre (Four Courts,
October 2004)

CHRISTOPHER MORASH

A History of Irish Theatre, 1601–2000 (Cambridge, 2002)

LIONEL PILKINGTON

Theatre and the State in Twentieth-Century Ireland
(Routledge, 2001)

SHAUN RICHARDS

*The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth Century Irish
Drama* (Cambridge 2004)

KAREN VANDEVELDE

The Alternative Dramatic Revival in Ireland, 1897–1913
(Academia, 2004)

ROBERT WELCH

The Abbey Theatre 1899–1999 (Oxford, 1999)

sider the popular notion that the premiere of each play involved violent disorder by philistines determined to "disgrace themselves again." Although both occasions involved violence, it appears that the "riots" that greeted Synge and O'Casey's

One possible explanation for the prevalence of so many Abbey myths is that much of what we know about the theatre has been fed to us by people who either worked at, or were closely associated with, the theatre. Yeats was of course the most influential Abbey historian, since he not only wrote, commissioned, and selected the theatre's plays, but also produced huge amounts of writing that defined the reception of that work. Lady Gregory was also an important influence, writing the first history of the Abbey only nine years after its foundation. And this pattern of Abbey insiders going into print has endured ever since — with histories appearing from

book reviews

Lennox Robinson (1951), Ernest Blythe (1963), Hugh Hunt (1979), and Christopher Fitz-Simon (2003). While this has given us an unparalleled sense of the theatre's inner workings, it may also have skewed our understanding of key episodes in its past.

In fact, our view of what makes the Abbey's history interesting probably depends on how we view the theatre in the present. Take for example Robert Welch's description of the approach made by a member of the Abbey's staff to the Irish government, with a view to rebuilding the theatre because its premises were too small. The government responded positively at first, but then began to stall on implementation of the proposal. This may sound like Ben Barnes in 2000, but it was actually Ernest Blythe in 1937 — and it took him almost three decades to get the theatre rebuilt and reopened. It's interesting how this apparently minor detail from Welch's history has now become so relevant.

Similarly, some of the most interesting material currently being written focuses on marginalised figures. Ciara O'Farrell's *Louis D'Alton and the Abbey Theatre* gives an excellent introduction to one of the Abbey's most popular writers, and is particularly interesting in its analysis of how the Abbey under Ernest Blythe put strong emphasis on commercial success. O'Farrell explains that the theatre provoked criticism for focusing on "kitchen comedies to inflate box-office receipts, and encouraging long runs and revivals of popular plays at the cost of introducing new drama." By showing how the balancing act between financial survival and artistic integrity has been a major part of the Abbey's past, O'Farrell gives us some useful ways

of thinking about the theatre's direction today.

There have also been moments of surprising daring in the Abbey's history, which — again — have contemporary relevance. Take for instance Albert DeGiacomo's study of TC Murray, which describes a 1972 Peacock revival of Murray's *Briery Gap*, a 1914 one-act work about clerical intolerance of pre-marital sex. DeGiacomo discusses how, at the conclusion of the Peacock production, a recorded speech was played condemning the way that Ireland "drives unmarried girls to England to have either abortions or illegitimate babies", and suggesting that "the community ought to accept more readily the travelling people." Expressing some of these sentiments would be risky even today; it's amazing that the Abbey was willing to articulate them 32 years ago.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of these recent publications is what *isn't* written about. With the exception of an excellent special edition of the *Irish University Review* on Lady Gregory, there has been very little work on women writers at the Abbey. Although we are constantly told that the Abbey produced lots of plays in Irish, no-one seems interested in telling us anything about them. And the work on Murray and D'Alton highlights how little is known about other Abbey playwrights from the 1930–1960 period: Teresa Deevey, Una Troy, MJ Molloy, and many others.

All of this suggests that although there may be a surprisingly large number of new books on Ireland's national theatre, a lot of the story remains to be told. ■

Patrick Lonergan is completing a PhD on contemporary Irish drama at NUI Galway.

entrances & exits

PETER CRAWLEY notes the coming and goings in Irish theatre.

JACKIE DOYLE, (pictured) artistic director and founding member of Prime Cut Productions, is to step down after 13 years with the company to pursue directing and producing work. The position will be advertised ... **MARTIN MURPHY** is standing down as artistic director of TEAM at the end of the year after seven years with the company. The post will be advertised ... After 8 years with Tinderbox Theatre Company as General Manager, **EAMON QUINN** has assumed the role of Development Officer with the Belfast Festival at Queen's ... **HANNA SLATTNE** has recently been appointed as Literary Manager with Tinderbox Theatre Company.

NIK QUAIFE has been appointed to the new position of publisher with irish theatre magazine. The producer and publicist will handle all of *itm*'s management and administrative activity, filling the duties of former managing editor **MAURA O'KEEFE** and temporary administrator **ROSS Ó'CORRÁIN**...

LIAM HALLIGAN, artistic director of Quare Hawks, has taken over as artistic director of Storytellers Theatre. He replaces **MARY-ELIZABETH BURKE KENNEDY** who held the position for 15 years. Quare Hawks has been put 'on hold' ...



DON SHIPLEY, formerly artistic director and manager of Canada's Performing Arts; artistic director of the du Maurier Concert Stage; and head of Performing Arts at Harbourfront Centre, has been appointed director of the Dublin Theatre Festival. He replaces **FERGUS LINEHAN** who leaves after the 2004 Festival to take up

the directorship of the Sydney Arts Festival ... **WOLFGANG HOFFMAN**, co-founder and director of Fabrik Potsdam and artistic director of the Aurora Nova programme at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, succeeds **VALLEJO GANTNER** as artistic director of the ESB Dublin Fringe Festival, taking over the annual 3-week festival from November 2004 ...

DONAL SHIELS, recently festival manager of the Chinese Cultural Festival in Ireland, has taken up the position of chief executive officer with the St Patrick's Day Festival. This position incorporates the duties of artistic director and CEO, held previously by **DOMINIC CAMPBELL** and **MARIA MOYNIHAN** ... **MICHAEL HUNT**, recently artistic director of Co-Opera, has been appointed director of the Theatre Royal in Waterford ...

HUW ROBERTS, previously with North Wales Theatre, has joined The Helix as its marketing manager.

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by darren donohue

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A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM

by William Shakespeare

Barabbas ... The Company

On tour; reviewed 28 May 2004

at Project Arts Centre, Dublin

BY SUSAN CONLEY

IT WAS THE TIME OF YEAR TO PRODUCE what is arguably Shakespeare's most accessible play, but one which betrays its complexity, depending upon the practitioner. In a recent visiting Slovenian production, presented by Mladinsko Theatre, Ljubljana, and staged for only a handful of days in the Abbey as part of their European season in this centenary year, one was immediately struck by the wedding aspect of the play, given that three of the main females — Helena, Hermia, and Hippolyta — were decked out in meringues. Rather than reducing *Midsummer* to a wedding

play, however, director Vito Taufer openly worked against that conclusion, with his women giving as good as they got, betraying the innocence of their dresses through a ferality often only found in rabid wolves. In this way, he teased out the conflict between the innocence of virginity with the earthy and oftentimes violent events that unfold throughout the production.

In Barabbas' version, directed by Veronica Coburn, the weddings are the incidental outcome of a night of madness and lust and transformation, and we are presented with the complications of the piece heightened through the intricacy of the company's staging. If nothing is ever simple in that Athenian forest, when the action has been transplanted to a wood in

Wicklow, things gets really, really complicated.

Here, the familiar story — of unrequited

PAT REDMUND

TRANSFORMING SPIRITS

The Midsummer Night's Dream Company

love requited and of all manner of unions struck and renegotiated — has been shifted to take in the Irish mythological idiom, and Coburn has chosen to stage the piece with a cast of six. Helen Norton, Sean Kearns, David Pearse, Mary O'Driscoll, Deirdre Molloy and Frankie McCafferty are alternately several of the main characters, the fairies, and the Rude Mechanicals — in other words, one cast performing what can be seen as three separate plays (the Athenian nobles, the fairies in the forest, and the working class amateurs) all by themselves. Things get particularly knotty, especially for McCafferty, as events of the magical midsummer night start to rapidly conclude. The actors work together flawlessly to effect the changes necessary to get from scene to scene: one will helpfully lash a pair of wings onto the back of another; props are smoothly handed off to an exiting fellow player. This sounds simple in the extreme, but it demands real physical confidence. This is the case with Coburn's cast: their interactions off the main action are as essential to the piece as is the blocking of the production, and only rarely do they interfere with the perception of the action. In the main, the transformations are elegant and entertaining simultaneously.

Transformation is at the heart of the piece, the transformation from love to hate, from city to country, from 'real world' to that of the fairies, the transformation (imperfectly) of workingmen into actors. Coburn turns her cast's transformations into an active part of the piece, allowing us into the mystery of the making of a play, of the playing of a scene, without utterly destroying our ability to suspend our disbelief. Everything is on display for the audience's perusal, and what usually occurs, hidden, backstage,

is executed on stages left and right, out in the open. She opens up the boundaries of our perception, much like the fairies do for the mortals, by exposing the edges of the dramatic world. This allows us to watch what goes on between the fictional moments that take place upon the stage, and the sideline journey the actors take to get there. While the ancillary moments have their own element of fiction and narrative, they are a liminal place that contains what has happened, what is happening, and what will happen. Like the fairies' forest, it is the place that guides us from one state to the next, and allows us an inkling of what it takes to make theatrical magic happen.

The performances are uniformly strong, with Norton, Kearns and Pearse particularly so: they speak the text effortlessly, and with comprehension, which is generally the largest stumbling block to the effective performance of Shakespeare in these parts. All the players are fully committed, not only to the text, but also to their myriad duties, which ask them to perform above and beyond the normal call, resulting in a refreshing and creative take on a very familiar play.

Susan Conley is a novelist, film-maker and critic, and is art director of this magazine.

ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL

by William Shakespeare

Classic Stage Ireland

Helix Theatre, Dublin

18 June-3 July 2004; reviewed 28 June

BY PATRICK LONERGAN

IRISH ATTITUDES TO THE CLASSICS OF WORLD theatre have always been ambivalent, perhaps because the classical and the colonial are in many ways intertwined in



this country. In the international classical tradition, most of Ireland's greatest dramatists — Sheridan, Goldsmith, Wilde, and so on — are regarded as British writers. And Irish audiences' first encounters with many great international plays are often via translations that were designed for wealthy urban English audiences.

The development of a distinctly Irish classical tradition is therefore an ongoing process — one that requires coming to terms with a lot of historical baggage. That process has so far been quite successful: the Irishness of dramatists who wrote before 1904 is no longer contested, and there is a growing body of Irish translations of international classics.

The emergence of Classic Stage Ireland (CSI) may be an important next step in this process. Founded by Andy Hinds (who directs this production) and Marie-

ARMS AT THE READY *The Company in All's Well That Ends Well*

Louise O'Donnell, the company intends to explore a specifically Irish classical tradition. Quite what that tradition should include — and whether the company can successfully present it — remains to be seen. But this production of *All's Well That Ends Well* makes a good start, establishing three important principles for presenting the classics in an Irish context.

First, the company appears to have chosen this play out of a sense that it's worth producing in its own right. *All's Well That Ends Well* is rarely seen in Ireland (so rarely, in fact, that the company calls their production an "Irish premiere" in some of its advertising). So the first principle established here is that Shakespeare actually has something to say to contemporary Irish theatregoers, and should be produced for that reason.

Secondly, CSI shows an awareness that

you cannot cut corners in your Shakespearean casting. Hinds has assembled a remarkable group of actors. Eva Bartley, Liam Carney, Vincent McCabe, Stella McCusker, and Eleanor Methven all do outstanding work in the play's supporting roles. And Aidan Kelly, cast against type as Parolles, is particularly good in a part that allows him to demonstrate his versatility.

Less successful however are Peter Gaynor and Janet Moran as Bertram and Helena. Neither actor seems to have come to terms fully with the question of whether their characters' final-act marriage really is an example of how "all's well that ends well." That question is of course open to interpretation, but the production needed to establish its own attitude to the issue. These characters needed to be performed with more conviction.

But the most important feature of this production is that it asserts the need for the development of an Irish classical voice. There was a risk that the company might have filtered Shakespeare through a generic, artificial stage Irish idiom. Instead, the actors comfortably and convincingly deliver the verse in their own different Irish accents. In the past, writers such as Murphy, Friel and Kilroy have pitched translations of Chekhov and Ibsen for an Irish ear. CSI is trying to do something similar for voice work and direction, attempting to present Shakespeare's English for an audience attuned to Irish rhythms and sounds. This is a genuinely important achievement that ought to be developed further.

Part of that development might involve work on movement as well as voice. Body language for the Shakespearean actor has to start with the rhythms of the language, to build towards a performance that is

realistic but not necessarily naturalistic. Some members of the cast know how to achieve this, but others suffered from a lack of direction, bringing too contemporary a sensibility to their roles.

The use of space is also disappointing. The stage's depth and height are rarely exploited, and the blocking is often cumbersome. Anne-Marie Woods' set design is impressive, but it remains unchanged for the entire performance, so there is very little to engage the audience visually. This may arise from budgetary constraints — this is an inaugural production, after all — but more sophisticated choreography and a livelier use of visual effects would have been welcome.

That said, Classic Stage Ireland have set out with this production of *All's Well That Ends Well* to do an important new job for Irish theatre — to produce the world's classics regularly, and with skill and assurance. This production is a confident first step, achieving many of its aims very well indeed.

AMADEUS by Peter Shaffer

Ouroboros Theatre

Samuel Beckett Theatre, Dublin

15 June–10 July; reviewed 15 June 2004

BY HEATHER JOHNSON

THE REVISED VERSION OF PETER Shaffer's play *Amadeus* is the first production by Theatreworks in their revised identity as Ouroboros. In this new incarnation, the company continues its practice of large and lavish annual productions, clearly intending to concentrate on theatre of epic scale, with a vision that reaches from minute production detail up to grand statement. This is an aspiration that inevitably brings heightened audience expectations. These are largely



met in this production of *Amadeus*, which strives to present a well-rounded theatrical experience: the programme is informative, a conducting consultant was engaged to ensure verisimilitude, and the featured prop in the framing scenes — a wonderful old-fashioned wheelchair — is nicely evocative of the period.

The play focuses on the complex relationship between two composers, Mozart and Salieri. Establishment figure Salieri experiences a sense of jealousy, consternation, and failure when confronted with the boy genius Mozart and his unsettling sexual promiscuity, coarse language, and refined musical sensibility. However, the big themes promised by Shaffer's subject (such as the nature of artistic creation, and criticism versus creativity), at times

LISTEN UP Moy and Conway in *Amadeus*

become clouded by the minutiae of the play's own construction. Aspects of the writing make a long play

seem even longer, through no fault of this production. Verbal asides, frequent scene changes, and the demands of the play's retrospective structure sometimes interfere with its more reflective treatment of the principal themes. Director Michael Caven establishes a steady pace, despite Shaffer's many tedious interjections of extraneous plot detail which, while sustaining the logic of the narrative, do not help to build the dramatic impact of this epic.

Shaffer's exploration of character provides the focus and he has drawn two challenging roles in Mozart and Salieri. Patrick Moy gives an excellent performance as Mozart, his giddy laugh and

bouncy enthusiasm depicting a boyish madman imprisoned by his own genius. For early dramatic impact much depends on the sonorous presence of Salieri (Denis Conway) and his opening monologue, framing his own recollected story which then constitutes the body of the play. Conway carefully pitches the character of Salieri between deeply sinister devil and self-defeating begruder, though in the first act he is less than compelling, lacking a sense of caustic tension. However, by the time the actor delivers Salieri's *cries de cœur* at full tilt, the performance has grown in force and the scene is gripping. The actors portraying secondary characters also perform well, and each of the various court figures succeeds in remaining distinctive through their smartly comic scenes.

An impressive set design by Ferdia Murphy features a black and white graffiti-style backdrop which projects a sense of elegance. Tall revolving doors, mirror-panelled on reverse, neatly incorporate functionality and aesthetic statement, though some elements suggest design straining to fill the stage space: the central chandelier, hung high above the set, has little impact, while the 'aside' windows elevated above the set seem stylistically incongruous. These are minor discrepancies in an otherwise splendidly stylish set.

In 2003 Shaffer added a crucial new scene to *Amadeus*, effectively amplifying the play's larger themes and, in this production, making endurance of the play's length worthwhile. The added scene clarifies Shaffer's intellectual as well as moral concerns, making explicit Salieri's guilt for Mozart's poverty and the comparative limitations of his own talents. When Salieri begs for absolution from Mozart, it

is dramatically powerful as the audience knows that Mozart is incapable of providing such salvation due to his mental and physical deterioration and his genius. The poignancy of Salieri's desire to conceive of himself as his superior's double speaks to self-deception and the agony of human fate.

Exploration of artistic inspiration, music, and masculinity makes this play more complex than a simple tale of professional envy. Whether as God's expression through man or the product of personal demons, music itself prevails in this production. Shaffer urges us to listen as if for the first time, through imaginative reproduction of the debut performances of Mozart's compositions, so that the musical works and Salieri's ecstatic response to them have a remarkable power of truth within the context of fictionalised biography. The depiction of male potency and the sexualized language reveals how these baser elements complement such moments of transcendence; the arena of sexual conquest is here intrinsic to artistic creation. The thought-provoking production by Ouroboros ultimately elucidates Shaffer's inquiry into this relationship of creativity and morality.

Heather Johnson is a literary critic and tutor in literature at DCU.

BEAUTIFUL THING by Jonathan Harvey

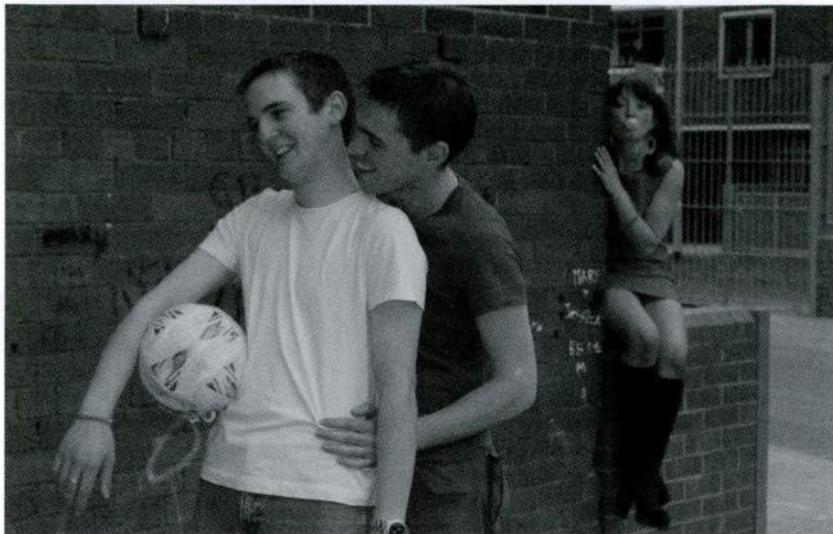
Dark Horse Theatre Company

On tour; reviewed at Andrew's Lane Studio

on 7 July 2004

BY PÁDRAIC WHYTE

VERY SIMPLY, JONATHAN HARVEY'S play follows the story of two people who fall in love. While this can be one of the



most exciting experiences in life, it can also be extremely complicated, particularly for teenagers. For the protagonists of this play, theirs is that love that dare not speak its name, at least not in a low-rise block of flats on Thamesmead Estate in South-East London.

The set for Dark Horse Theatre's production adopts pale and pasty colours that reflect the dreary existence of the characters on an estate filled with abuse, drugs, and single parents barely able to make ends meet. With a blurred city-skyline etched onto the lower half of the flats, the set creates a sense that this story is but one snapshot of city life.

The plot centres on the relationship between three teenagers, Jamie, Leah and Ste, who live next door to each other. As Jamie struggles to come to terms with his homosexuality and the bullying he

BUBBLE TROUBLE

Walsh, Montgomery and Nixon-O'Neill in Beautiful Thing

receives at school, Ste copes with being bullied at home by his abusive father and brother. Meanwhile Leah, expelled from school, channels all her energies into listening to and mimicking singer Mama Cass. Life becomes increasingly problematic when Ste takes refuge in Jamie's flat to escape his father's drunken beatings. The two boys share a bed together and, over the course of the play, fall in love.

Written in 1994, this play primarily explores the complexities of growing up and falling in love on a working class estate. Secondary to this is the fact that the characters who fall in love happen to be gay. In this sense there is almost a conscious attempt at a 'normalisation' of homosexuality in the text, with many dominant stereotypes of gay men being challenged through the portrayal of sporty and laddish Ste. Harvey's script is

a complex social commentary that explores the process of falling in love. His well-rounded characters reveal the darker elements of living in an environment that does not accept this love, with their subtle humorous self-criticism offering moments of comic relief.

However, the complexities of the script that were later immortalised in the 1996 film adaptation *Beautiful Thing* were unfortunately reduced and ultimately discarded in this production. The play suffered from unimaginative direction, being transformed into a simplistic comedy that at times descended into farce. This was particularly evident in many of the bedroom scenes between Jamie (Glen Montgomery) and Ste (Maurice Walsh). By placing too great an emphasis on the comedic elements of the characters' dilemma, director Seán Colgan failed to explore the complexity of their situation. At one point in the production Ste lies on Jamie's bed, battered and bruised from a beating. While there is a great deal of humour, the dark and tragic events that have forced the two together are downplayed. As a result, the potential for sensitivity or tenderness is lost.

Indeed, this is symptomatic of the entire production. There is very little chemistry between the two actors and it is difficult to identify when the relationship starts and how or why it progresses. While Walsh's Ste is uncomfortable and shy to begin with, his performance never suggests that he overcomes this awkwardness or has any great interest in Montgomery's angst-ridden Jamie. The characters of the two boys are not developed sufficiently on stage, and it is subsequently unclear from the production why they go to such lengths to maintain the

relationship. That some of the characters have Irish accents and some London accents upsets the audience's sense of place. Also, the oversized set limited the use of theatrical space and restricted the movements of the actors.

The most enjoyable feature of the production was Annette Tierney's outstanding performance as Jamie's mother, Sandra. Tierney created an exceptionally well-rounded and complex mother whose fits of anger never overshadow her unconditional love for her son. Along with Tierney, Tara Nixon-O'Neill's depiction of Leah also provides entertaining episodes. In fact, the female performances allow for the greatest moments of tenderness in the piece. Both performers demonstrate great range in their acting abilities, everything from dramatic outbursts to silent glances, and bring to the fore the multiple dimensions of the characters present in Harvey's text.

Unfortunately, however, the production fails to come together as a coherent whole, the potential of Harvey's script not being fully realised. In essence, this *Beautiful Thing* could do with a makeover.

Pádraic Whyte is studying for a PhD in children's literature at Trinity College, Dublin.

THE BECKETT PROJECT: THE DISCIPLINED BODY

Granary Theatre, Cork

24-29 May 2004; reviewed 26 May

BY ANNA McMULLAN

THE PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL DEMANDS of performing Beckett are legendary. Billie Whitelaw has recalled the excruciating experience of performing in *Not I* and *Footfalls*, and Beckett's emphasis on restraint: "Too much colour, Billie, too



much colour." Practitioner and teacher of Asian martial arts and yoga, Phillip Zarrilli, has developed a psychophysical approach to performance which, in "The Beckett Project", he and actress Patricia Boyette have applied to productions of Beckett's late drama. Initiated in 1995 and launched at the Grove Theatre in Los Angeles in 2000, "The Beckett Project" took up residence in Cork in May 2004. Zarrilli and Boyette engaged in intensive training with five Ireland-based actors (four from Cork) culminating in a week of public performances of Beckett's shorter plays. The first of the two programmes presented *Ohio Impromptu*, *Play* and *Eh Joe*, and the second *Not I*, *Footfalls*, *Act With-out Words I* and *Rockaby*, the programmes running

TALE TELLING *Zarrilli and Crook in Ohio Impromptu*

on alternate evenings, with one double-bill performance. The intimacy of the Granary Theatre served "The Beckett Project" well. The audience was ushered out of the theatre between each play, re-entering to find the actors already in place, like an installation. While this made for a long evening on the occasion of the double bill, it enabled each of these short but perfectly self contained dramas to inhabit the theatre space and engage the audience anew. It also made palpable a kind of suspended stillness and silence in the plays — one of the real achievements of "The Beckett Project".

The double-bill began with *Ohio Impromptu* which exquisitely captured the restrained energy and visual

chiaroscuro of this 'dramaticule'. The interplay between Andy Crook (Listener) and Zarrilli (Reader) gave full weight and resonance to the movements and to the pauses and repetitions. The striking attention to visual detail and precision of movement was also characteristic of other pieces, especially *Rockaby*, where the sole image on stage was of a rocking chair and the tiny figure of Boyette as the prematurely old 'W'. Costumed in a high-necked full-length sequined dress, 'W' remained an object of visual fascination as her recorded voice told of her eventual renunciation of the search to glimpse and communicate with another living soul.

To each of her performances (*Rockaby*, *Eh Joe* and *Not I*) Boyette brought a remarkable combination of vocal discipline, emotional depth, and intelligence. While she has consulted with Billie Whitelaw, who worked closely with Beckett, and has clearly learned a great deal from this magnificent Beckett actress, she has developed her own distinctive style of delivery. She conveyed the effort of will and self control needed by both character and actress to simultaneously evoke and restrain vistas of loss, vulnerability and, in the case of the female voice in *Eh Joe*, what Whitelaw referred to as 'suppressed venom'.

In performing Beckett, discipline is a survival strategy for beings on the edge of trauma or erasure. It is the sense of the human creature within the framework that is compelling, revealing what Beckett described in a 1938 essay on the Irish poet, Denis Devlin, as "the need which is the absolute predicament of particular human identity." I missed that aesthetics of vulnerability in *Footfalls*,

where Bernie Cronin achieved an admirable corporeal control, but did not convey to me the anguished determination of May's attempts to prove her own existence — through dialogue with her Mother's voice (evocatively delivered by Mairín Prendergast), the articulation of her own narrative, or even the sound of her footfalls. Devoid of the concept of need, the disciplined body as a focus of performing Beckett may convey simply technique, and occasionally I felt this was the case here. For the most part, however, the corporeal restraint which characterized "The Beckett Project" did not reduce the expressive vocabularies of the actor's 'bodymind', but opened up a range of shades otherwise imperceptible.

I had quibbles about some of the design and directorial decisions in individual productions. *Play* was well performed by Cronin, Crook and Regina Crowley, but the visual image of three urns in limbo was cluttered by packing cases, as if the urns had been abandoned in some warehouse, which I found visually and conceptually distracting. *Act Without Words I*, again characterized by disciplined performances, rendered visible as a hooded figure the normally unseen agent. While this foregrounded metatheatricality, it also dispersed the dramatic focus.

On the whole, however, I was impressed by "The Beckett Project"'s detailed attention to the visual aesthetics of the stage, and the intensely focused and resonant performances it achieved.

Anna McMullan is Lecturer at the School of Drama at Trinity College Dublin and author of Theatre on Trial: The Later Drama of Samuel Beckett.

BELFAST BLUES by Geraldine Hughes

That's Us Productions, Kay Ellen Consolver,

Georganne Aldrich Heller and Steven Klein

Soho Theatre + Writers' Centre, London

1 June-3 July, 2004 (7.30 pm)

PROTESTANTS by Robert Welch

Ransom Productions in association with Soho

Theatre Company

Soho Theatre + Writers' Centre, London

7 June-3 July, 2004 (9.15 pm)

Both plays reviewed 14 June

BY IAN SHUTTLEWORTH

WE'RE ALL USED TO PLAYS BEING misrepresented by hyperbolical publicity blurbs, selectively quoted reviews and the like. Sometimes, however, context alone can make the implication. I suspect that

Soho Theatre reckoned that scheduling *Belfast Blues* and *Protestants* to play in separate first and second houses on the same evenings made for a diptych that was both convenient and illuminating: both solo shows "from" Northern Ireland, one rooted in a Catholic/Nationalist/Republican nexus. The other ... well, look at the title.

But therein lies the mistake. Draw inferences from the combination of the title of Robert Welch's play and its cultural provenance, and you're adding two and two and getting seven. Where Geraldine Hughes' piece is a memoir of a childhood in West Belfast's Divis Flats during the 1970s and early 1980s, Welch's play is a self-consciously dense, literary/poetic *tour d'horizon* of Protestantism, from Martin Luther to a bigoted soccer



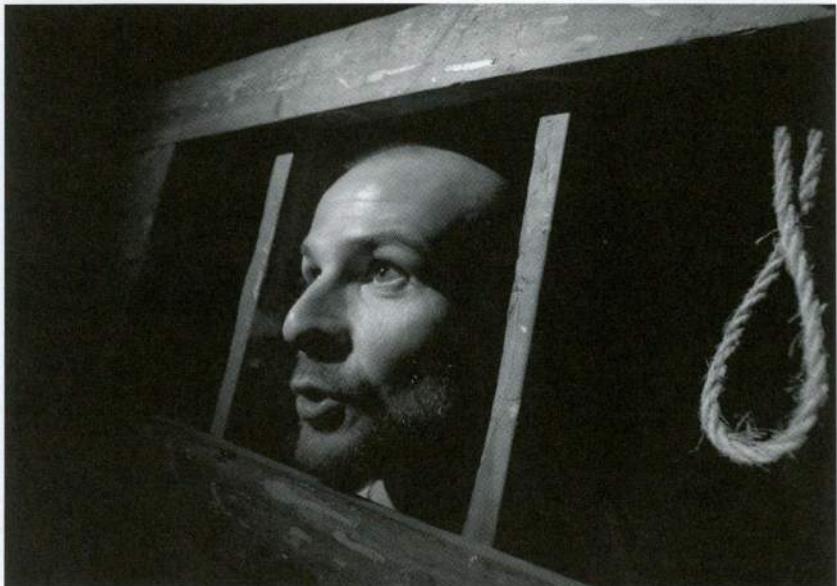
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thug in a Glasgow bar. Soho's programming may have enabled the two shows to piggy-back on one another's box-office trade, but its implicit suggestion of a Troubles mini-season with one play from each "side" does both shows, and *Protestants* in particular, a disservice.

It's impossible, of course, to ignore the Troubles in a play such as *Belfast Blues*. The Divis development was, after all, created at the fag-end of the Unionist-dominated Stormont era to become a Catholic ghetto, if not later a slum, and it very quickly became a textbook example (literally) for many years of the worst public housing in Europe, including the then-Soviet bloc. Such a background in turn will tend to politicise the inhabitants of the area. Hughes' dramatic memoir

HANGING TOUGH

*Paul Hickey in
Protestants*

describes events from the Troubles such as her mother being enlisted to smuggle a gun past a British army patrol, various shootings in the flats and so on, but seldom takes an explicit political position. When it does so, the response of this reviewer (with his East Belfast Protestant upbringing) is broadly akin to the way I read Tim Pat Coogan's histories: I am annoyed and resentful at the stridently hostile tone, but none the less entirely persuaded by the horrific mass of facts which underpin it.

Ultimately, though, *Belfast Blues* isn't "about" the Troubles. Hughes, on a stage bare except for a table, a chair and a series of back-projected photographs, performs a number of character sketches of her family and neighbours as she herself grew up, but it's in the second half of the

KIRPA MATTHEWS

show that one begins to form a sense of its true *raison d'être*. For at the age of 14 or so, she was cast in an American film about the Troubles (which the Internet Movie DataBase reveals to be the 1984 TV picture *Children In The Crossfire*), and consequently began to find herself between two worlds, neither of which really understood the other. The second half of the show leads us ineluctably towards Hughes' ultimate decision to go to UCLA to train as an actress; she now lives and works in California, whence this show originates.

This may explain the faint air of "showcase therapy" which hangs about the piece. It's fluid in structure and adept in performance, but one suspects that it has been created to display Hughes' range of talents as a performer, and ultimately perhaps to address an issue personal to her. It is as though she is trying to justify that decision to move to Los Angeles, which meant breaking a promise she made to her dying father than she would stay and look after her family. This creates an imbalance in the material: what begins as a portrait of a particular flavour of Belfast childhood tips more and more into a single individual's single issue, which is given more weight than it seems to justify. Even if mistaken, this impression can retrospectively devalue the rest of the piece, since however much else it may contain, it is apparently founded upon navel-gazing, its audience being asked not merely to enjoy or to be impressed. One feels as if she is asking us to validate her choices.

Protestants is far the simpler show in respect of conceptual genesis, if of nothing else. An impressionistic portrait of an entire strain of belief is, after all, much easier said than done. True, Welch uses



CHILDHOOD WAVE
*Geraldine Hughes in
Belfast Blues*

Northern Ireland as a primary focus for his account, but really only in

the sense that the province is a location where both the virtues and vices of Protestantism are at their most conspicuous.

The staging, too, is more adventurous, and in keeping with London expectations of Rachel O'Riordan's Ransom company after the triumph of Richard Dormer's Alex Higgins bio-play *Hurricane*, seen at the same venue earlier this year. In a mini-amphitheatre — a wooden "O", indeed — performer Paul Hickey uses a meagre selection of poor theatre-style "found" props to create the character and tone of each of a series of first-person episodes, interspersed with

reviews

a vaguer, more poetical present-day thread. Thus, for instance, half of a circular saw blade hoisted upon his shoulders becomes the ruffed collar of Queen Elizabeth I, whilst a Zimmer frame suggests both her voluminous gown and her advancing years at the time of her betrayal in Ireland by Essex; the Glaswegian tough, eagerly anticipating a bout of sectarian ultraviolence, strains and snarls at the end of a chain, like a fighting dog in his pit; and so on.

That the play is only erratically successful in its professed aim is to be expected. It's an immense area to cover, especially when trying to give both individual portraits and a hint of overarching thesis all in little more than an hour. The tone adopted by Welch recognises this practical impossibility. Nevertheless, such a thesis is advanced, and it is that Protestantism is intimately bound up with the notion of protest. Oddly, a number of English critics seem to have been surprised by this notion, despite both the blatant etymology and a press release which explicitly trailed this as the underlying perspective of the piece. Certainly, Welch's account of Protestantism is almost entirely oppositional in character: his Martin Luther (portrayed in Hickey's generally intense, sometimes frighteningly energetic performance, though in this scene with a bizarrely inaccurate accent more suggestive of central Asia than Germany) passionately conveys his opposition to certain doctrines of Catholicism, but gives much less of a sense of what he is in favour of than, say, John Osborne's dramatic treatment of the same figure. Of course, doggedness in the face of insuperable difficulties, such as evidenced by the production as a whole, is

arguably itself one of the characteristics of Protestantism.

Ian Shuttleworth reviews theatre for the Financial Times and Teletext (ITV), and is editor and publisher of Theatre Record magazine.

THE BUTTERFLY RANCH by Tom Swift

The Performance Corporation

SS Michael & John Church and Buildings,

Dublin, 26 April - 2 May 2004;

reviewed 1 May

BY BELINDA McKEON

"THERE ARE A COUPLE OF DIFFERENT levels", whispered the ticket attendant at the door to the unfamiliar rear space of SS Michael & John; "stand on whichever you choose, and feel free to move between them." Thoughts flash: sounds intriguing, but won't that be uncomfortable, disruptive? Yes, as the audience is embroiled in the layers and levels of the striking, specially constructed stage, its three tiers interlocking like the pieces of a dizzying jigsaw puzzle; and that's just the point.

Previously, with *Candide* and *The 7 Deadly Sins*, The Performance Corporation has displayed a gift for sharp social comedy delivered with an energy to which the word 'boundless' could scarcely do justice. But in *The Butterfly Ranch*, the boundaries have been firmly established — physical, tangible boundaries between the stage and the viewing-space, moral and psychological boundaries between the innocent and the corrupt. When they are transgressed, as the high-voltage fury of Tom Swift's script seethes towards a climax, the strange, crypt-like space of its performance is not a pleasant place to be. The metal bars leaned upon by the audience form both a springboard and a hid-



ing-place for those onstage. Bodily joltings and trodden fingers result, accompanied by the unshakeable sense of tension which comes of literally teetering over the maelstrom of Swift's surreal vision, rather than being allowed to sit and observe it from a conventional distance.

The audience, then, is shaken. But this is part of the game, for, as the play unfolds, far worse versions of the same discomforts are visited upon the unfortunate lives of these characters. The butterfly ranch is run by the merciless tyrant Jed Senior (Mal Whyte) and his loutish son Jed Junior (Peter Daly) for the purpose of breeding butterflies (beautifully suggested by Sinead Woods' projections) to feed to snarling pigs. It becomes a nightmare world both for, and in the hands of, an unnamed boy (Louis Lovett) who literally falls from the sky into its

DIG IN *Louis Lovett*
The Butterfly Ranch

clutches. We're all, it seems, going to feel something of the pain, the confusion, the mistrust of that world, yet

since this is a production from the Performance Corporation, we're all also going to laugh, darkly and uneasily, at the same time.

This would seem to be Swift's premise, and with Jo Mangan as director of his tale of savagery and betrayal, it comes off for the most part memorably. Though mounted, both in terms of narrative and of physical realisation, on premises so eccentric they prove something of a distraction, the story that evolves is solid and compelling — that of a heartless father, and of the ruin he wreaks on the boys cursed with the fate of being his sons. Greed begets greed, and Daly and Lovett brilliantly slap the brotherly hatred and helplessness that

reviews

binds their characters into visceral, dramatic shape. Theirs is a ruthlessly physical theatre, one which conveys the violence of their relationship — and their background — to chilling effect; the roar of the pigs underground, the shadow of the shotgun at home, of the whip in school. And all the time, the shape of another son — the brother who defied his father, and was punished — lurks with the pigs, in the pit. Even a wonderfully realised love scene, between Lovett and Michelle Read as his schoolroom sweetheart, turns vicious — subtly, slowly — as the site of their affections, the playground swing, becomes an instrument of abuse.

It may be in this scene that Lovett's character, the boy, turns bad, and begins his descent towards the calculated brutality of the final scenes, in which father and son become his playthings. But as onlookers, we cannot pinpoint the exact moment, only realise when it is too late to reverse it, and it is in sketching the conflict between inevitability and intervention that Swift's play has its power. Yet this is marred by a vagueness as to the nature of the boy's anger — from his demeanour, it is clear that he feels himself to face a dilemma of some sort, but why? And what is it? — which only invites accusations of an unimaginative reliance on the notion of inevitability. Equally unclear is the prominence given to the characters of two Latvian farmhands plotting an internet scam. Though played with suitable coldness by Read and Damien Devaney, they seem, as they move up ladders and down trapdoors, to exist only to reinforce the full wonders of the innovative stage. A case of too many hands in an otherwise original, visually striking tale of revenge which shakes off

the obvious Greek influences to place familial revenge in the callous hands of the outsider.

Belinda McKeon writes about the arts for publications including The Irish Times.

FAR AWAY by Caryl Churchill

Bedrock

Project Space Upstairs, Dublin

30 June-10 July 2004; reviewed 6 July

BY BRIAN SINGLETON

CARYL CHURCHILL'S PLAY IS A 45-minute parable on a world tearing itself apart. The title is an ironic reminder on that most English of hymns (*There is a Happy Land, Far, Far Away*) and the land evoked is an Elysium made in England's own image, a place of verdant pasture where everyone is at peace. Churchill lulls us into a false sense of security, as the English Elysium she is about to expose is rife with hatred and putrid with death.

Bedrock's Elysium (designed by Seamus O'Fiaich) is a pared-down country kitchen with a large blue-screen backdrop. Sound designers Vincent Doherty and Ivan Birtwhistle provide a soundtrack of birds chirping, creating an idyll for the first of the three scenes of which the play is composed. A child, Joan (played with understated innocence by Laura Murphy) cannot sleep because of events she has witnessed in her uncle's yard. Her aunt Harper (Jane Brennan) attempts to pacify her with spurious explanations but as the child probes and persists with her questions, Harper is forced to alter her story to hide the truth. We, the audience, never get to the truth, but we hear the truth presented as lies. The child's innocent witnessing is the only truth we need.



Director Jimmy Fay handles this scene with extreme care, while Jane Brennan spins a superbly convincing web. Though we know she is lying, Brennan plays the character with a sympathy we respect.

The play next reveals the adult Joan working as an apprentice designer and maker of outrageous hats. Laura Murphy conveys the adult transition with a slightly deeper register and more physical confidence. Joined by Todd (Barry Ward), a more experienced hat-maker, the two grow closer together in a series of conversations on the state of the industry and their relationship, while we get closer to realising the full horror of why they are making the exotic hats. The stage then fills with a parade of prisoners in rags wearing their exotic creations: they are heading for their deaths and the hats will be destroyed along with the bodies. It is a horrific irony

IF THE HAT FITS ... *The Bedrock Company in Far Away*

that onto human destruction the state layers a hat competition, humiliating the prisoners at their final moment and turning their destruction into a spectacle of absurd power.

Between the scenes, video sequences by O'Faichi are played of animals, war, and horror-movie walking zombies. These reinforce the play's main drive as being one of war — something we could surely be trusted to discern for ourselves, given the strength and simplicity of the allegorical message. Faced with images of Hollywood B-movie zombies, and actors on stage imitating them, however, the instinct is to laugh. This immediately attenuated and upstaged the intended effect of the prisoner's hat parade. Further, the positioning of the screen for the projections was so dominant centre stage that Fay had difficulty making a parade look effective. What should have

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been a moment of horror, as wave after wave of prisoners in hats descend upon us, came across as a weak zombie-like procession to a disco beat. In the end the prisoners ambled about with little effect and were even permitted to come out for a curtain call, some smiling. It was a shame that here, an apparent desire to abandon the simplicity of the text for the sake of spectacle and cross-over to another medium undermined the potency of much of Fay's direction and the cast's skilful handling of the text.

That potency, thankfully, was restored in the final scene when the play returns for the third phase, again with the passing of time, to find Joan and Todd on the run from the city and holed up in Joan's aunt's house. Here there is a complete breakdown of language as a form of communication, with characters speaking of animal species as ethnicities, races or nations in a neo-Darwinian nightmare world of competing and changing allegiances. Again the cast performed the text with a delicate mastery, Jane Brennan at the forefront in clearly elucidating Churchill's linguistic irony. At first we take the irony as absurdity, but to Fay's credit, by the scene's end that absurdity changed to total credulity and horror. The absurd is not absurd when the whole world is acting absurdly: absurd horror is the new reality.

And so with the exception of an unwarranted video spectacle in the middle of the production, Fay made Churchill's portentous story of a world consuming itself resonate with clarity and power, Bedrock at its best when presenting Churchill's simple truth, without adornment, chillingly.

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

HEAVENLY BODIES by Stewart Parker

Peacock Theatre, Dublin

23 June-31 July 2004; reviewed 29 June

BY BETH NEWHALL

THRILLS, CHILLS, PASSIONATE KISSES, AND more handlebar moustaches than you could shake a shillelagh at! As Irishman Dion Boucicault's nineteenth-century melodrama-cum-Irish-adventure *The Shaughraun* graces the stage of the Abbey, *Heavenly Bodies*, Belfast-born Stewart Parker's 1980s riff on the tumultuous life of Boucicault, rollicks along at the Peacock. What a delicious meta-theatrical pairing. While Conn the Shaughraun outwits his nemeses upstairs at the National Theatre, downstairs Parker's play invokes Boucicault's reliance on plot contrivance and melodramatic archetypes to question whether even Boucicault's own best work merits the status of such "high" art. Nothing less than the playwright's soul hangs upon the answer.

Fortunately, with this dashing production — under Lynne Parker's assured direction — the spirits of both Boucicault and Parker can rest easy. In *Heavenly Bodies*, the character of Boucicault languishes in his geriatric years, the most popular English-language playwright of the latter-half of the nineteenth century reduced to penury having squandered his fortune yet again. With a Faustian sense of timing, one Johnny Patterson — an Irish circus performer and balladeer responsible for such classics as "The Stone Outside Dan Murphy's Door" and "The Garden Where the Praties Grow," — appears à la Mephistopheles to escort "Boucie" to a special limbo where, ahem, theatre critics gleefully wait to torment artistic hacks for all eternity. Heaven, as Patterson points out, is reserved for

"poets ... verse dramatists," and other such "English" type "heavenly bodies." When Boucicault protests that he has earned a place in that illustrious company, Patterson invites him to replay his life and theatrical ventures. This will determine whether Boucicault's moments of dramatic integrity and genuine creativity do in fact counterbalance his exploitation of spectacle and Irish stereotypes. What follows is a mélange of Boucicault's life and dramas, both of which intertwine considerably. With Patterson keeping a lively commentary, onstage musicians providing the necessary melodic flourish, and each member of the cast assuming several characters from Boucicault's life and dramas, *Heavenly Bodies* makes entertaining and probing work of its central question.

Critics may have condemned Boucicault's reliance on spectacle to sell tickets, but there is no denying the visual appeal of Monica Frawley's design for this production. The deep reds of her set — a simple raked stage backed by a lush velvet curtain — evoke Victorian theatre while providing a multi-purpose, non-specific setting for the play's rapidly changing scenes. At the same time, the slanted angle of the stage lends an air of distortion to the surreal proceedings. Paul Keogan's lighting moves easily between the theatrical, as



FALLEN ANGEL?
*Roe and Conlon in
Heavenly Bodies*

when a train approaches from offstage, and the subtly affective. The musicians, directed by Hélène Montague, likewise

switch between participation in the staged melodramatic action, and a gentle underscoring of Parker's dialogue. The ensemble, too, winkingly revels in *Heavenly Bodies'* ironic use of melodramatic conventions. Although occasionally the acting of the plays-within-the-play falls a little flat, or a brief slice of reality does not ring true, in general, the cast, led by the able Declan Conlon as Boucicault, achieves the difficult balance between satire and sincerity so crucial to the play. Lynne Parker's direction incorporates all these elements beautifully, maintaining a

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comic tone (at times, hilarious) without sacrificing Stewart Parker's insistence on the ambiguity of his hero.

In this extended consideration of Boucicault's theatrical legacy, the Peacock's *Heavenly Bodies* ultimately offers up two real stars, and Boucicault himself does not quite make the list. As Johnny Patterson, Owen Roe, done up like a leprechaun gone horribly wrong — think Jack Nicholson as The Joker meets the Irish brute of *Punch* cartoons — is simply outstanding. Roe struts and sings across the stage absolutely and perfectly larger-than-life. Nevertheless, at the end of the first act, when Patterson talks about how the Famine haunts the diasporic Irish, all the theatricality vanishes in a focused, spell-binding, and utterly heart-wrenching moment. Roe's performance demonstrates nothing short of an artist's mastery of his craft.

And while selections of Boucicault's scripts testify to his wit, it is finally Stewart Parker's craftsmanship as a playwright that makes *Heavenly Bodies* a success. Parker interweaves Boucicault's dialogue and biography with fiction of his own, showing himself capable of the highest humour. And one can only respect Parker's refusal to either lionise or vilify his subject. As the play ends, and a cloud descends from the rafters to raise the vindicated Boucie to heaven, it begins to pour. Without missing a beat, Patterson pipes up, "Wouldn't ya know? The heavens open, and it rains!" It feels only appropriate that Roe and Parker share this last laugh.

Beth Newhall is currently completing an M.Phil. in Irish Theatre and Film at Trinity College, Dublin.

THE ILLUSION by Pierre Corneille, adapted by Tony Kushner

Randolf SD The Company

Project Cube, Dublin

8-17 July 2004; reviewed July 8 & 15

BY CONOR HANRATTY

RANDOLF SD THE COMPANY HAS GROWN out of Randolf Scott Dances, the group behind *Eeeugh!topia* at last year's Dublin Fringe Festival. *The Illusion*, its first production under this new name, features Tony Kushner's free adaptation of Pierre Corneille's *L'illusion Comique*. Kushner gives the original, written in 1639, a ravishingly wordy facelift, while director Wayne Jordan allows the sumptuous text to shine in a simple but very effective production.

The company's stated aim of investigating audience-performer dialogue is evident from the beginning — the audience arrives into what appears to be a rehearsal room, with actors, scripts and the pre-requisite bottles of mineral water strewn about. The actors are dismissed by The Magician, (Kate Nic Chonao-naigh), who clears the stage for the entrance of The Lawyer, played with great charisma by Will O'Connell. He has come to the Magician in the hope of learning what has happened to his estranged son. The Magician conjures up several dramatic vignettes centring on the love affairs of the young man, but finally reveals to the Lawyer that what he has seen are the tricks of the eponymous illusion; the man's son is in fact an actor in Paris.

Some of Kushner's adaptation is in verse, as is the original, but the language is never allowed to become too grandiose, and the text has a contemporary and intelligent freshness. This is a



play about the nature of theatre — in Kushner's words, 'a rose smelling faintly of blood'. The play sweeps through the various emotions of love — joy, lust, jealousy, even hatred — exposing and exploring them through the illusion(s) of the theatre. It ends with a bravura speech (Kushner's, not Corneille's) about the power and importance of theatre, delivered with fiery aplomb by Nic Chonaonaigh.

Despite the play's length, Jordan maintains an engaging pace, saving some of the best moments for the very end. Generally he pays wonderful attention to detail, and turns the company's limited resources to his advantage. The 'rehearsal-room' feel of the production creates a very effective contrast to Kushner's text, and the minimalist *mise*

REALITY CHECKING

*Radmall-Quirke, Lee,
McGill in The Illusion.*

en scène lets the story remain the centre of audience. Louise White's set consists of a raised square catwalk, which runs around a central playing area, accessed by four folding entrances. Jordan fully exploits these to create a variety of effective comic moments between characters, while the set creates a dual playing space — the Magician and the Lawyer stay on top of the catwalk while the other performers move through and around it. Simple use of makeup effectively delineates the 'real'-world Lawyer from the actors within the illusion. The attention to detail falters only in the costumes (by Helen Bermingham and Georgina Carrigan), which, although they come from a clever idea — white cotton "dressing up" additions to the actors' everyday clothes — are not realised

reviews

entirely successfully. Perhaps if more obviously 'artificial' — or even genuine antique costumes — were used the sense of pretence would be more clearly communicated.

The actors perform with great enthusiasm, and several prove skilful performers. The three women (Nic Chonaonaigh, Natalie Radmall-Quirke as the Lover, and Ruth McGill as the Maid) are particularly impressive, as is Nick Lee as the Magician's assistant. Only Philip McMahon's performance as The Orphan (the Lawyer's son) is disappointing. This character is vital to the play. Though, like the others, a character within the illusion, he also possesses a hint of outsider status. In a play about the nature of illusion, this slight outside/inside dissonance can help ensure that the audience constantly re-assesses what it is viewing. McMahon's performance does not equal those surrounding (and very much supporting) his, and although his character does force the 'illusion' into much sharper relief, the degree to which this is intentional is questionable. Overall, however, the company appears to enjoy thoroughly performing this play, and, despite — or perhaps because of — the shifting layers of illusion and reality, enthusiastically involves the audience throughout. The performers' considerable abilities are most evident when they become completely engaged in the 'illusion'.

This production demonstrates that Randolph SD | The Company is an exciting group of young theatre-makers. *The Illusion*, a play about theatre, is an appropriate choice for their first production, and they succeed in thoroughly involving their audience in their passionate world. Their cleverness and exuberance could well become a

distinctive and refreshing trademark.

Conor Hanratty is a director and translator, currently completing an MA in Greek Theatre Performance in Royal Holloway, University of London.

JIMMY JOYCED! by Donal O'Kelly

Bewley's Cafe Theatre, Dublin

31 May–19 June 2004; reviewed 15 June

BY CATRIONA MITCHELL

JIMMY JOYCED!, WRITTEN AND PERFORMED by Donal O'Kelly and directed by Sorcha Fox, is a frenetic and intelligent one-man show narrated by an imaginary character, JJ Staines, a bric-a-brac salesman in the Portobello Market. It begins with Staines running into the room to loud hurly burly music, wearing a leather jacket and black-feathered angels' wings. Leaping onto a trunk at centre stage he claims Joyce needs rescuing: "The academics have him." He displays one of his wares, a straw boater with a large hole in it — said to hail from the writer himself. But tellingly, Staines has chosen to heed his father's advice: "Don't sell the Joyce stuff, keep it, it's ours."

As the programme notes explain, O'Kelly drew from a wide range of texts in writing this play, including the biographies by Costello and Ellmann. Through the Staines character, who has a mania for all things Joycean, O'Kelly single-handedly recreates Joyce's milieu in the year 1904, the year his mother died and he met Nora Barnacle. The script comprises a series of densely informative biographical sketches largely exploring the theme of "fathers and sons, the carried on and the rebelled against." As well as meeting John Stanislaus, a "cross-eyed drunk staggering in the hall", we learn about James'



early relationship with his siblings: "Mary, piddle in a puddle for me please", his mother: "She doesn't understand the artist in me", and Nora: "She has a lazy gait I like."

The success of the play is highly dependent on the script, which is full of evocative detail. Because there is very little use of props, many of the scenes are set through words alone, and the audience is asked to make an imaginative connection with the text. "Shoeprints, pebbles, scattered canopy sky", describes Glasnevin Cemetery on a hot day, where "the caring angels sweat." The language is at times playful and musical: when Joyce takes singing lessons from an

KELLY CAMPBELL

FLYING SOLO
*Donal O'Kelly in
Jimmy Joyced!*

Italian, "Bellissimo the Latin lips go," and when he practises piano, "a plinky plonky all the family hear his song." It's also frequently lyrical, creating memorable and evocative images: at James' birth, "Mary smiles, a star glides," and a dinner plate is described as "a white moon on the velvet universe of tablecloth."

O'Kelly delivers his script rapidly, with fierce concentration and without faltering, in a performance that is both funny and profound. A highlight is his portrayal of many arbitrary characters acquainted with the Joyce family — while Gogarty yells in a gravely voice, Tom Devin in the pub "performs his clucking hen routine." Men on the street gossip idly about the young Joyce, who is "making a faint yet discernible mark." The actor's comic ability comes to the fore with these characters, particularly through his facial gestures — the jutting of a chin or the rolling of his eyes — and his timing is faultless. But the show is more than just entertainment: behind the comedy is a work of serious literary merit.

The Dublin atmosphere is represented in a painted backdrop by Paula Martin. Portobello Market appears softly in blues, greys and apricots, with the dome of the Rathmines Parish discernible in the background and a helter-skelter broken-down world of junk in the foreground: a bike, piano, clock, toys, books, broken-down chairs and garden tools. This chaos is the perfect visual equivalent to

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O'Kelly's lively script, while the subdued hues keep it from being distracting. The lighting by Moyra D'Arcy is minimal but effective — when Joyce discovers his piano is missing, O'Kelly is bathed in a shocking demonic red glow: "Father, you have drunk the piano." By contrast, when he first sets eyes on Nora, bright light disperses into a dappled spring effect. "Just a blur around her. Nora," says Joyce, who isn't wearing his glasses.

O'Kelly's appreciation of Joyce, literature and the subtleties of language, is beyond question. The more you know about Joyce the more you glean from this performance — it's clever, multi-layered, and crammed full of references. The Joycean novice will find it hard to follow because of its density, and because it assumes a lot of background knowledge about both Joyce and Dublin. Although it's funny, *Jimmy Joyced!* makes demands of its audience. However, those Bloomsday fans who nearly crushed me in the rush for seats were not disappointed.

Catriona Mitchell is finishing an M.Phil in creative writing at Trinity College, Dublin.

JUST A LITTLE ONE

by Karen Egan and Susannah de Wrixon

Devised by the Company

Bewley's Café Theatre

22 April–22 May, 2004; reviewed 17 May

BY CATRIONA MITCHELL

"THE FIRST THING I DO IN THE MORNING is brush my teeth and sharpen my tongue." Dorothy Parker Rothschild (1893-1967), renowned for her formidable wit, was obsessed with alcoholism and the war between the sexes — themes that dominate *Just a Little One*. The script is a montage of Parker's writings, performed

by chanteuses Susannah de Wrixon and Karen Egan, and linked thematically to explore the plight of urbane, 'sophisticated' women in New York in the 1920s.

The show begins with a two-handed delivery of Parker's 'A Telephone Call'. The whistling sound of wind circulates the room and the performers, as one character, deliver their lament: "Please God, let him telephone me now ... it would be so little to you, God, such a little, little thing ... you damned, ugly, shiny thing. It would hurt you to ring, wouldn't it?" The women are elegantly turned out in black dresses, pearls and scarlet lipstick; the set is black and white, with an old-fashioned telephone spot-lit on a red stool at the front. The use of red against a neutral background is striking, indicative of passion and also pain.

Parker's darkly humorous poem about suicide, *Résumé*, is recited, and there is some — but not enough — singing. While their acting is good, the performers' voices are superb; the singing (along with a terrific musical score by Trevor Knight) steals the show. It seems a missed opportunity that the performers' musical talents are kept mostly in reserve.

Optimal physical use is made of the confined space of the Bewley's stage in a sketch where de Wrixon is a flapper at a dance. A man invites her onto the floor and she retorts, "I'll see you in hell first", before performing an energetic *danse macabre* with the stool. The lighting is inspired and makes versatile use of the space. In the final sketch, de Wrixon dons a man's hat, jacket and red tie while Egan puts on a white feather boa and muff; the year is 1928, and we are in a speakeasy. There is an explosion of (artificial) smoke and the set is bathed in a red light. "Was Edith with you last Thursday night?"



SHARP TALKING GALS Egan and De Wrixon in Just a Little One

terrating." As they talk, the light changes: the stage becomes brightly lit in slats, cleverly implying dawn coming through a Venetian blind. Much drink is taken and finally the characters fall into a drunken stupor, the lights fading to black.

Bleak statements are made throughout about the power balance between men and women, and this is the real focus of the show. "It's so easy to be sweet to people before you love them," we are told,

and "they hate you whenever you say anything you really think. You always have to keep playing little games." I was reminded of *Sex and the City*; as one of my companions said, "we're still getting hammered and waiting for the phone to ring ... it's very up to date." Although the script offers none of the explicit sexual content we are accustomed to today, Parker's psychological truths remain accurate, and are here expressed with wit and flair.

It isn't immediately obvious that *Just a Little One* is made up of fragments of Dorothy Parker's writings pieced together. The changes from one text to another are marked by the use of props, but there is no through-line in terms of character, and as a result, the narrative comes across as disjointed. Parker herself proves the real character of the play. Her dark and pithy views of the society she lived in are delivered in an imaginative and theatrical manner, and styled visually to evoke the period in which it's set. Despite slight incoherence, *Just a Little One* is a fine directorial debut for Trevor Knight. Parker herself wrote in one theatre review, "if you don't knit, bring a book." Advice of this nature does not apply.

THE LARAMIE PROJECT

by Moisés Kaufman and

Tectonic Theatre Project

AboutFace Theatre Company

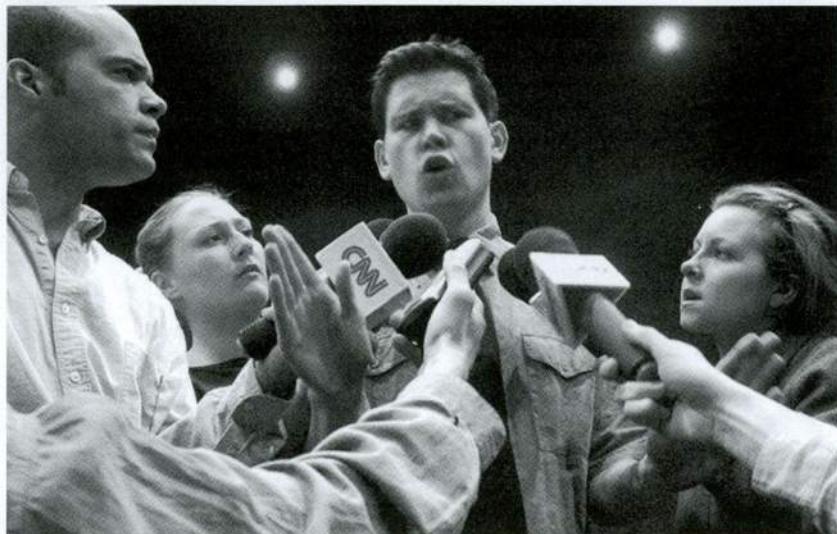
Helix Theatre Space (13-15 May, 2004) and

Civic Theatre, Tallaght (18-29 May, 2004);

reviewed 14 May at the Helix, Dublin

BY FINTAN WALSH

THE LARAMIE PROJECT PRESENTS THE story of Matthew Shepard, a twenty-one-year-old gay student who was kidnapped and beaten to death in Laramie, Wyoming



in October 1998. The play is based on interviews conducted by Moisés Kaufman and members of Tectonic Theatre project with the Laramie community in the year following the hate-crime and leading up to the killer's successful prosecution. These disparate testimonies, gathered from over two hundred interviews, are assembled into a compelling collage of confession and contradiction, remembrance and remorse, depicting a community's effort to understand Shepard's tragic death.

Produced by AboutFACE Theatre Company, *The Laramie Project* was staged as part of the first international Dublin Gay Theatre Festival. The young cast, directed by Paul Brennan, deftly present this challenging work, which demands that eight actors play in excess of sixty roles. Perhaps most striking is the produc-

TESTIMONY *Hope Brown, Noni Stapleton, Paul Nugent and Tara McKeever in The Laramie Project*

tion's sensitivity, a quality easily threatened, given the subject matter, by the allure of sentimentality on the one hand and sensationalism on the other. This

quality is further enhanced by graceful choreography and musical interludes which punctuate the production, as if to temper an overly-emotional audience response. Similarly the set design, comprised of telephone cables fading into the backdrop, impresses the twin importance of communication and perspective. Such components prevent the production from sinking into embittered judgement, offering instead a moving memorial.

While this warm rendering ensures that the audience is treated to an evening of excellent performances, the specific form of dramadoc theatre on which *Laramie* is built raises many questions about the play's responsibili-

ty to the issues presented. Certainly I left the production moved by the reportage, though unnerved by a suspicion that sympathy was inadequate, particularly owing to the story's relatively recent and tragic facticity. This is not Brechtian dramaturgy, despite the role-playing and internal contestation of voices. There are few points of entry in the play's form to facilitate a critical evaluation of the story presented or for imagining alternative outcomes. The story is told as factual and complete — as a review to be consumed — and the audience is left to engage with the material in retrospection or, worse still, resignation.

This is not an isolated concern of *Laramie*, however, but one raised by the growing trend towards dramadoc theatre. The Tricycle Theatre in London has spearheaded many of these creations through the staging of its "Tribunal plays", including *Justifying War* (2003), based on the Hutton Inquiry and most recently *Guantanamo — Honour Bound to Defend Freedom* (2004), based on debates surrounding the Guantanamo Naval Base in Cuba. As with any form of documentary, dramadoc is fraught with methodological concerns. Balancing historical veracity with creative license is a challenging demand. First, when the stories presented remain part of the heatedly unresolved present, even more caution needs to be exercised, not only out of dignity for the victim and affected parties, but in respect of the multiplicity of possible outcomes. Second, there is the selection and organisation of 'evidence' inherent in the editing process that invariably textures the play with a particular bias. And this 'editing' takes place at the heart of the theatrical phenome-

non, on the affective plains of directorial interpretation and actor delivery. These anxieties are compounded in the case of high-profile events, such as the deaths of Shepard or Lawrence (or the case of Guantanamo, for that matter) when productions become embroiled in mediating that which is already heavily mediated. Truth risks being choked in a web of simulacra.

While the ambitions of these plays are noble, the chances of *The Colour of Justice* outliving *Mother Courage*, for example, are unlikely. Dramdoc or Tribunal Theatre — its most pervasive manifestation — is surely doomed by the currency of its appeal. But while *Laramie Project* is very much part of this movement, the play differs in seemingly having transcended its own thematic specificity to be embraced by all marginalised voices, not only the gay community, as a protest against prejudice. In this respect, given Ireland's continuing tormented relationship with the outsider (one currently thinks of racial diversity and nationality), it is no surprise that the play has been restaged in Ireland in such a short space of time (the play had amateur stagings in Belfast and Dublin in 2003). *Laramie* reminds us that, contrary to one character's assertion, Wyoming is not unlike anywhere else on earth — each day people are persecuted because of sexual, racial, ethnic and religious differences. AboutFACE's elegant production is a cautionary reminder of this point in hand; a timely tale for Irish audiences of how ignorance produces hate, of how fear breeds exclusion.

Fintan Walsh is a research student at the Samuel Beckett Centre, Trinity College.

reviews

LOSING STEAM by Ray Scannell

Corcadorca

The Woodford Bourne Cork Midsummer Festival; Marina Commercial Park
17-26 June, 2004; reviewed 17 June

BY ALANNAH HOPKINS

CORCADORCA CONTINUES TO PURSUE ITS policy of putting on plays in unusual venues. *Losing Steam* recounts the drama of the Ford and Dunlop factory closures, and takes place in a warehouse in the Marina Commercial Park, a business enterprise occupying what was previously the location of the Ford and Dunlop factories themselves.

The play is set during the events leading up to the closure of Irish Dunlop in September 1983, which put 700 people out of work. In 1984, the neighbouring Ford factory closed with the loss of another 800 jobs. The older generation, brought up to believe in "a job for life", was devastated, as the heart was ripped out of industrial Cork. The more cynical younger generation sought escape from the economic depression in the post-punk music scene.

A young writer, Ray Scannell, who is just completing his MA at UCC, was commissioned to research and write the play. The script was developed in workshop and rehearsal. The political events portrayed are factual, with two fictitious families, the Geraghys and the Dempseys, providing human interest and comedy. The location, a warehouse accommodating a promenading audience of 150, was flimsily built of corrugated aluminium, with a concrete floor, while an ominous soundscape by Mel Mercier contributed to the strangeness as audience and cast assembled. The sets were mounted on scaffolding around the

edges, and the community cast of 27 milled about as the audience entered. There was no seating, and the audience could move to follow the action, which switched about unpredictably.

The narrative moved between trade union meetings and the Dempsey and Geraghty families. The Geraghys are a Ford family, socially a cut above the Dunlop Dempseys. Fin Dempsey is courting the Geraghty daughter, Shirley, a university student. Mrs. Geraghty is permanently sozzled, while Mr. Geraghty cares only for his canary and his boat. After a stiflingly genteel family dinner, in which real food was consumed, Fin and Shirley's preference for pogo-dancing to the live punk band was understandable.

Davy Dummigan's sets were a marvel of minimalist economy, suggesting familiar interiors by one item: the Geraghty's low-slung leather sofa, as opposed to the Dempsey's upright fireside chairs. Costumes, by Joan Hickson, similarly spoke volumes, from the colourful bondage gear of the punks, to the drab parkas of the workers.

The acting and direction (Pat Kiernan, assisted by Tom Creed) were of a consistently high standard, even though the unusual acoustics worked against total audibility. Similarly, although the lighting was spot on, and different height platforms were ingeniously used, sightlines were sometimes a problem. The convention of staging plays in theatres has its *raison d'être*.

Kieran Ahern deserves special praise for revealing the human frailty behind the smooth façade of Bob Geraghty, while Damian Kearney gave a terrifically engaging performance as the stay-at-home older brother, Frank Dempsey.

Aidan O'Hare as Fin was less memorable. Maria Hingerty, as the mother and Julie Kelleher as the punk daughter, Shirley, struggled to animate one-dimensional characters, as did Noel O'Donovan as Fin's father, Bernie Dempsey.

As a spectacle, with its riotous crowd scenes and its live punk band, *Losing Steam* worked, though 90 minutes was a long time to ask an audience to stand. In that it gave a sector of the Cork working class a new pride in their identity, it was also effective community theatre. An elderly ex-Dunlop worker standing beside me was almost moved to tears by the union leader's speeches, and was compelled to tell me in a stage whisper that he'd been there, and that was exactly how it was.

While apparently accurate as documentary, the play failed to satisfy on other levels. The great effort to recreate the look and the spirit of the times could not hide the fact that the characters were stereotypes, portrayed in lacklustre, TV soap-style writing. The quality of acting and direction was far higher than that of the writing; its fast pace and rapid scene changes carried you along, and only afterwards were you struck by its superficiality. The piece was entertaining, and pacy, and relevant to the local community, but it lacked the real human drama that would



HAPPY FAMILY?

Hingerty, Ahern, Kelleher and O'Hare
in *Losing Steam*

give it wider appeal.

The terrific effort and ingenuity put into mounting this production in an unconventional warehouse space could not disguise the fact that it is

in essence a conventional, unadventurous play. While Corcadorca's commitment to fostering young writing talent is admirable, on this occasion it left the company with a play unworthy of its collective talent.

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

PARADISE

by Padraig Coyle, Conor Grimes,
and Alan McKee

Lyric Theatre, Belfast

4 June–3 July 2004; reviewed 3 July

BY PAUL DEVLIN

ADAPTED FOR THE STAGE BY PADRAIG Coyle, Conor Grimes, and Alan McKee from Coyle's book *Lost and Found: The Story of Belfast Celtic, Paradise* is a condensed theatrical retelling of the history of the once-great Belfast Celtic football club and its demise at the end of the 1940s due, in part at least, to intensified sectarianism in post-war Belfast. While a very enjoyable piece of theatre overall, *Paradise* suffers from the desires of its writers to satisfy triple, far from complementary, demands of historical accuracy, entertainment value, and social commentary. As a result, their play never really manages to ask the more provocative questions its subject matter might imply.

Told through a series of flashbacks played out on Stewart Marshall's expansive and multi-tiered set, the play opens in 1952 at Belfast Celtic football ground. Charlie Tully, one-time wunderkind of the Club, has returned to play an exhibition match with Glasgow Celtic in front of a thirty thousand strong crowd in his native city. A series of key episodes follow relating the story of the Club's formation and its rise to prominence, punctuated with essential exposition from the play's narrator, Ossie McKeown. This culminates in a Boxing Day match against Belfast Celtic's long-standing rivals, Linfield, which sees sectarian violence spill on to the pitch and signals the *de facto* end of the Club as a competitive football team.

Within this framing historical narrative, Coyle, Grimes, and McKee weave personal narratives of the play's two central char-

PARTY OVER? McKee, Jordan, McKenna, Clements, Lagan and Grimes in *Paradise*



CHRIS HILL PHOTOGRAPHIC

acters, Elisha Scott and Ossie McKeown. Scott journeys from being the celebrated and dedicated manager of Belfast Celtic, to a man who loses his love for the beautiful game and becomes disillusioned and embittered by the acts of sectarian violence he has witnessed. Journalist McKeown, who under pressure from a few functional establishment figures failed to report the truth behind the events of the Boxing Day match, has returned to Belfast from America, where he is a successful sports writer, to make recompense for his previous shortcomings.

For the most part, what *Paradise* attempts to tell, it tells solidly. It establishes the non-partisan sporting ethos underpinning the formation of Belfast Celtic; it conveys the financial pressures continually threatening the Club's survival; and it generates a feeling for the importance attached to the Club within the working class communities it served. But in the push to set up the broad parameters of Belfast Celtic's fifty-eight year history, what Coyle, Grimes, and McKee's script gains in scope it loses in detail and subtlety. Working with character type — a megalomaniac police chief, a corrupt politician or even Scott as the salt-of-the-earth football manager, for example — means that their script is able to swiftly sketch out the Club's history, and allows for a few nice comic moments in the play. But this approach also means that Coyle, Grimes, and McKee lose the dramatic possibilities of addressing the complexities of the era which saw the demise of Belfast Celtic. As a result the play is more nostalgic than analytical.

Dan Gordon directs *Paradise* with precision and vigour, drawing an energetic and extremely focused set of performances from his all-male, seven-strong ensemble

cast. Complementing this, Stewart Marshall's imposing though somewhat bland set and Conleth White's fluid lighting allow Gordon to achieve the pace and strong physical energy the play requires. He deals smoothly with the play's tremendous number of scene changes and his directorial confidence lifts the entire production, making it feel very polished and slick. As an ensemble, his cast serve him well. Lalor Roddy valiantly struggles to put flesh on the bones of the Elisha Scott character, bringing a welcome intensity to his role. Though engaging in itself, however, his performance is not enough to overcome the difficulties of his character as written. Breffni McKenna, as narrator Ossie McKeown, has a more substantial character and orchestrates the action of the play with a measured confidence and a keen sense for the theatricality of his role.

Paradise is far from being a bad play. It's a good play. It just felt in watching it, and largely as a result of the creative energy Gordon brings as director to the production, that it had the potential to be a better play. The social commentary the play proffers, that Belfast Celtic football club was just another institution that collapsed because of Northern Ireland's 'endemic' sectarianism, is too easy and ultimately platitudinous. *Paradise*'s main problem is it feels too safe, too comfortable in its own sentiment and conclusions.

PASSADES by the Company

Operating Theatre

The Digital Hub

6–8 May, 2004; reviewed 8 May

BY PETER CRAWLEY

A HUGE STEEL GRILLE RETRACTS WITH a slow industrial groan and we shuffle uncertainly into darkness. Inside this first

EERIE CHILL
Fouéré in Passades



ROS KAVANAGH

cavernous space of the Digital Hub, vacant and spotless, a rear door bolts open and a figure appears propped up on ski poles, silhouetted by the headlights of a car outside. The motor hums intimidation, as though threat itself burns within its carburettor. The figure limps into this liminal space, spilling light into the gloom both from a miner's head-lamp that obscures her features behind its glare, and from a small torch attached to her lame leg, dragging around a little iridescent pool of blue.

Where are we? Who is this?

Some time later we will become a little too close for comfort, entreated as we are to stare inside her skull, or reading the name and date that appear on a magnified x-ray. The patient is Olwen Fouéré, and in Operating Theatre's extraordinary production we have entered her personal oblivion.

There's nothing unusual about artists mining their personal experience to make performance, but Fouéré has here transformed a near-death experience into a site-specific installation. Personally unsettling, but artistically aloof, these two texts compete in the mind of the spectator, conjuring at once a shudder and a shiver. Just three months earlier, in a gruesome car accident in late January, the performer was dragged under the wheels of a jeep before losing consciousness. In a wordless, pointedly allegorical performance, she seems to explore the incident with deep interest but total detachment — the way you might approach a sculpture in a glass case. At times one cannot help but wonder if Fouéré is still in shock.

But, more than her, the space itself seems inured to cataclysm. Another area is revealed, inviting us now with innocuous muzak to enter a pristine hangar of

smooth concrete floors and buzzing neon strips. A man in a white chemical suit waves us into a new position with illuminating aircraft paddles, and now in a small area cordoned off with construction site tape, we struggle to make sense of this gallimaufry of urban signifiers. But as Fouéré's voyager anxiously throws bags of peas from a deep-freezer, an Ernest Shackleton of the frozen food aisle, yet there is another chill in store in this vast mausoleum, amid the relics of what was Lee's Cash and Carry Warehouse.

You've probably guessed the rest: an expressionless child (played with astounding, eerie focus by Ciara Harrison) appears in identical costume to Fouéré's and leads the timid audience, parent-like, through plastic tombs, past little shrines of desultorily blinking snowman lanterns, up harshly floodlit staircases and into yet cooler sanctuaries of the warehouse (where both Fouéré and her mini-me succumb to stylised hypothermia in a startlingly moving sequence). Finally we are beckoned towards the final set-piece: a video interview with Fouéré, shot outside a hospital, in which her unintelligible jabber is then played in reverse, revealing an acquired insight that there's an energy that binds all humanity together.

It would be unwise, however, to wheel our interpretations no further than the casualty ward, because for all the radiological testament of Fouéré's leg x-ray, composer Roger Doyle's ever-present music is more immediately fractured. Using software to capture sound in an aural freeze-frame (it says here), Doyle has generated a score that aims to represent stasis in time. Just as *Passades'* title refers to a back and forth manoeuvre in dressage, so the score traces and retraces a single step, creating music that builds

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and spirals anxiously, alternately resembles the icy wind of a tundra or a distress-signal emitted from deep space.

Ultimately it is the emotional vacuum of these expanses (like the dreamless sleep of anaesthesia) that *Passades* exploits best, and designer Ferdia Murphy, lighting designer Paul Keogan and sound technician Benny Lynch have performed wonders — chiefly by responding to, and subtly accentuating, the ghostly chill of the space and, particularly in Lynch's case, by making the effects crystal while keeping their sources virtually invisible. With a promenade performance through a site so sprawling there would always be a tension between the rigid (obey the runway paddles) and accidentals (is this a real security guard almost rupturing the whole shebang?), director Selina Cartmell's great triumph is not only to honour Operating Theatre's multi-media ethos, achieving a textual equilibrium between Fouqué's performance and Doyle's score, but also to serve as an architect of experience. It creates a world of careful control and artistic liberation, a consummately guided piece of suspended animation, where accidents wait to happen.

Peter Crawley is a freelance journalist and critic and is news editor of this magazine.

THE PLAYBOY OF THE WESTERN WORLD

by JM Synge

Abbey Theatre

On tour 10 June–19 December, 2004;

reviewed 12 Aug at the Abbey

BY PETER CRAWLEY

AS RADIO ADVERTISEMENTS GO, THIS one is close to brilliance. Hoisted out of context for the purpose of a sound byte,

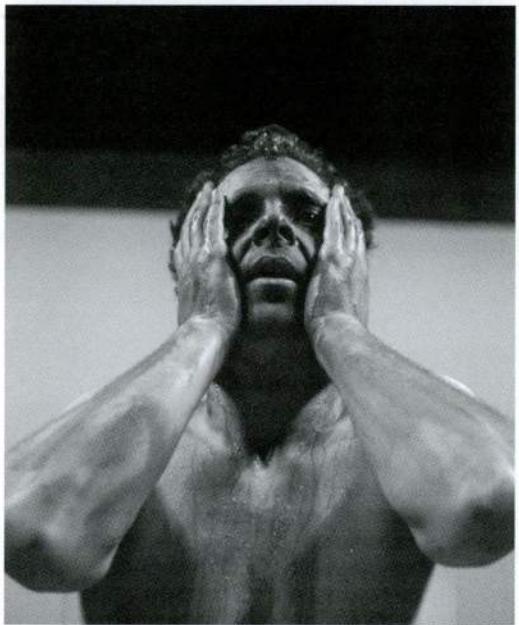
the final words of *The Playboy of the Western World*, sound a world away from those famous "wild lamentations." Across intriguingly flat tones Pegeen sounds almost disinterested. "I've lost him surely," she ponders. "I've lost the only Playboy of the Western World." And then — in a masterstroke of voice-over chumminess — comes some bloke with a thigh-slapping rejoinder: "Never mind Pegeen! He's bound to show up in the Abbey Theatre!!!" [My emphasis and exclamation marks].

You can almost imagine the guy slinking onstage to drape an arm possessively around her, like a game-show host with a bewildered contestant. It is the most apposite promo ever conceived for a production that oozes unconvincing familiarity with the text, obscures the talent of its cast, and rushes a classic of Irish theatre in determined pursuit of a market.

Having done remarkable feats to lure us in, then, director Ben Barnes appears to immediately engage in a studied attempt to put us off. On strides Simon O'Gorman, (dressed somewhere between a vaudeville vagabond and a droog from *A Clockwork Orange*) to recite Synge's original preface to the play. "In Ireland, for a few years more," it echoes solemnly, "we have a popular imagination that is fiery and magnificent." Many, many years later, as a preface never designed for oration is slowly, deliberately, importantly enunciated upon the Abbey stage, the popular imagination seems caked with soot.

Designed to tour the nation and then abroad, Guido Tondino's set, a low-ceilinged shebeen trimmed with bottles, splits open at intervals to reveal a

nondescript space, available for stylised illustration — Christy washing himself contentedly, the town girls running with prepubescent exuberance, choreographed sporting enactment, and so forth. But more impressive is the



hearth, a costly looking machine that hugs to the lip of the stage, flickers, and spits up cute little aesthetic sparks. It, at least, is magnificent and fiery.

It's just in the smaller matters, such as textual exploration and physical proxemics, where it's hard to perceive that much directorial consideration. When the gutless Shawneen Keogh (a comically astute but largely miscast Andrew Bennett) is so desperate for

escape that he struggles free of his coat, why is he running *away* from the only exit? When Pegeen Mike extracts Christy's unwilling confession, ("Would you have me knock the head of you with the butt of a broom?") why does she hold a deeply unthreatening empty fist? Why does the erotic poetry of the love scene translate into a deadening decision to physicalise the desire? Could it be that the production is simply bored with the play?

There are commendable exceptions. As Christy, Tom Vaughan Lawlor is alive to every line and every moment. He may be the first Christy to deliver the words, "I'm destroyed walking", and embody them with an all-over ache. Trailing such powerlessness through his interaction with Cathy Belton's initially coarse, then subtly flowering, Pegeen and Olwen Fouéré's swaggeringly butch Widow Quin, he bounds with a childish enthusiasm into their favour — or falls, hurt and cowed, out of it.

Other choices can seem either depthless or defeat-ed. The infantilised sexuality of the town girls for instance, giggling and tactile, is neither funny nor insightful; at times, in fact, it seems contemptuous. Maeliosa Stafford's Old Mahon is so amiable and cheery that he threatens to undermine the whole plot: who would

SEEMLY FELLOW
*Tom Vaughan Lawlor
in The Playboy of the
Western World*

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dream of raising a loy at this sweet old man? If the Widow escapes unscathed, it is because Fouéré, in a gypsy mélange of shabby suit and wide-brimmed hat, is the only actress who could preserve her dignity when forced to dress like one of The Bangles. Like everyone, however, she is forced to enunciate every line with a rounded clarity, presumably so that tourist audiences can shuffle alongside Synge's song without tripping over the accents.

Actually, it's the production's stylistic conversation that lacks eloquence. Taken separately, the marvelously eerie moment following Christy's real attempt at patricide or Belton's final, delicate lament would be startling. But in a hotchpotch of pivoting styles, neither is properly supported by the production, and they stew like the anachronisms of Monica Frawley's costumes.

Following Niall Henry's 2001 interpretation for the Peacock, and Garry Hynes' unforgivingly recent and boldly entertaining production, the Abbey's determination to stage *Playboy* in its centenary coursed with a bullish sense of entitlement. With this production, they've lost it. They've lost it surely.

THE PRICE

by Arthur Miller

Gate Theatre

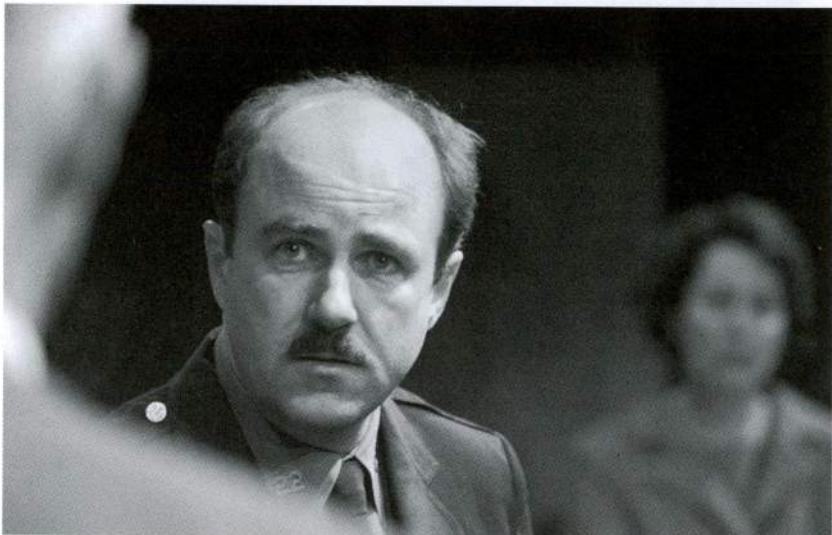
May 6-June 26, 2004; reviewed May 11

BY HARVEY O'BRIEN

TIME IS A LIVING FORCE IN ARTHUR Miller's powerful reaction to the political impotence of late 1960s American theatre, and it is vividly evoked in Joe Vanek's set for the Gate's absorbing 2004 production. The play takes place amid

the physical and emotional detritus of human and social memory in the attic of a New York apartment building circa 1968. The penthouse is strewn with furniture and keepsakes from a once wealthy American family fallen low in the wake of the Great Depression, and Vanek has piled the Gate stage high with appropriate odds and ends. These could easily have served simply as decoration if director Mark Brokaw were not keenly aware of the power of space compounded with time through the medium of live drama. Instead, after an initial 'wow' factor which comes with appreciating the work of set construction, the objects become very much part of the action. They are a constant reminder of the tangible qualities of time and memory, and reinforce the thematic preoccupation with the importance of the past in any consideration of the present.

Though it is tempting to think that Miller's reflections upon *The Price* as a specific commentary on the Vietnam war is a fanciful intellectual apposition inspired by the accepted reading of *The Crucible* as an allegory for the McCarthy hearings, it is clear that the author's concern with the question of legacy is very real. The play explores how patterns of past thought and behaviour shape present experiences. It also questions the extent to which ideals and ideas are constructed from outmoded or otherwise inappropriate (or destructive) attachments. The playwright examined the same theme in *All My Sons* (recently staged at the Abbey), where the legacy of a bad business deal resurfaced to haunt and eventually destroy an American family, then in the context of the Second World War. As Miller writes in the Gate programme, the conflict in Vietnam



was a different matter. To his mind, at least, the avant-garde and counter-cultural reaction in American theatre ultimately served only itself. He felt audiences might benefit from "a certain spirit of unearthing the real that seemed to have very nearly gone from our lives", and so presented a powerful confrontation between two brothers about their father's great, 'lost' life without ever mentioning the word 'Vietnam'.

The question is asked again and again: what is the price of a clear conscience? How do you put a value on the experiences which have shaped your world and the ideals you cling to? What is the cost of changing the world, and can it even be done? Searching questions, certainly; and no less apt in the wake of the Second Gulf War than they were in 1968. Lest we become dizzy with geographical distance and political self-satisfaction

DILEMMA *Cranitch and Ryan in The Price*

though, it should be noted that *The Price* is a deeply affecting human drama too.

It explores complex emotions through powerful dialogue in ways which resonate with all of us, doubly so by dint of the strong performances in this production.

Though Robert Prosky provides the celebrity turn as Gregory Solomon, the elderly Russian-Jewish antique dealer whose quasi-comic schtick provides a difficult challenge on the level of tone, Lorcan Cranitch anchors this production with his forceful interpretation of Victor, the New York cop whose selfless devotion to his father raises uncomfortable questions of social and personal responsibility. Prosky is very good: a lot of fun without losing touch with the core themes introduced during the scenes in which he features most strongly. The action intensifies with his departure

though, throwing the weight of the drama back upon Cranitch, who occupies the central role in every sense. The actor brings tremendous conviction to his performance. His very real feeling for the currents and eddies of personal uncertainty as depicted through body, voice, and movement give way to a blistering portrayal of sibling antagonism in the final act. Nick Dunning seems to have been voice coached by Christopher Walken, but acquits himself well in the role of Walter, the 'successful' brother whose olive branch is snapped by Victor's need to ask probing questions of the price paid for peace of mind in their past and present. Ger Ryan provides able support in the smaller but neatly focused role of Esther, Victor's concerned wife. It is not a very sympathetic role, but Ryan manages to soften the old-fashioned and rather sexist edges of the character through subtle vocal cues.

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

PYGMALION by Bernard Shaw

Gate Theatre, Dublin

6 July-18 September 2004; reviewed 6 July

BY LOUIS LENTIN

IF IT WAS OUT IN TIME I WOULD URGE "Get you to the Gate ... Be sure and get you to the Gate on time", and enjoy this fine, stylish, stimulating production of *Pygmalion*, Bernard Shaw's extremely personal comedic inversion of the classical Pygmalion-Galatea legend.

I laughed at his wonderful wit, was close to tears at the sadness of the inevitability of Henry Higgins, Professor of Phonetics, and Eliza Doolittle the ex-flower girl whom he transforms into a

Duchess — everybody knows the musical, if not the play — being denied the possibility of making a go of it together. What a fun working relationship that would be, but never a marriage. That may be human, but not Shaw's point.

Higgins has recreated Eliza as "a mechanical doll in the role of a duchess to whom manners are an adequate substitute for morals" (critic Eric Bentley) Supremely confident, his creation is now "a consort for a king." But Eliza wants kindness, love: "Freddy loves me, that makes him king enough for me." Despite Higgins' priggish, somewhat reluctant statement, "... I have grown accustomed to your voice...", does he really allow himself to know what he wants? Appalled, wounded by the thought that she might accept Freddy Hill's proposal, to Higgins Freddy is simply a fool: "Can he make anything of you? That's the point." That indeed is the point. Economic emancipation, stand on your own two feet Eliza.

For George Bernard Shaw the essential value was women's economic independence. Long married, he nevertheless proclaimed: "Until we free the marriage relation from economic entanglements ... the difference between marriage and Mrs Warren's profession remains the difference between union and scab labour." Despite his romantic infatuations, "love", he wrote, "is the most impersonal of all passions." Infuriating Higgins surely reflects Shaw and vice versa. Eliza survived as a flower girl, but now she knows she can really go for it: "If I can't have kindness, I'll have independence." Sadly, according to Bentley, "Pygmalion is not really a 'life giver'. Eliza may be his pupil, but in the end the tables are turned, she is the "vital one", he [Higgins] must remain



the prisoner of his [own] 'system'." The conflict continues.

In his enlightening published epilogue, Shaw writes that Eliza may indeed have "mischievous moments in which she wishes she could get Higgins alone on a desert island ... and see him making love like any common man ... she likes Freddy..." However this "Galatea never does quite like [her] Pygmalion ... too godlike to be altogether agreeable." So wisely she opts for Freddy.

We tend to forget that GBS, albeit a Fabian Socialist and humanist committed to 'selectively' improving society, was above all a pro-feminist man who believed both men and women needed to be emancipated from the burden of economic toil. Let us not forget the ironic inverted parallel of Alfred Doolittle, Eliza's dear old dad

SPEECH DOCTORING
*Brennan and Stanford
in Pygmalion*

the dustman. Emancipated from slumdom he may be by an enormous inheritance, the unintended outcome of a Higgins caprice,

but too late for change. He is what he is, indeed quite shortly he'll probably contentedly be back to dealing in bones. Eliza, the "crime of poverty overcome, the sin of ignorance cancelled" (Bentley) is truly a Duchess.

Robin Lefevre did the Gate proud with a wonderfully intelligent and styled production that ensured this far from easy play possessed its own reality: the fun, the cut and thrust, the debate ongoing and scintillatingly alive. Perhaps he didn't quite overcome the difficulty of keeping matters as buoyant after Act 3. Eliza has triumphed! It's all over. But now, to fully drive home his theories of love, marriage, economic emancipation, Shaw has to shift

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gear from comedy to debate — hence the difficulty.

The entire cast could not have been better. Better cast or better played. The central trio: Stephen Brennan's delicious Professor Higgins, a balanced mix of arrogance tempered by a sensitive realisation that on a personal level he is but a mother fixated "grown child." A perfect foil to Dawn Bradfield's proudly, intuitively human Eliza and Alan Stanford's delightful coddly controlled Colonel Pickering. The three fully integrating in particular with Susan Fitzgerald to the manor born as Higgins' mother, dignified and knowing; Barbara Brennan's sympathetically controlling housekeeper; Michael Fitzgerald's hilarious Freddy; Gemma Reeves inoffensively snobbish Clara; Jeananne Crowley's proud yet practical Mrs. Eynsford-Hill; and Mark Long's vigorous dustman. All capturing time, place, accent with apt style and nuance.

Visually set to perfection in period set and costume designs by Liz Ascroft. The idea of archive film projections on to the cameo of the draw curtain was a gem. Shaped and enhanced throughout by Mick Hughes' fine lighting. I have yet to see light so convincingly used to simulate rain on any stage.

Another Gate triumph.

Louis Lentin is a theatre director and independent television producer/director.

RIVERDANCE

Gaiety Theatre, Dublin

10 Jun-28 Aug 2004; reviewed 7 July

BY BRIAN SINGLETON

THE TENTH ANNIVERSARY HOMECOMING of *Riverdance* is a specially constructed 'theatre' show with a pared-down troupe

of dancers but no shortage of spectacle. Ireland and its culture have been transformed in the interim and *Riverdance* was part of that, a musical and dance form which is intra-cultural, mining its roots for self-transformation. There is no doubt that the original seven-minute interval sequence in the 1994 Eurovision Song Contest owed a good deal of its success to that final step-line pounding out the beat to Bill Whelan's emotive music in unison. This was the corporate body of the new Ireland, strong, bold, proud, and original. The subsequent decade of continuous international touring to world-wide acclaim stands testament to its life-affirming sense of rejuvenation. It is patriotic, and yet it incorporates the dance traditions of other cultures, all of which have evolved through transnational migration and diasporic longing.

Riverdance is not a theatre production, or a musical or dance concert; it is also a form of theatrical storytelling. The show's narrative is projected by a male voice-over, beginning in pagan Ireland: "out of the dark we come ... we rose like a strong wave on land ... now we were the people of this place." From the outset we are invited to take pride in our ownership of our Ireland, while the narrative is porous enough to be inclusive of other nationalities. Myth and legend dominate, with the pinnacle a lament for Chú Chulainn and the confrontation of a symbolically powerful thunderstorm, embodied by a troupe of Celtic warriors in macho leather who invade the stage with an aggression to match the All Blacks. Principal dancer Conor Hayes gives a spirited recreation of Michael Flatley's original choreography and posturing. Finishing the first act, rivermen and riverwomen gradually fertilise the



once-barren land, finally combining together in corporate unison to deliver that most famous sequence which originally captured the moment of Ireland's entry into national maturity in the popular cultural sphere.

The second act casts the Irish adrift to encounter the traditions of the other immigrants in the new world. If there was any doubt that *Riverdance* was constructed for an American market, this is where that doubt is dispelled. The Irish dancers trade their dance traditions with others in the melting pot: Russian 'dervishes' show the Irish immigrants how to use their whole bodies acrobatically, while female dancer Yolanda Gonzalez Sobrado adds the sensuous Latin rhythms of 'riverflamenco'. The highlight, is the sequence entitled 'Trading Taps' when two African American tap dancers enter into an

TAPPING TRADITION *The Riverdance company*

adversarial, though-good-humoured competition of skill with the Irish dancers. And throughout the act the *Riverdance* musicians perform live a succession of numbers which turns the audience into foot-tapping concert-goers. However, these musical numbers are as carefully controlled as the choreography to maximise audience response, moving from group to solo moments, allowing the soloists to move out of their upstage area and down to the audience like the stars of music-hall of yore. How can you not applaud them? In case there were still doubters, however, director John McColgan goes one step further to ensure approval, by having Rupert Murray's lighting design swivel rock-concert style out into the audience to motivate us to give something back. Even in design the show is presentational and constantly seeking affirmation.

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The finale outstrips the original *Riverdance* as all dance styles are embraced. And this is where *Riverdance* lays itself open to accusations of a globalisation which rides roughshod over traditional cultures. These dance traditions are transformed to give them greater currency, like a global 'euro' if you like, each 'coin' or tradition embossed with a national symbol. This is what critics call 'glocalisation', where the local is employed by global marketeers to ensure consumption. But back in its home country the *Riverdance* phenomenon is still readily consumed, because it still taps into a very basic need of small nations for global recognition and significance, no matter how self-confident we have become. It also touches us emotionally through nostalgia, and more positively by tapping into our national consciousness, reminding us that in a globalised world we still retain a national identity. Ten years ago *Riverdance* played a significant role in our perception of and the evolution of our culture and its traditions. In 2004, with this production which has changed only by degrees since its original inception, we (who have changed so much) are being asked to worship at the feet of a by-now iconic cultural achievement. For the moment, I am still happy to worship.

RURAL ELECTRIC

by Little John Nee

The Earagail Arts Festival

St Mary's Hall, Clonmany, Co Donegal

On tour 9-17 July 2004; reviewed July 17

BY FIACHRA GIBBONS

THERE IS NOTHING MORE SELF-CONSCIOUS than an Irish theatre audience. It's like a queue for the confessional — everyone's

there seeking relief or transcendence or something, with no great hope of ever getting it. The last night of Little John Nee's tour of the parish halls of north Donegal was one such evening. There were a couple of tourists in coats, but it was mostly locals in their summer dresses and Hawaiian shirts eyeing the Urris Hills for a shift of rain that might come out of the sun like a Messerschmitt.

A brace o' big mountainy men in v-neck jumpers had made it back from Carndonagh Agricultural Show (the other big attraction that night was Hugo Duncan and his band in the marquee) flushed with a hotel tea and rosettes for the best crossbred ewes. For the record, there was also a woman with a moustache.

This then was who was gathered that eternal, northern summer night in Clonmany.

Not that St. Mary's Hall doesn't take evenings like these in its stride. Thanks to them wans at the Earagail Festival, it has hosted Catalan installation theatre in its time as well as ICA meetings and Pioneer quizzes. It has a recently modernised kitchenette with tea-making facilities (closed) and a good high stage, one so high that that night Little John Nee looked a giant. Which was fitting, for in *Rural Electric* he has created a masterpiece of storytelling theatre from the unpromising premise of the electrification of the almost fictional parish of Meenamore, one of the last in Ireland to see the light.

Set somewhere in the half-light of 1959 — though to my reckoning, it took the linesman another 25 years to complete the job — this is the story of the sacrifice and the suffering of the heroic ESB men who fought to free Donegal from darkness. As Nee says, while George 'Moody'



McLaughlin goes through his own Iwo Jima raising a pole near Muckish mountain, "Many of them had never got out of bed in the morning before. And some days it rained ..."

They also had to contend with the sceptics, those who say the electric light is too bright, and the dark complexities of one-eyed Father Murphy — a literal interpreter of the biblical maxim to cut out organs that cause you to sin.

Yet *Rural Electric* is far from an absurdist Father Ted farce. Nee's characters are too real, too many of their ghosts haunt the corners of halls like this. This is a Donegal that has only just disappeared, and we all knew it. There was a moment just as the psychic Bridie Diver reads the tea leaves when the big bull shoulders in

SQUEEZEBOX SOUL

*Little John Nee in
Rural Electric*

front of me began to shake, and a hand the size of a shovel pinched wet eyes. Bridie sees the young leave Meenamore and their mothers worry how they will be welcomed in Glasgow, Dublin and New York, while later other mothers far across the sea wonder how their children will be met when they come to Meenamore looking for work.

Sentimental? It should have been, but it wasn't. And that appears to be Nee's great gift: to lead people down the bramble path of nostalgia and then prod them ever so gently with a pitchfork. A former street performer, his dogged insistence of taking his shows, which combine song and story, off to wee halls in the places they are set has meant it's been easy to

reviews

dismiss him as a provincial curiosity, undeniably brilliant but clearly wasting his time on the bingo crowd.

I beg to differ. His is a unique talent, one that far transcends Donegal or even Ireland. That night in Clonmany I sat next to a woman who knew less about Donegal than she did about the lesser-spotted New Guinean galah. Again and again her face lit up in the dark like a child's. That is what theatre can do when the power is on.

Mike Regan's set, a neat box of tongue-and-groove tricks, and Laura Sheeran's songs, with their dark shadow of the Tiger Lillies, chimed perfectly.

But like those valiant ESB men, Little John Nee is the hero — a hero of another kind of rural electrification, an electrification of the imagination. One day all of Inishowen will claim they were there that night in St Mary's Hall to hear the story of McGroarty's snoring cow.

Fiachra Gibbons is from Donegal, and was arts correspondent of The Guardian. He is now on sabbatical in Belfast writing a book about the Balkans.

SAVOY by Eugene O'Brien

Peacock Theatre, Dublin

3 May-5 June, 2004; reviewed 18 May

BY HARVEY O'BRIEN

THE STRENGTH OF EUGENE O'BRIEN'S *Eden*, his first play, was the subtle and ever-evolving characterisation woven through two intertwining monologues. This haunting tale of marital infidelity demonstrated both delicacy in language and detail in plotting which belied the simplicity of the presentation: two actors standing against a minimalist set exploring the depths of their characters' real and imagined realities.

Savoy, O'Brien's second full-length work, is far from delicate: it is an exceedingly literal drama featuring tiresome, one-dimensional characters spelling out the play's themes through clumsy overstatement.

The story takes place on the closing night of the Savoy Cinema, Edenderry, Co. Wicklow in 1994. Box office manager Andy (Eamon Morrissey) is delighted that David (Fergal McElherron), local lad made good as soap actor, has travelled down from Dublin "to get a bit drunk and talk shite about the deceased" — namely, both the cinema and the world it represented. Nostalgic reminiscence gradually gives way to darker reflection as layers of illusion and performance are stripped away. Encouraged by Andy, David as a boy used to play out roles in life inspired by what he saw on screen. But not everything in David's life was as it seemed, nor in Andy's, and eventually both men are forced to confront the 'cinematic' nature of the lies they invented for themselves.

O'Brien self-consciously explores the schisms between projected images (of self, of memory, of movie stars) and realities (the petty tyrannies of Irish parochialism, social and psychological dysfunction and denial), all of it summed up by the cinema's projectionist, Pax (John Olohan): "...they're outta films, do you see? Just fucking pictures, they don't breathe, or feel anythin' or... get hurt... see. They're not real, I just look at them..." The characters are trapped by the architectures of illusion woven by the cinema as an art form, as a social institution, and as an actual building. A mood of sad, onanistic desperation hangs constantly over these habitual cinema-goers whose lives are mostly built

around borrowed dreams.

There is a good core idea here, but the execution is heavy-handed. Much of it actually plays like scenes from bad Hollywood movies, which may be deliberate but leaves the audience nowhere to go that wasn't obvious from the outset. Neither the anecdotal observation about small town Irish life nor the revelations about lies and hypocrisy which make up the bulk of the action is surprising or particularly effective, especially given the level at which most of it is pitched. There is desperation in O'Brien's eagerness to drive home his points. Much of the script is laced with foul-mouthed one-liners rather than witty zingers, and there is an over-reliance on comic caricature both in the main characters and minor roles. This undercuts the very idea of finding the 'true depths' under the 'filmic' surface.

The performers do their best with at best unpleasant and at worst uninteresting characters. McElherron gets to have some fun restaging scenes from movies, and Morrissey careens about the stage with plenty of appropriate nervous energy, but both actors quickly run out of places to go because their characters never surprise us. The best turn in the piece comes from Olohan, who fares better because his character manages to hold on to some reservoirs of emotion. Initially buffoonish, latterly sleazy, finally aching-ly human, Pax is the most rounded per-

TOM LANLOR



SILVER SCREEN DREAMERS

*Morrissey and
McElherron in
Savoy*

sonality in the play. The writing here calls to mind some of the delicacy of *Eden*, confronting us with social paradox and psychological insight through an individual character's response to his inner and outer life, and the actor takes full advantage.

Bláithín Sheerin's cinema lobby set is evocative but essentially useless to director Conall Morrison, who has little choice but to move the actors around a little as they speak. The set fixes the action in the very specific space, complete with movie posters, a box-office and a couple of entrances, yet really all the characters do is stand in front of it. However, nothing in the writing suggests more elaborate use of space until the ill-advised finale which attempts to engage our sympathies by moving the actors through the Peacock auditorium (which now doubles as the Savoy itself). This conceit, from the original script,

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does not add significantly to the drama.

Overall, *Savoy* cannot but rate as a significant disappointment after such an accomplished debut.

SEARCHING FOR THE ENEMY

by Gerald Bauer

Boomerang Theatre Company Ltd. (Ireland),

Theater der Jugend (Austria), and Shade

Interactive (Netherlands)

Firkin Crane, Cork

6 June, 2004 as part of

'Isn't It Magic - A European Theatre Event'

BY PÁDRAIC WHYTE

DO YOU REALLY BELIEVE THAT YOU are an individual? What do words such as 'freedom' and 'democracy' really mean in contemporary society? Is 'individualism' simply a cult, a collective idea to make us think we are free? These abstract questions form the basis of *Searching For the Enemy*, a highly original and thought-provoking exploration of contemporary global culture and politics.

Inspired by George Orwell's 1984 and written by Gerald Bauer, *Searching for the Enemy* is the fruition of a collaborative project involving Boomerang Theatre Company Ltd. (Ireland), Theater der Jugend (Austria), and Shade Interactive (Netherlands). The production was staged in Cork as part of the *Isn't it Magic* festival, run by a network of European theatre companies (MAGIC-NET) which aims to connect classic texts to a young audience.

Even as the audience began to take their seats, an immediate sense was created of Orwell's 'Big Brother' watching every movement in the auditorium. On entering, several members of the audience were photographed. Their images were subsequently transferred to a laptop

and displayed on a video screen that covered the back wall of the stage. This resulted in real spectators in the theatre looking at a montage of images of audience members on screen. Everybody was watching everybody. This technique made it instantly and clearly apparent that the spectators were not merely objective observers, but were active participants in the performance. Such an atmosphere of suspicion and voyeurism would be successfully sustained throughout the production.

The story is set in a fictional world and centres on the character of Winston Connor who begins to challenge and question the system of individualism in which he lives. He disagrees with the ethics of his job where he must identify supposed 'undesirables' in society and take pre-emptive action by removing certain people and placing them in institutions. As his superior, Mr Miller, notes, this is in order to protect 'individualism' from the 'terror' within and outside the system, a comment that has a significant resonances in contemporary global culture. Tired of his superiors who constantly encourage ability and decisive individuality amongst the workers, yet in reality resolutely block such developments, Winston begins to seek out others who also question the philosophy behind this social structure.

In front of a large video screen, Winston's story is played out on stage by a cast of five actors and the use of four mobile cameras. The audio-visual elements of the production, created by Ruud Lanfermeijer and Marcel Wierkx of *Shade Interactive*, are essential in fully realising on stage many of the themes present in Orwell's original text. The screen is used in a variety of ways, functioning almost



as another character and never becoming merely illustrative of events on stage. At several moments, projected

on screen is a montage of recent media images and news reports such as the Hutton inquiry, 9/11, and great sporting achievements. These are simultaneously accompanied by a barrage of sounds of modern technological devices and indecipherable radio reports. Bringing these elements together with the actors on stage successfully highlighted specific moments of suspicion and paranoia in the production. The multimedia elements never overshadowed the rest of the play, however, but firmly worked in conjunction with the actors on stage, each continually complementing the other. The per-

BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING

The Company in Searching for the Enemy

formance was filmed from several miniature mobile cameras on stage and projected onto the screen, providing multiple viewpoints of the actors simultaneously and thus heightening the themes of voyeurism and perspective that dominated the production.

Colin Scannell's depiction of Winston was suitably subtle and interacted well with Mark O'Brien's portrayal of the domineering Mr Miller. However, at times energy levels on stage appeared to drop and many of the actors became inaudible. While Simon Jaritz's Barber was extremely energetic and often manic, his voice projection lacked the power and vitality to reach the majority of the audience.

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But these were minor inconsistencies in a production which, under the excellent direction of Boomerang's Trish Edelstein, was visually impressive and stimulating. Its themes were thought-provoking and timely, questioning the manipulation and distortion of concepts of freedom in contemporary culture. It also represented an important step in providing a high quality yet accessible and challenging form of theatre for teenagers and young people in Ireland, drawing upon present-day media and political concerns, while also fusing Orwell's idea of Big Brother with Channel 4's take on the concept. As such, Boomerang's collaboration with other European theatres proved extremely successful in creating a complex commentary on current social structures, making it a company to watch.

THE SHAUGHRAUN

by Dion Boucicault

Abbey Theatre

28 May-31 July, 2004; reviewed 12 June

BY FIACHRA GIBBONS

JOHN MCCOLGAN. YOU STAND ACCUSED before the Court of Begrudgingly on three counts of being far, far, far too big for your boots. First, drunk on dreams of world domination, you knowingly and recklessly re-engineered the *Riverdance* virus so it might prey on host theatres as well as stadia, a disastrous process of reverse evolution which will end one day with a one-man version of the show driving the last surviving disciples of Strindberg from the final studio space in the land.

Then in a fiendishly clever bid to curry favour with the Incomptibles, those unheralded Few who watch over Ireland's cultural soul — and the first names on every list for complimentaries

— you threw crocks of fairy gold at a production of a beloved but neglected classic at an equally beloved and neglected old theatre which has trouble these days paying for bowler hats for Beckett.

But your greatest stroke was to direct a play by Boucicault, a choice which slyly invited comparison with the original and greatest purveyor of stage Irishry, whose great achievements and innovations, much like your own, have been unfairly done down by them that claims to know their shallots from their pickling onions.

Like Conn the Shaughraun caught with a salmon flapping from his trousers, McColgan is as guilty as sin on all counts. But he gets away with it, sometimes beautifully, often only by the wad in his pants.

Money has been lavished on *The Shaughraun* like whiskey at a Boucicault wake, by the barrelful. A four-piece band embellished with the ghost of much larger orchestra, a huge revolving set silhouetted with the crags and castles of Romantic Ireland, and dancers galore. Indeed, before we have a breath of Boucicault, the stage is hijacked by an escaped troupe from Bunratty. It is as if McColgan doesn't trust a show without hoofers, and more worryingly, that deep down he doesn't trust Boucicault either, and half believes the rot about him being a terrible old fraud. So Boucicault, the old pasticher, is further pastiched. Sure, his coincidences and plot twists test credulity to the limit, but given a moment to breathe between the hoofing and the hammering you can hear in his dialogue a wonderful precursor to Synge's attempt to catch two languages in collision and transition. In Captain Molineux, the embodiment of mutual misapprehension between Ireland and England, you have the template for Friel's *Translations* and



every walk-on uncomprehending "honest" Englishman since. And is not the Shaughraun himself as much a tragically heroic figure as he is comic — part Uncle Tom, part rebel, caught on a sinking island in a stream unsure of which bank on which to jump: tied to a dying culture, unable to be true to it and unable to fully embrace a new one.

The Shaughraun, it is easy to forget, was written not for Dublin but for Broadway — and maybe even Queen Victoria, Boucicault's biggest fan — and Conn is as much the wily immigrant as the aborigine, unlettered yet able not just to survive but to triumph on wit and chutzpah. The villains are not the aristos but the grasping, greasy-claw-

CAPERS WITH CONN
*Jasmine Russell, Adrian Dunbar and Anita Reeves
in The Shaughraun*

ed, malevolently middle-class Corry Kinchela and his henchmen.

None of this we get here. What we do get is entertainment, endless effects — some of which Boucicault would have himself been proud — but after three hours of it even his arse would surely beg mercy.

Melodrama is a tricky, intangible business. It is easier to say what it isn't rather than what it is, and here everyone seems to be singing from different hymn books, most marked panto. Fiona O'Shaughnessy is breathily brilliant as the fair colleen, and Don Wycherley enjoys himself almost too much as Kinchela. Adrian Dunbar in the title role has enough glic to sell a three-legged donkey to a tinker, yet

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is slightly too cocksure to convince.

However, none for me could match the nobility or poise of Patch, the Jack Russell who plays Tatters the dog.

As for McCollan himself, there is no pretending that this isn't an impressive directorial debut in "straight" theatre, whatever that is. OK, it may not stand up to the bewitchery or the ambiguity of Howard Davies' production with Stephen Rea at the National Theatre in London in 1988—but let's face it, it's much more fun. If he can bring himself to hobble a few dancers, slash a half hour from the first act, and maybe spend a few more grand for gaslight (or even the effect of it) from those expensively faked scalloped footlights, then we could be talking melodrama.

SHINING CITY by Conor McPherson

Royal Court, London

June 9-July 17; reviewed June 21

BY LYN GARDNER

ALL STORIES ARE A KIND OF HAUNTING. We keep the ghosts alive in the telling and the retelling. None more so than playwright Conor McPherson who loves to tell a ghost story, and has done so to terrific effect in the world-wide hit, *The Weir*. McPherson has a gift for transforming the soiled lives of ordinary people into metaphysical odysseys to the emotional underworlds of banal existences. A strong sense of the spiritual coils around his work. *Shining City* is set in a contemporary Dublin where God has lost his shine, therapist and former priest Ian (Michael McElhatton) has lost his faith and would like to lose his wife and child, and middle-aged sales rep John (Stanley Townsend) has recently lost his wife in a car accident.

Through the window of Rae Smith's set we glimpse a lonely church spire.

Wracked with guilt and suppressed rage at his wife's death that came at a time when the two were not talking, John goes to Ian's run-down Dublin office for his first counselling session to unburden himself. McPherson's clever first scene has the two men engaged in a comedy of errors as they try to make contact with each other through a faulty intercom buzzer at the front door. Both John and Ian are locked in relationships with their pasts that render them incapable of genuine communication, incapable of building a future. If you cannot deal with the dead, what hope do you have of communicating with the living? The aloneness of these two men, even in marriage — particularly in marriage — is terrifying. They are truly lost souls.

Over the course of several counselling visits, John's story unfolds: his childless marriage, his fumbled attempt at an affair with a beautiful woman to whom he is drawn because she recently had a miscarriage and he feels he shares her pain, the bitter silence between himself and his wife, the expensive red coat that he bought her out of guilt and which she was wearing on the night that she died. John is haunted by regrets, but he also believes that he is being haunted by his dead wife. Such is his conviction that he has moved out of the unhappy house that they shared and into a local bed and breakfast. Ian is to be his salvation.

Ian, however, is in an almost worst state than John. You can tell by the way he tries to wrap up a teddy bear, a present for the child he secretly wishes to abandon. You can tell by the way that he never finishes a sentence. You can tell because one night he brings back a gay rent boy so he can explore his confused homosexual feelings and the rent boy, a Dublin waif



and stray, turns out to be rather more together than his client. This is hardly the case with Ian and his client. Ian is a man who is constantly moving the furniture around in his Dublin office, but can never confront the real sources of his unhappiness and dissatisfaction. Ian doesn't believe in ghosts, but his own spectres of guilt and regret are always just behind his shoulder.

Shining City ends on a moment so unexpected and so shocking that it makes the audience gasp. To reveal it would be as heinous as snitching on the culprit in *The Mousetrap*. When it happens it feels slightly cheap and reeks less of real revelation and more like a playwright who doesn't know how to end his play. Later, you are not so sure. Which is very much the way of ghosts, I suppose. It is the way of McPherson too,

WISE COUNSEL?
Townsend and McElhatton
in *Shining City*

who knows that the best stories are full of ambiguities, and have frayed endings that are not knotted and neatly tied off.

We are frequently told that McPherson has the gift of monologue, as if somehow that were a second rate talent in a playwright. His real gift is to make us lean forward and listen very hard as the story unfolds. There are moments during McPherson's restrained and beautifully acted production when the silence of the audience is such that it feels as if we have collectively forgotten to breathe, as if we know that in contemplating John and Ian's tarnished souls we are peering into our own. Once again McPherson has us in the palm of his hand.

Lyn Gardner writes about theatre for The Guardian.

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SONGS IN HER SUITCASE

Devised by Púca Puppets

On tour; reviewed 29 May 2004
at Project Arts Centre, Dublin

BY SUSAN CONLEY

IN THE LAST FEW YEARS, THE BIOGRAPHICO-musical theatre piece has had a significant presence on Dublin stages — significant enough when taken against the expected production of Irish classics, American classics, and the repetition of productions that continually return to commercial theatres for seemingly eternal 'last chance' runs. Elvis, Dusty Springfield, Peggy Lee, Percy French, Mae West have all been interpreted by a wide range of performers, who have employed their own personalities in the telling of stories of lyrical lives, the spines of such shows comprised of a vertebrae of hit tunes and anecdote.

Generally, the performers are accomplished singers who have the kind of acting skills that work best up close and personal, encompassing the patter of the cabaret stage which is germane; biographical narrative is a mainstay of cabaret, and it's usually the performer narrating his or her own life. In *Songs in Her Suitcase*, Púca Puppets have mounted an ambitious production that is conceptually right on target: loathe to let someone else interpret her life story, Agnes Bernelle (1923-1999), German emigrant to Ireland, actress, model, and bon vivant, rises from her bier with the help of puppeteer and performer Niamh Lawlor, and takes us through her life and times, via story, song, and moving image.

It's not a tale for the faint of heart: a Jew in Berlin in the late Thirties was sure to be marked by the horrors of the Second World War, and had Bernelle's father



SOUL SISTERS

Lawlor in Songs in Her Suitcase

not been a successful theatrical impresario, with the means to get to London, there

may not have been a tale to tell at all. It's easy to believe that the young Agnes was a precocious and plucky thing, as she relates a tale in which she lied directly to the necessary authorities in order to get her British work permit; easy to imagine, through her choice of lyric and song, that she'd had more than her fair share of hard knocks.

ROS KAVANAGH

The show falters when it asks Lawlor to lip-synch to songs and attempt a cabaret style performance, which the setting does not support. Not that the setting isn't excellent: Marcus Costello has created a six-sided, wheeled frame, the walls of which are stretched fabric. Doors open easily to reveal different spaces: the backstage of a theatre, the hallway of a flat, to TARDIS-like effect. It is truly innovative, and its sides of scrim show off director Leticia Agudo's abstract and atmospheric film clips extremely well. It's just that we are not (nor cannot, thanks to the new smoking ban) be given the kind of smoky, murky setting that cabaret demands, and the set, while versatile, is also asked to do too much.

Other difficulties crop up in Lawlor's embodiment of Agnes. A half mask is all that creates some distance between Lawlor the performer and Agnes the persona. A more exciting and successful distance is created when Lawlor is doing what she does so well: seeming to disappear behind an almost life-size puppet, and directing it into life. The puppets are extraordinary, ranging in age from childhood to late maturity, and the way in which Lawlor controls the action of each of Agnes' personae, and yet becomes subsumed by them is incredible, and therein lay the strength of the show.

Additionally, however, Lawlor is alone on stage, and must do all the scene changes, all the puppet changes, and, of course, all her own changes as well. This 'business' compromises the magical quality that puppetry has when it's at its best: a suspension of disbelief that convinces us that the world we're seeing is mysterious. These complicated changes further compromise the world of cabaret, in which we must be led to believe that one

woman is enough to tell her story. The conflict between the mystery of puppetry and the openness of cabaret has not been fully reconciled, resulting in a creative conflict that interferes with Agnes' history, rather than invigorates it.

One got the feeling, watching Lawlor waltz with Agnes, that the heart of it all was right there, between creator, creation, and the woman who inspired it. In her embrace of the puppet Agnes, Lawlor synthesized her love of the story of this woman's life, and displayed her own prowess as a creator and manipulator of puppets. This synthesis was beautiful and moving to watch, and its simplicity would have been sufficient to tell the tale.

STITCHING by Anthony Neilson

Everyman Palace Studio, Cork as part of the Woodford Bourne Cork Midsummer Festival

16-26 June 2004; reviewed 23 June

BY BERNADETTE SWEENEY

STITCHING, FIRST PRODUCED IN 2002, brought the writing of Anthony Neilson to the Everyman Palace for the Cork Midsummer Festival. Neilson's work is often classed together with the graphic plays of Sarah Kane and Mark Ravenhill, and the advance publicity for *Stitching* promised something similar: "Anthony Neilson's dark and intimate play is a love story set at the extremes of brutality, banality and tenderness."

The audience was ushered up and down a series of staircases and guided into the Everyman Palace studio — a long narrow room with seating on three sides, daylight and the sounds of passing traffic coming in through a sash window, and with little space for the actors. As the door opened to admit latecomers, their arrival had heightened significance —



has it started? Are they acting? In one such moment the two actors entered the studio too, and began as stragglers were taking their seats; this was a nice touch — casually dressed, they seemed just like the rest of us ...

Given the company that Neilson's work keeps, *Stitching* had the expected shock value. The play initially presents a couple, Abby and Stu, as they are dealing with Abby's unexpected pregnancy. This mundane relationship is offset by a graphic abusive fantasy that actors Hilary Reynolds (Abby) and Edward MacLiam (Stu) play out on the same space. The action is not chronological, and one of the audience's tasks is to decide whether the pregnancy is in the here and now and the prostitution fantasy in the past, or vice versa.

The material of *Stitching* is horrible,

CLOSE ENCOUNTER

*MacLiam and
Reynolds in Stitching*

and should explode beyond the confines of this set, the audience and the studio. As staged at the Everyman, the ugly immediacy of the

play's violence was nicely at odds with the trendy room as suggested by a suede backless couch with fawn cushions, and tasteful interior lighting. There were little flashes of humour, such as Abby's "excuse me for having a womb", that were appreciated by the audience on the night I attended. The action evolves into a sleight of hand in the use of flashback, with occasional, romantic moments of memory here staged in dappled light to sentimental music. This more overtly theatrical use of lighting and music heightened these moments to good effect.

But overall, the full dramatic potential of *Stitching* was not realised in this production. The romanticism seemed imposed upon, rather than deserved by,

EDDIE CHARLIER/EVENING ECHO

the action, which seemed to swing between traumatic violence and argumentative exchange, with little room for the humour to resonate. We saw a version of the 'brutality', and some of 'banality' of the relationship, but too little of the promised 'tenderness'.

It was a brave choice to put this intense piece into such an intimate performance space. This proximity could become part of the meaning, with potential for the audience's voyeuristic discomfort to escalate as the action of *Stitching* unfolded. But one of the overall difficulties may be that it is, perhaps, just too difficult to attempt a realistic staging of violence in such a small space. At one point Stu tells Abby, 'I'm bored with being slapped by you'; this rang hollow at the Everyman, as the actor, quite obviously, wasn't close to being slapped. While the play depicts graphic sexual violence, the enforced proximity of this production space drew attention to the gap between the action and the performance of it. Early in the action, sex was suggested offstage, but later, when portrayed onstage, it lost its force in the awkwardness of faking it. We were forced into a real intimacy by the space but shown false slaps, pulled punches and tentative abuse.

We were, however, shown black pages instead of the graphic pornographic images of the play. This formless suggestion was very effective, and could have been applied to the action too. Although the actors remained committed throughout to this difficult piece, they seemed hampered by the sometimes conflicting demands of the material and the space (and also seemed, dare I say, too young?) This would not have been a problem had the piece been staged in a stylised rather than realistic way.

This was a strong choice of script; well performed and designed, with some compelling directorial choices, and so the production did go a long way towards showing us the 'extremes' of intimacy. In unpicking *Stitching*, however, it seems to me that the production's strength was also its weakness: the small performance space, the realism of some of the staging choices and the graphic violence of the play didn't quite fit together in the Everyman Studio.

Bernadette Sweeney lectures in drama and theatre studies in University College Cork.

THE THREE SISTERS by Anton Chekhov

Red Dress Theatre

Players Theatre (2-12 June) and The New Theatre (14-26 June); reviewed 21 June, 2004
at The New Theatre
BY BELINDA McKEON

RAYLA TADJIMATOVA'S CHEKHOV interpretation opens with an elegant tableau; the three sisters of the title glide onstage in the half-light, trailed by a light melody, and sit there quietly, close together, all smiles. It's a romantic vision — graceful young women trusting in the goodness of the spring, they could be the performers of the Moscow Artistic Theatre for whom the play was written — but one that's qualified immediately by a glimmer of incongruity. The melody, though fitting, is unmistakably modern, and comes from three musicians who sit offstage, almost amidst the audience; yet they are not hidden to these sisters in turn-of-the-century Russia, who take visible pleasure in the performances, watching, listening, and singing along as they play.

In the pristine surface of Chekhov's play, the Uzbekistani director has cracked

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a chink through which a promising interplay might flow; the music of reality becomes illusory, the illusion reaches out to the real, and the canonical text awakens to its context. Tadjimatova touches here on a way to realise her express desire to render the drama relevant to Irish audiences, without resorting to crude suggestion. But if, thankfully, this production resists the latter temptation, neither does it capitalise on the potential of its own device. Rather, as the play pushes on through its weighty three hours, that chink falls open to become a gaping irritation. Every act has its theme tune, played by the musicians and sung along to by the cast; often, one of the musicians will answer a question from a character, or all three will respond visibly to an action onstage. The interaction lacks dramatic purpose, however, and loads a weary sense of self-indulgence on exactly the type of play that can least afford it. Chekhov's drama of loneliness and longing — so rich, yet so sobering — requires the lightest of touches.

To be fair, guiding a cast of 14 over this thin ice would present a challenge to even the surest director, and Tadjimatova's approach is far from amateur. She sees the best of each of the sisters — Olga's honesty, Masha's passion, Irena's realism — and coaxes her actors to show flashes of darkness, of petulance, of despair even when their faces are bright with optimism, creating some deeply affecting moments, both of unity and division. She knows, too, the power of the unseen in Chekhov, and does not flinch at leaving a stage almost empty while the action audibly takes place elsewhere.

Perhaps tellingly, it is when this situation is reversed, and the larger proportion

of the cast are onstage, that the control slips most, that the delicate chemistry of need and resentment, of openness and secrecy, dissolves mid-air. It is a problem of dynamic, for individual performances are generally strong. Of the sisters, Bibbi Larsson's Olga is the most sensitive realisation, and Leanor Bethencourt negotiates the changing ages of Irena with skill, though the eccentricity of Anne Lillis' Masha comes across too awkwardly; her jerking movements evoke a string puppet more readily than they do a frightened, unstable woman. In her affair with Lenny Hayden's likeable Vershinin, however, Lillis uses Masha's madness to more successful effect; the overblown emotion of their separation is as excruciating as it should be. Interestingly, this melodramatic style works also for Killian Boland, who plays the violently jealous suitor of Irena, glorying in sulks and rages. Tadjimatova evidently has a talent for sounding varying pitches of emotion; to marry them successfully, however, requires a more confident cast. And though the supporting performers, including Simon Toal as the brother Andrey, Maura Duffy as his selfish wife, John O'Donoghue as Masha's willfully ignorant husband, and Patrick Kelly as the old porter Ferapont, bear the sisters up with an evident love, their communal energy is too nervous to convince.

Tadjimatova's decision to give the play such an intense treatment, with the long performance time compounded by the addition of several musical interludes, is a brave one, and surely the only way to approach a work in which the enormity of loss and uncertainty takes a year's full circle to come home to the sisters; to abbreviate would most probably have been to trivialise. But the effectulti-

mately drags for the audience, and, as a result, its sympathies with the characters are too often compromised. Given that the three musicians comprise dramatic presences to be attended to on top of all the others, it turns out that there simply isn't enough conviction to go around.

...TOUCHED... by Ursula Rani Sarma

Asylum Productions and the Woodford Bourne

Cork Midsummer Festival

On tour; reviewed 19 May 2004

at The Helix Space, Dublin

BY HEATHER JOHNSON

IN HER PLAY ...TOUCHED... URSULA Rani Sarma reveals an aptitude for storytelling: Macca (Mark O'Brien) gives a colourful account of a robbery that has occurred minutes before the play's action begins, while orphaned brother and sister Mikey (Ed Malone) and Cora (Catriona Lynch) describe a country childhood characterised by abuse, drink, and boredom. And so a tale of two cities comes about. Teenagers Mikey and Cora ultimately run away to a romanticised Dublin, conjured by a photo of their glamorous mother beside a River Liffey reflecting lights and urban excitement. Instead, they encounter an uncaring capital where, feeling forced through necessity into their first crime of shoplifting, they run into Macca. In contrast to the 'naïve' country folk at a loss in the big city, Macca survives as a street-wise, fast-talking Dubliner veering between comedy and violence. The play hinges on the divergent perspectives of their stories.

Given that this play is written by a young playwright and specifically set on millennium eve night (and the preceding decade), expectations of a fresh engagement with contemporary Ireland are gen-

erated. And the play's starting point is promising: exploring the background to disadvantage and personal stories of homelessness. Instead, Sarma mines a familiar seam, the city/country contrast, and draws characters who tend toward stereotype: country 'culchies' characterised as wide-eyed beyond the retrospective scenes of childhood, and lovable city rogue as a contrasting type of marginalised urban 'victim'. Nonetheless there are moments of effective drama: Catriona Lynch deserves considerable praise for her performance of the child Cora, who suffered sexual abuse: her pivotal speech, recounting the girl's ordeal during forced seaside drives with the abusive doctor, induced considerable unease in the audience as people began shifting in their seats. But overall, the storyline feels clichéd, limited in its commentary on the harsh realities of homelessness, and concentrating instead on a glimpse into a past already too familiar and here presented with no particularly new insights.

Aspects of the story and the play's characterisations seem inconsistent. A sense of claustrophobia and incarceration is needed to persuade us to sympathise with the characters' sense of alarm once they escape to the city. In a 1990s Ireland of mass communication and routine travel, Cora and Mikey's apparently rose-tinted impression of Dublin does not ring true. There are indications of access to information to dispel their romanticised vision of the capital long before they disembark, penniless, at Busáras — a reference to the big hotel down the road suggests the ubiquitous hotel lounge TV, for example. Similarly, there is an incongruous note in Cora's manner of speaking: the plaintive "I'm cold" on reaching

Dublin is all too quickly followed, post-robbery, by "fucking get out of here", the transformation from simple country girl to hardened curser effected in just one bus trip. The play asks us to accept the perennial story of young runaways floundering in the big city, while leaving us unclear as to the source of the characters' ignorance, whether age or rural isolation or both. Were it set in an earlier period of Ireland's history, this premise might be more credible.

Directed by Donal Gallagher, this pared-down production appropriately foregrounds the personal narratives, with actors spot-lit and two wooden crates unobtrusive as the only props. But the writing itself is not always trusted to create the dramatic tension.

At times the sound is openly manipulative, par-

ticularly in its heavy-handed underlining of the key moment regarding the abuser. A prolonged crescendo labours the scene; without it, and handled more subtly, the scene could have greater impact. Fortunately such melodramatic effects are not the rule: Linda Buckley's sound does give some apt shading to the performances.

What makes this play memorable then is neither an engagement with Ireland beyond the Pale, nor distinctive characterisation, both of which fail to materialise; it is instead the intermittent spark that flares in the playwright's deft use of language. We should not be surprised to learn that Sarma is writing poetry as well as drama, for the writing in ...*touched...*

includes descriptive passages of evocative power. The loss of Cora's child-

TEENAGE WASTELAND

Lynch in ...*touched...*



hood happiness at the seaside, and her painful memories of accumulated years of hurt and disappointment, are conveyed through a striking verbal image of many half-eaten ice creams lying layered in the sand. The play's principal strength lies here, in the promise that Sarma might bring to bear more of her poetic skill on her future dramatic work. This would make for a refreshing approach to work for the stage that seeks to speak to contemporary Ireland.

TYPHOID MARY by Eithne McGuinness

Queen of Sheba Productions

The New Theatre, Dublin

17-22 May 2004; reviewed 20 May

BY COLIN MURPHY

EITHNE MCGUINNESS IS THE EPONYMOUS *Typhoid Mary*. Alone on stage, she regales us in the intimacy of the New Theatre with a tale of travel, typhoid and personal trauma in turn of the century New York. As writer and actor, McGuinness interprets her text with nuance and imagination, yet her deft performance struggles to craft a coherent and compelling narrative from a script that is unsure of itself and lacks consistent focus.

"*Typhoid Mary*" is Mary Mallon, an Irish emigrant chef in the houses of the great and good in New York. As she works her way through the kitchens of the wealthy, typhoid works its way through their houses, yet Mary herself never falls ill. The script delves into the enigma of this woman who defied science: in McGuinness' portrait, Mary defies both medical convention, as a typhoid carrier who is not afflicted by the disease, and the medical establishment, by refusing to accept her status as a carrier.

The short monologue retraces the jour-

neys of Mary's life from her emigration from Cobh as a girl to her success as a chef and ultimate downfall. Yet, curiously, Mary's journeys are only physical: they follow the contours of the Atlantic, and her journey across New York from big house kitchen to penal and scientific institutions, but not her emotional development as she struggles against her fate. Struggle she does: she spits, claws and forks her way out of the clutches of the law, and to the end denies the judgement of science. But she never relents, and McGuinness does not allow self-knowledge or tragic awareness to cross her. Mary is portrayed as an innocent victim of an alien state and a fascistic medical science, which combine to subject her to a Kafkaesque ordeal of legal and scientific subjugation and incarceration. And so *Typhoid Mary* remains an aloof character, one of obdurate strength — impressive, but hardly sympathetic, and certainly not tragic. She is a historical curiosity. McGuinness rightly spots that such a curiosity merits further investigation, and ultimately a representation on stage, but as *Typhoid Mary* conforms to the perceptions of those around her — a mad, stubborn Irish woman — she loses our sympathy and this drama loses its narrative momentum.

Nonetheless, there is sharp historical insight in the piece. A doctor says derisively of Mary, "The Irish, so charming, wholly lacking in ambition of course. Their homes! The heat, the smells, the squalor. I climb stair after stair, meet drunk after drunk, filthy mother after filthy mother and dying baby after dying baby." It's good to be reminded that we were ourselves once regarded as dirty immigrants when we sought refuge abroad.

And the writing itself is often elegant.



McGuinness constructs a complex tale of multiple characters and anecdotes, and endeavours to present Mary's background and plight both economically and affectingly. The best writing comes when Mary loses herself in personal recollection, such as when describing taking the boat from Cobh, and meeting a storm in the Atlantic. This scene is recalled with vivid intimacy, and in such moments a character emerges that is empathetic and engaging. These moments point to something deeper in the character than is revealed in her latter misadventures

JUST COOKING *McGuinness in Typhoid Mary*

with science and the law, and suggest that a fuller treatment of Typhoid Mary's story might be merited. McGuinness is hard tasked to adequately account for these misadventures, as she attempts to negotiate the tribulations of the legal process to which Mary is subjected, and the personal hardship that the character endures as a result. The result is something of a hot-potch of impressions of Mary's life and struggle, without the consistent thread of character development.

McGuinness plays Mary with the precise physicality of a mime and, under Maureen Collender's direction, she probes her own script carefully for physical resonance. They use an imaginative cookery motif effectively: Mary mimes food preparation as she talks through her favourite recipes, and weaves the narrative through them. Eamon Fox's tight, simple lighting captures well the ambiguous, private space in which Mary recounts

her life's story to us, and a solitary table provides her with all the set and props she needs to recreate the diverse scenes from her life.

McGuinness' script has not found its dramatic core, and struggles to combine the dense intimacy of Mary's personal memories with a curt retelling of the facts of her story. Yet the production is earnest and the subject matter original; Typhoid Mary herself may not be sympathetic, but

FUTOSHI SAKAUCHI

she nonetheless makes for curious, and oft-engaging company.

Colin Murphy is a Dublin-based journalist.

**UNIVERSAL EXPORT –
DAY SHIFT & NIGHT SHIFT**

by Alex Johnston and Ioanna Anderson

Gaiety School of Acting
Project Space Upstairs, Dublin
21-26 June, 2004; reviewed 26 June
BY PETER CRAWLEY

The standard *itm* brief to the reviewer of the annual Gaiety School of Acting Graduation production carries some basic instructions: concentrate on the new writing, which is gamely commissioned by the GSA each year, and then — space allowing — you might mention the production too. The fledgling actors, however, should be spared very close critical scrutiny. The logic is pretty airtight — the writers are professional, where, as of yet, the actors are not.

Still, it might seem like a perverse approach; not unlike going to a new art exhibition in a gallery in order to review the picture frames. The task can become even more muddied: do these plays offer the writer enough creative freedom to forge works representative of their talent, or are they made-to-order showcases, journeyman offerings designed to serve their young cast with ample scope for multiple accents and — space allowing — the loosely justified opportunity for a dance routine? It may not be a picture frame, but is a "showcase" that much different?

Certainly *What The Dead Want*, Alex Johnston's first play for the GSA, resisted the rigid specifications of a showcase and instead provided one of the most acerbic,

darkly humorous and captivatingly relevant plays of recent years. His next, *To Be Confirmed*, found a rock band stranded from their equipment and set-up with an unscrupulous journalist (is there any other kind?) to wander around a less focused schematic. But his avowed last play for the Gaiety seems slightly defeated, as though, having avoided the showcase initially, he finally clammers into one.

There is one thing strikingly novel at least: on this occasion two writers Alex Johnston and Ioanna Anderson have made a commitment to each other, agreeing to share the play, for better or for worse. They confine their separate characters to the same location and trail references across either side of the interval. But even the title of their joint endeavour hints at a punch-card resignation to the logistics of granting eighteen actors equal stage time: *Universal Export — Day Shift* and *Universal Export — Night Shift*.

What is most striking about *Day Shift*, directed by Patrick Sutton, is not the similarity between an hallucinating character with "psoriatic atrophy" and Dennis Potter's Singing Detective (as Johnston points out in his programme note, with typical prolepsis). Nor is it that character's "low-rent dream sequence" that allows more for accent and gender hopping from the cast rather than meaningful progression of the narrative. Nor is it even the weak distinction between some of Johnston's female parts — how many acridly sarcastic characters can one office hold? Rather, it's the bristling moral dilemmas that he places in innocent admissions. The chronically ill Ger even blames herself for her boyfriend's infidelity. Like her dandruff, her sexual



allure flakes off from every part of her body. It's a reassuring glimpse of Johnston's usual provocations, where previous efforts at subverting the showcase have worn him out.

Coming fresh to the exercise, Anderson somehow imbues the *Night Shift* with more pep than the day. For similar reasons, perhaps, she is also more interested in her characters (and thus so are we). Hence she's not as keen to escape the office as Johnston, finding more room to manoeuvre within dialogue than in dream sequences, without exhibiting any self-consciousness over

CLASS OF 2004
Rody White, India Whisker and Elaine O'Dea in Universal Export

using naff yet shamefully amusing puns. One of her characters used to work for a psychic's hotline but gave up because "there was no future in it." *Fnar!* But Anderson also employs a deft touch in the distinction of her various voices, letting both the cast and director Liam Halligan respond to them with a lively orchestration: each voice contributes its unique colour and the stage bustles with contrapuntal chatter, never drowning out the plot points.

The plot points themselves are hardly earth-shaking but they are smoothly facilitated: a new uptight boss enters the night shift, the staff go disinterested about their work, the flamboyantly gay guy is blanked by the closeted new boss, the sex kitten hankers for the long-suffering night-watchman and a suspiciously attentive new recruit with an Olivia-Newton-John bouffant may not be all that she seems. Well, of course not, and with one self-reflexively wry revelation, Anderson unmasks

that new recruit, bringing the latest crop of Gaiety School graduates face to face with the horrifying fact that there is an actor among them. Swept up in the breeziness of the conceit you can forgive the fact that an extended line-dancing sequence smothers any hope of dramatic resolution. But with one subtle coup, Anderson has danced around the notion of the showcase with a fleet-foot.

VERY HEAVEN by Ann Lambert

The Focus Theatre, Dublin

6 May-12 June, 2004; reviewed 28 May

BY COLIN MURPHY

THE SMALL STAGE OF THE FOCUS IS an impeccable living room, a clean but dowdy domestic space (designed by Sonia Haccius). There is fumbling with keys offstage, and then the hall door, back centre, swings open, and in walks Harriet, cradling a memorial urn. Fussing, she goes to place the urn on the table, but it slips and the ashes are unceremoniously dumped over the carpet. As she stoops to sweep them up, frantically muttering apologies to her late mother, her younger sister, Juliet, comes in unnoticed. Juliet speaks and Harriet shrieks, and the audience bursts out laughing.

Such is the stuff of both farce and tragedy — a family of three sisters gathered to pay obsequies to the matriarch — and Barbara Ni Chaoimh's production of Ann Lambert's *Very Heaven*, at the Focus, courts both, with mixed success.

The sisters have gathered to honour their mother's wishes, and cast her ashes into the lake at the back of their family home in rural Canada. The eldest sister, Harriet (Elizabeth Moynihan) is in charge, a prim, prudish and lonely mother of two, who has inherited her domineering mother's tendency to bossiness. Juliet (Aisling McLaughlin) is the boozy, nervy and loud sister who arrives late and promptly digs into the drinks cabinet. She is the family member destined to ruin any occasion by getting drunk, upset and offensive — repeatedly. McLaughlin's performance at first seems overbearing, but in fact she brings a deft comic touch to an engagingly over-the-top char-

acterisation. Last to arrive is the youngest sister, Lee (Maria Tecce), climbing in the window later that night with her guitar, in incongruous cowboy hat and boots. Tecce's characterisation is preposterously exaggerated, her Southern twang and cowboy swagger so far out of place amongst her sisters in their genteel family home in rural Canada as to be incredible. Yet Tecce has a real gutsy presence and, if the superficial aspects of her character seem strained, she handles the emotional demands of the part well.

Ann Lambert's script is at its best when sketching the petty rivalries and legacy of the sisters' shared history, and the Focus Theatre's production is true to this in creating a remarkable affinity between the three actresses on stage. Despite their radically different character types and exaggerated characterisation, they achieve an alluring sense of humanity as they stumble over and around each other, trying to negotiate their family home in the absence of their overpowering matriarch, and giving us moments of both poignancy and humour in the process.

Lambert is less successful in grafting a credible dramatic narrative onto this simple and compelling emotional landscape. Gradually, a hidden story of their mother's last months emerges to confront the sisters' one-dimensional view of her, centring on her relationship with a much younger, French-speaking, local handyman (Patrick Joseph Byrne as an convincingly Francophone, François 'Stretch' Lachance). Lambert is not confident enough in the dramatic quality of her story to leave it at that, however, and so it transpires that their mother had not only hidden this relationship from her daughters, but that she had also faked the story of their father's death when he had left



her during their childhood. Their father is still alive, living with a second family — and the sisters have his phone number on a letter that Lachance has kept for them. This sheer quantity of revelation reduces the narrative to incongruity, and despite the apparent catharsis provoked by these dramatic revelations, the play closes leaving the issue of their surviving father practically unaddressed.

Bairbre Ní Chaoimh directs her actors to a pitch of uncomfortably high intensity, as if her vista is that of classical tragedy rather than contemporary domestic drama. Only Glynnis Casson, as the matriarch, Rose, succeeds in downplaying the emotional potential, and as a result her brief soliloquies are quietly gripping. However, the core of the play

REVELATION TIME
*McLaughlin, Moynihan
and Tecce in Very Heaven*

remains the relationship between the three sisters as, irrespective of the ludicrousness of the plot developments, they strug-

gle to reconnect to each other, to find a new relationship in the absence of their overbearing mother, and to reassess their own lives as they leave their youth farther behind. In depicting this relationship, the production is quietly successful. This is paradoxical: the script is uncomfortably clichéd, the plot developments awkward and the direction over-intense, yet the relationship that constitutes the emotional core of the play is credible and compelling. Simply, McLaughlin, Moynihan and Tecce as the three sisters, despite some kinks in their individual performances, look utterly at home on stage together.

ROS KAVANAGH

**THE YOUNG MAN
WITH THE CREAM TARTS**
Adapted by Declan Feean

and Lisa McGee

Sneaky Productions Theatre Company
Lagan Weir, Belfast
18-22 May, 2004; reviewed 22 May
BY PAUL DEVLIN

AS A THEATRICAL SPACE, THE SUBTERRANEAN chambers and passageway of the Lagan Weir tunnel in Belfast have much to recommend them. The steep metal stairwells, cold concrete cells, and the stretching vista of its main corridor are full of dank, shadowy possibilities. Specifically commissioned by Sneaky Productions for performance at the Weir, *The Young Man With The Cream Tarts* attempts to exploit the enormous potential this location has for site-specific theatre.

A kind of sub-existentialist thriller, the play is an adaptation by Declan Feean and Lisa McGee from Robert Louis Stevenson's short story 'The Suicide Club'. It details the peculiar events of a night in the life of its central character and narrator, Prince. In a late night café he meets Dorian, a disaffected and vain acquaintance, who tells him of an exclusive club whose bohemian hedonistic members have sworn to live life to the full and die young. The indulgent lifestyles of its current crop of members are financed through a sacrifice: someone has to die to feed the communal pot through a bequest. Periodically, through the ritual of a card game, one member is selected for death and another to be his or her executioner. Prince, intrigued and attracted by the implied dangers of the Club, decides to join and sets out that night to find it.

Stevenson's original plot for his short story is inherently melodramatic. In their

problematic adaptation, Feean and McGee's script does little to temper this tendency. Structurally, their approach becomes formulaic: each character is introduced in an individual scene as Prince encounters them, climaxing in the card game scene where all characters assemble together. In performance this progression becomes monotonous, and would have benefited from some variation. Stylistically, Feean and McGee attempt to fuse naturalistic, dialogue-based exchanges between characters with the more 'introverted' poetic mutterings of their unrelentingly loquacious narrator, Prince. This really never works. Prince's musings, even allowing for — at a stretch — his writerly aspirations, are more rambling than lyrical. Expressed often in paragraph-length speeches, where one measured sentence might suffice, they proved increasingly tedious and obscure as the play developed. More than this, though, Feean and McGee's self-indulgent script fails to deliver as a work of site-specific theatre. Beyond the immediate sense of being in an underground world generated by the initial impact of the location alone, the text never engages the imposing physicality and potential dynamics of the Weir.

Jonathan Harden's direction is faithful to the demands of the script, but at the expense of the location. It's telling that Harden's direction is most effective in moments between scenes, when the audience physically moves to different sections of the Weir. Freed from the demands of text, Harden allows the space to speak: for example, in the play's third scene the audience sees the character of Anais in the distance as they approach her through the neon-lit corridor of the Weir. Here there is a sense of



how the space and performance might have begun to unite into a theatrical event. Outside these moments, however Harden's direction of the play overall is heavy-handed. He over-blocks scenes, the majority of which are far too static, which ultimately undermines the potential theatrical energy of the location.

Significantly, the performance takes place in a limited area of the available space. Some years ago Shibboleth Theatre Company staged an adaptation of *Crime and Punishment* that used the entire length of the Weir. Visually, the chambers in the belly of the Weir proved much more interesting than those selected for this production and it seems strange that the company chose to ignore these areas.

Individual performances from this new and relatively young company do little to surmount these difficulties. When the characters are finally brought together, the cast struggles to work as an ensemble. This is partly due to directorial and script

DARK PRINCE O'Shea
and Morrison in *The Young Man ...*

issues, the scene being poorly paced and over long, but individual cast members perhaps over-play the roles by way of compensation.

Conor Morrison, as the narrator Prince, pursues his role with a rhetorical smugness that made his lengthy soliloquies difficult to listen to. Bronagh Taggart also fails to bring any significant subtlety to her performance as Anais. Chris Robinson, as Dorian, draws out his role with some light and shade and provides the most confident and subtle performance.

The Young Man With the Cream Tarts, regrettably, never generates the kind of theatrically galvanised communication between audience and performers that site-specific theatre can often achieve. Arguably, in relation to its script at least, it doesn't even attempt to.



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

JONATHAN HARDEN

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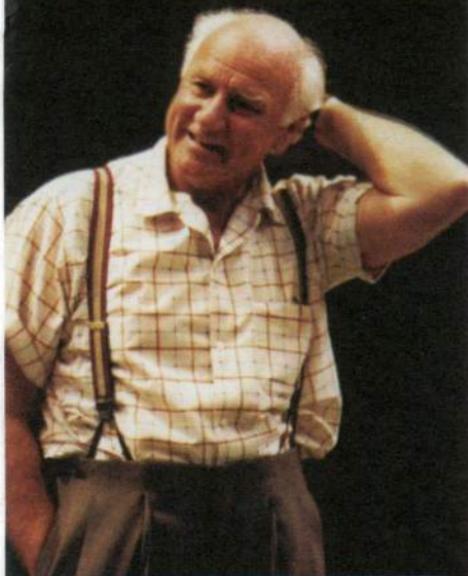
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